



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

School Entry Decisions

A Guide for Parents

by Paula Laidlg, Ph.D., NCSP
Stillwater, MN Area Schools

How Do We Know if a Child is Ready For Kindergarten?

Are there benefits to delaying kindergarten entrance?

Are there benefits to starting kindergarten early?

Kindergarten readiness is the concept that children have developed a group of skills necessary to learn. It can include readiness to read, write and count; to sit and listen; to follow two-step directions; to ask an adult for help; to interact appropriately with other children; to toilet independently. These and numerous other factors related to readiness are found in popular and child development literature, but there is no universal set of behaviors required for a child to enter kindergarten. In fact, the sole requirement for kindergarten entrance in the United States is chronological age; children must be five years old by a certain date, usually by September first.

What we know about readiness in young children: Young children learn at different rates and markedly so from preschool through age eight. For example, while most children can learn to decode words during their sixth year, it is normal for children to learn as young as four and as old as seven years of age. This wide but normal range is also true for drawing, writing letters and numbers, counting, speaking clearly and following multiple directions. So it is to be expected that a typical kindergarten class should include children entering with wide variation in their school-related skills.

Factors in Delaying Kindergarten Entrance

Although readiness is legally defined as reaching the age of five by a certain date, many parents and educators have become concerned that some kindergarten-age children seem socially or physically immature or lacking the skills to read, write and compute. Over the last 20 years or so, delaying entrance to kindergarten by one year has become a common response, especially for boys who turn five within four or five months of the kindergarten cutoff date. A review of the research on delayed entrance and on children who are the youngest within their grade has shown that:

- Delaying kindergarten until age six has not resulted in improvement in reading, writing or math skills;
- At kindergarten and first grade, youngest children do score lower on achievement tests, but the difference tends to diminish as grade level increases, usually disappearing by third grade (one researcher noted that six-year-olds *should* look more skilled than five-year-olds in kindergarten; they have been alive 20 percent longer);
- Delayed entrants 4 to 12 years after entering school were no more academically skilled, athletically involved or socially successful than students who had entered kindergarten after just turning five years old;
- Students who are one year too old for a grade level are much more likely to drop out of high school.

Factors in Starting Kindergarten Early

While some parents choose to delay their child's kindergarten entrance by one year, there are others who request that their child enter kindergarten one year early, at four years of age. With birthdates one to three months after the kindergarten cutoff, these children tend to be early and quick learners, socially mature and most often girls. Schools that allow early entrance usually require some formal testing and possibly a simulated or "trial" kindergarten experience to determine if the candidates are advanced beyond the typical kindergarten skills. Research on early entrance to kindergarten has shown that when the early entrants, boys or girls, have *superior intelligence*, and when their parents and the receiving teacher *support the decision* and have *realistic expectations* of the child:

- Academic achievement, athletic involvement and social adjustment were at least as great as children of similar intelligence who entered at age five.
- One researcher who reviewed several studies noted that, "there is no reason to conclude that the early entrants would have achieved more and adjusted better if they had entered school at the usual time."

Recommendations for Parents Considering Delayed Entrance

All parents and educators want children to be successful in school. When parents believe their child may struggle or fail in kindergarten, delaying entrance by one year has become a common practice and some educators have recommended it. However, experts in child development generally agree that, rather than trying to fit the child to the program, schools should tailor the program to accommodate the individual differences in the kindergarten class. Teachers should assess each child's entrance skills and design curriculum to advance him or her to the next skill level. So before deciding to delay a child's entrance to kindergarten by one year, parents should consider:

- Meeting with the prospective kindergarten teacher to discuss how the school program would meet their child's individual needs and skill level, keeping in mind that the only school entrance requirement is to be five years old; and/or
- Requesting formal educational assessment if there is concern that the child may have an educational disability. Preschool special education services may be available.

Recommendations for Parents Considering Early Entrance

When parents believe their child is advanced intellectually and socially, early entrance may be one option. Before deciding to request early entrance, parents should consider:

- Meeting with the prospective kindergarten teacher to discuss how the school program would meet their child's individual needs and advanced skill level if the child entered at the regularly scheduled time.
- Exploring enrichment options available in the community during the year prior to regular entrance to kindergarten.

Resources

- Bredenkamp, S. (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8: Expanded edition*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Elovson, A. (1993). *The kindergarten survival handbook: The Before School Checklist and a guide for parents*. Parent Pride Resources.

- Gredler, G. (1992). *School readiness: Assessment and educational issues*. Brandon, VT: Clinical Psychology Publishing Company, Inc.
- Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (1995). *Solve your child's school-related problems*. New York: HarperPerennial. (Chapter 2: School Entry Decisions)
- Peck, J.T., McCaig, G., & Sapp, M.E. (1988). *Kindergarten policies: What is best for children*. Washington D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).
- Ryan, B. (1996). *Helping your child start school: A practical guide for parents*. Citadel Press.
- Shepard, L.A. & Smith, M.L. (1989). *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. New York: The Falmer Press.
- Walmsley, S. & Walmsley, B. (1996). *Kindergarten: Ready or not?: A parent's guide*. Heineman.

© 1998 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda MD 20814 — 301-657-0270.