

**Making Informed Decisions about Academic Redshirting and Retention
through School and Community Partnerships**

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Abstract

School administrators and teachers create a culture for high learning and achievement when they partner with parents to make decisions regarding the optimal age to begin formal schooling. The age that students begin school has decreased across the globe; however, the United States has various eligibility dates for school entry that require children to begin kindergarten at older ages. A large amount of research suggests that there is an achievement gap between students whose ages are close to the eligibility age for school entry when they begin kindergarten compared to students who begin kindergarten at an older age. Parents often attempt to reduce the potential that their young children will experience school failure by *redshirting* them for a year before enrolling them in kindergarten; however, many parents cannot afford to pay for another year of childcare so they enroll their children in kindergarten with the possibility of retaining them and repeating kindergarten. Some researchers assert that there are no positive long-term effects to redshirting children. Children grow and develop at various rates; therefore, parents and educators must collaborate to decide when a child will begin public school based on individual social, emotional, and academic needs.

Keywords: redshirting, retention, kindergarten, school entry, preschool

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The age that students begin school has decreased across the globe; however, in the United States, many states have set new eligibility dates for school entry resulting in students beginning kindergarten at older ages (Dhuey, 2016). In 1975, nine states required students to be five-years-old by September or earlier to enroll in kindergarten. By 2010, 37 states required students to be five-years-old by September or earlier to enroll in kindergarten (Education Commission of the States, 2011).

The changes in eligibility dates for school entry are due in part to older students achieving more academic success than their younger peers in the same grade (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). When older students take state, national, and international assessments, score rankings are more likely to improve. In addition, there is a temporary reduction of students in public schools that results in more immediate savings for the government (Dhuey, 2016). States are requiring more rigorous curriculum standards and standardized testing for children of all ages. The focus of education has shifted from providing for individual student needs to comparing assessment scores between states and nations; therefore, strong partnerships between educators, families, and local communities must be maintained to support diverse student needs.

Determining the optimum age for school entry is crucial because as Elkind (2001) argued, when children are pushed to achieve beyond their developmental abilities, they may experience school failure or behavioral symptoms such as aggression or withdrawal, chronic physical and psychological illnesses, drug and alcohol abuse, suicide, depression, and anxiety. According to Dee and Sievertsen (2015), about 20% of kindergarten students are 6-years-old. More children are beginning kindergarten after their sixth birthday because their parents are holding them out of school for a year to prevent them from being the youngest in class (Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017). Some parents decide that their children are not ready for public school and *redshirt* them (keep them out of school for a year), while other parents go ahead and enroll their children in school with the possibility of retaining them in kindergarten for an additional year. School administrators and teachers create a culture for high learning and

achievement when they partner with parents to make decisions regarding the optimal age to begin formal schooling.

Teacher and Parent Perceptions of School Readiness

When determining if a child is ready to begin school, the decision relies heavily on the perceptions of the child's teachers and parents; therefore, frequent collaboration is imperative. Hatcher, Nuner, and Paulsel (2012) conducted a qualitative study that recorded teacher and parent perceptions of school readiness. During interviews, 25 of the 29 participants stated that a child's social-emotional maturity and ability to interact with peers and teachers predicted his/her school readiness. All 13 of the teacher participants and 11 of the 16 parent participants stated that children are ready to begin school when they master school-related behaviors and self-regulatory skills including paying attention, following school routines, participating in large groups, following directions, and staying on task. Eleven teachers and 12 parents stated that literacy skills such as recognizing letters, matching letters and sounds, identifying sight words, and writing were essential to kindergarten readiness (Hatcher et al., 2012).

Eleven of 13 teachers and 15 of 16 parents felt that a child's preschool experiences predicted his/her success in kindergarten. The parents reported that they utilized forms of parent/teacher communication, formal conferences, and assessments from preschool to help them determine if their child was ready for kindergarten. Eleven of the parents indicated that they experienced anxiety about their child's future kindergarten experiences. These parents worried about the teachers' expectations of their child regarding academic performance, behavior, reading and literacy skills, and social maturity further emphasizing the importance of fostering strong communication between school personnel and families (Hatcher et al., 2012).

Differences between Younger and Older Students

A national longitudinal study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (2007) reported that the age a child entered kindergarten was significantly related to a child's academic functioning. The children who started school at older ages showed higher gains in performance by the third grade on a series of Woodcock-Johnson subtests in vocabulary, language, literacy, and mathematics (NICHD, 2007). Studies by Huang and Invernizzi (2012) revealed a statistically significant achievement gap between the youngest and

oldest kindergarten students that narrowed but still existed by the second grade (Huang & Invernizzi, 2012).

Crosser (1991) asserted that males who had summer birth dates had an academic advantage (especially in reading) when they delayed starting kindergarten for one year. The females who delayed starting kindergarten for one year had an overall academic advantage over their younger peers (indicated by the composite battery scores on standardized tests); however, they did not have a significant advantage in reading or mathematics. The males and females who entered kindergarten at 6-years-old scored significantly higher on the reading subtest in fifth and sixth grades than the males and females who entered kindergarten at 5-years-old (Crosser, 1991).

In 2006, Bedard and Dhuey studied almost one-quarter of a million students from 19 countries. Younger students performed four to twelve percentiles below their peers in third and fourth grade math and science and two to nine percentiles below their peers in the eighth grade. In the United States, the older students were 7.7 percent more likely to take the SAT or ACT and 11.6 percent more likely to attend a four-year college or university (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006).

