

Preschoolers grow older as parents seek an edge

By Elissa Gootman, *The New York Times*, October 2006

Jack Haims, who turned 6 in late September, started kindergarten this year with an enviable skill set under his tiny belt: He could already read simple rhyming books, count to 100 and write his name.

“He has a lot more self-confidence if he tends to be the older one,” said his mother, Charlotte, 37. “I wanted him to have an easier time.”

Jack acquired his confidence and abilities thanks to an extra year of preschool, or perhaps simply an extra year of life. He is not alone: From Bronxville, where he lives, to Manhattan and beyond, parents are strategizing more than ever to keep their children out of kindergarten until they are nearly, or already, 6 years old.

Children who turn 5 even in June or earlier are sometimes considered not ready for kindergarten these days, as parents harbor an almost Darwinian desire to ensure that their own child is not the runt of the class. Although a spate of literature in the last few years about boys' academic difficulties helped prompt some parents to hold their sons back a year, girls, too, are being held back. Yet research on whether the extra year helps is inconclusive.

Fueled by the increasingly rigorous nature of kindergarten and a generation of parents intent on giving their children every edge, the practice is flourishing in New York City private schools and suburban public schools. A crop of 5-year-olds in nursery school and kindergartners pushing 7 are among the most striking results.

“These summer boys have now evolved to including girls and going back as far as March,” said Dana Haddad, admissions director at the Claremont Preparatory School, in Lower Manhattan, referring to children who turned 5 in those months but stayed in nursery school. “It’s become a huge epidemic.” In some corners, the decision of when to enroll a child in kindergarten has mushroomed from a non-issue into an agonizing choice, as anxiety-generating as, well, the private school kindergarten admissions process itself.

“It’s kind of crazy to hold them back,” said Jessica Siegel, 40, whose daughter, Mirit Skeen is back for another year at Montclair Community Pre-K in New Jersey, although she turned 5 in late August and the public school cutoff there for kindergarten is Oct. 1. “Someone’s going to be the youngest. Someone’s going to be the smallest.”

Ms. Siegel and her husband considered the decision for months, waiting until the week before public school started before making it final in case Mirit “suddenly had some kind of huge emotional shift.”

“I felt like her whole experience is about being the smallest and the youngest, and I wanted to change that experience for her,” Ms. Siegel said, adding, “The more people do it, the more people do it — partially because you don’t want yours to be the last.”

To stave off preschool fatigue, some city parents send their children to public school kindergarten for a year, hoping to transfer them to a private kindergarten the next year. Columbus Park West Nursery School on the Upper West Side is considering opening a “junior kindergarten” to accommodate children who in the past would simply have headed for the real thing.

In the New York City private school world, demographics play a role. Because so many children have applied for kindergarten slots in recent years, schools can be picky. While most city private schools maintain an official policy that kindergartners must turn 5 by Sept. 1, many routinely ask children born in August, July, and in some cases June to wait a year. Nursery school directors, mindful of the trend, may also encourage immature 5-year-olds to wait.

“Nobody ever was successful because they were the youngest in the class,” said Betsy Newell, director of the Park Avenue Christian Church Day School.

“The gift of a year, that’s what I always say to parents,” Mrs. Newell added. “The gift of a year is the best gift you can give a child.”

But research on the practice is inconclusive. In May, a federal Department of Education study found that of 21,000 children who entered kindergarten in the fall of 1998, results for the 6 percent who started late were mixed. By the end of first grade, the study found, the late starters were slightly more proficient than their classmates at reading, but less proficient in math.

Still, many parents are convinced that the year makes a difference.

Unlike many suburban districts, the New York City public schools are generally strict in placing children who turn 5 by Dec. 31 in kindergarten that year, and not the following year. Kindergarten is not mandatory, but children who are old enough for first grade will be placed in first grade. That rigidity has angered some parents, who maintain that in this day and age, kindergarten is no place for a 4-year-old.

City public school officials defended their cutoff system, saying it was best for children.

“New York City is so out of sync,” fumed Marlene Barron, head of the West Side Montessori School on the Upper West Side and confidante of many a parent frustrated by the public school policy. “It’s ridiculous. They have the babies of the universe. When you have kids who are so young, of course they never can test as well as kids who are older.”

Wendy Levey, director of the Epiphany Community Nursery School on the Upper East Side, said the benefits of being older were evident in settings like bar mitzvah parties and middle school dances, when “the really young kids are running around throwing ice cubes.”

And Simone Hristidis, admissions director at Columbia Grammar and Preparatory School, says her school’s college counselor insists she can sometimes detect age differences in college applications.

“What’s the downside?” Ms. Hristidis asked. “I’m waiting for somebody to tell me the downside. That you get out of college a little later?”

Several years ago, Ms. Hristidis revised the school’s official policy, pushing the kindergarten cutoff back a month, to Aug. 1.

“I didn’t want to waste parents’ time, and I didn’t think it was an honest statement,” she said. “We were starting to hold a lot of June and July, and I hadn’t had any August in a while.”

On the first day at Epiphany this year, Josh Miller, who turned 5 in early July, confidently shook Ms. Levey’s hand and looked her straight in the eye, a development that his mother, Eileen, said affirmed her decision to keep him in nursery school.

“Last year he didn’t look her in the eye,” Mrs. Miller, 38, said. “He didn’t know he was supposed to shake her hand. He’s a completely different kid.”

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