Elder and Lubotsky (2009) discovered a positive relationship between student achievement and kindergarten entry age that was primarily due to the skills that the older children gained before kindergarten. Because parents with higher incomes typically invested more in the education of their children before kindergarten, the effects of entrance age on their children were greater but declined after the first few years. The effects of entrance age on the disadvantaged children disappeared by fifth grade. The researchers did not find evidence to suggest that older children learn at a faster rate. Older students were less likely to repeat kindergarten, first grade, or second grade or be diagnosed with a learning disability, Attention Deficit Disorder, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. When the older and younger students were able to interact together in the same classroom, the test scores of the younger students improved (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009).

Oshima and Domaleski (2006) investigated the differences between younger children with summer birthdays and older children with fall birthdays. From the fall to the spring, there were significant differences between older and younger kindergarteners in reading, mathematics, and general knowledge as well as the height of the children; however, by the spring, these differences had decreased. Age differences were just as important as, or more important than, the gender differences in the early grades. During kindergarten through the eighth grade, the girls

outperformed the boys in reading (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006); however, other factors could have contributed to the academic performance of the students. Oshima and Domaleski (2006) indicated that differences in birth dates can be a more significant factor concerning academic performance than gender differences in the early grades, and these differences will continue throughout the elementary school years. When students exhibit academic deficiencies, educators and families must collaborate to make informed decisions regarding early educational interventions to prevent problems as the children progress through school.

Retention

Parents who cannot afford to pay for an extra year of childcare may choose to enroll their child in kindergarten despite their concerns about their child's readiness. As Elder and Lubotsky (2009) reported, children from low-income families often lack financial support and cognitive stimulation prior to enrolling in school. These at-risk children do not make academic gains when they stay out of school an extra year (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). However, teachers, parents, and administrators often fear grade retention due to the social stigmas and behavior problems that could be exhibited by the students who do not progress through school with their peers. Raffaele Mendez, Kim, Ferron, and Woods (2015) found that retained students continued to perform below their peers through high school.

Redshirting Students

Some parents choose to redshirt their child due to age differences, a lack of maturity, and the fear of future retentions. Redshirting is more popular for boys and wealthy families. Parental concerns regarding redshirting are often focused on social aspects due to parents wanting their children to be good workers and classroom leaders (Schanzenbach & Larson, 2017).

Educators disagree regarding the academic and behavioral effects of redshirting. However, most researchers seem to agree that redshirting can provide short-time benefits (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). When the age range of students is widened, teaching can be more challenging. Because kindergarten students who were redshirted begin school with more advanced levels of knowledge, kindergarten teachers often replace basic kindergarten concepts with a more advanced curriculum (Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Cameron and Wilson (1990) discovered that the academic achievement of students who were redshirted was similar to the achievement of the younger students who began school on time and were promoted each year. Therefore, redshirted students did not have an academic advantage over their peers; however, they did not fall behind their peers either (Cameron & Wilson, 1990). The oldest and youngest students had similar social outcomes including self-concept, peer acceptance, and teacher ratings of behavior (Spitzer, Cupp, & Parke, 1995). Dee and Sievertsen (2015) found that redshirting students reduced inattention/hyperactivity when the children reached the age of seven.

Boys with summer birthdays were more likely to be redshirted; therefore, the gender and birth date of the students influenced the decisions made by parents and educators to delay student entrance in school. Children who were over-age for their grade level and students who were redshirted in the younger half of their age cohort were more likely to receive Early Exceptional Needs services. Students who were redshirted achieved well, while students who were retained did not achieve as well (Graue & DiPerna, 2000).

Implications and Recommendations

Attempting to reduce the achievement gap between younger and older students, some parents redshirt their children for a year before enrolling them in kindergarten. However, a large number of parents cannot afford to pay for another year of childcare; therefore, they enroll their children in kindergarten and either anticipate or consider retaining them in kindergarten. Rigorous curriculum standards and standardized testing create school environments that are more developmentally appropriate for older children. When children begin school later, they often receive more opportunities for informal play, language development, and cognitive and emotional self-regulation (Dee & Sievertsen, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978; Whitebread, 2011). Although there is a great amount of research to suggest that older children are more prepared to begin formal school (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Crosser, 1991; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Huang & Invernizzi, 2012; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006; NICHD, 2007), there is also substantial evidence showing that there are no long-term positive effects to redshirting children before enrolling them in school (Lincove & Painter, 2006). Furthermore, retention might not close the achievement gap between younger and older students (Raffaele Mendez, Kim, Ferron, & Woods, 2015); however, it may be the only option for parents who cannot afford to redshirt their children. An extra year

in school may benefit students with limited English language proficiency and at-risk students by providing more opportunities for them to develop early reading skills.

Conclusion

Many individuals disagree regarding the optimum age for beginning school; however, studies have shown that children who started school at older ages had an overall academic advantage when compared to their younger peers. The older students had higher academic gains in reading, math, and science. By the eighth grade, academic differences still existed between the oldest and youngest students (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). Furthermore, older students were less likely to be retained, less likely to be diagnosed with a learning disability, and more likely to attend a college or university.

In a position paper on school readiness, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1995) stated, “The only legally and ethically defensible criterion for determining school entry is whether the child has reached the legal chronological age of school entry. While arbitrary, this criterion is also fair” (p. 2). The American Academy of Pediatrics advises parents to consider their child’s date of birth and developmental skills when deciding the optimum age to enroll their child in school. A four-year-old may be ready to begin school while another child may not be mature enough until he/she is almost six-years-old (Shelow, 1993). Children develop at different rates; and as Elkind (2001) argued, when children are pushed to achieve beyond their developmental abilities, they may experience school failure or behavioral symptoms. Therefore, teachers and school administrators should partner with parents to decide when a child will begin school based on individual social, emotional, and academic needs.

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