

When Kids Hate School

Ensuring a happy and successful school experience

By Christina Baglivi Tinglof, *parentzone.com*, March 2008

Recognizing what a child is ready to learn and when, and placing him where he can meet expectations, goes beyond scholastic cut-off dates and counting candles on a birthday cake.

I remember my first day of school. My mom tenderly escorted me into the classroom of PS 71 in the Bronx, where 20 other little children had also been corralled. Squeezed at the door with a handful of other beaming mothers, she waved good-bye and left. I sat frozen at a little linoleum table, hands properly folded in my lap as I stared in horror at some of the other children's reactions to their first day of being institutionalized. Some wailed; others threw themselves at their mothers' feet, while the latter appeared at a loss as to what to do. "What's going on?" I thought. "Why are they crying? Wasn't this supposed to be fun?"

That scenario takes place every September when many kids are forced (some kicking and screaming) into school before they're ready, says Jim Grant, founder and executive director of the Society for Developmental Education, one of the country's leading organizations involved in teacher training. Grant believes that "summer children," those with their fifth birthday falling shortly before the state-mandated cut-off date for kindergarten entrance, are far more likely to have trouble in school than the oldest kids in the grade. "There's tremendous stress for many children who are developmentally too young to meet the school's expectations," Grant says. With 365 birthdays in a year and only one cut-off date, someone is going to be misplaced. Grant estimates the number of "over-placed" kindergartners at 25 percent.

A study of 278 kindergarten through sixth-grade students in Hebron, Nebraska (follow-up studies have been done periodically), conducted by Dr. James Uphoff, Ed.D., author of *School Readiness & Transition Programs: Real Facts from Real Schools* (Modern Learning Press; 1995), shows that younger children in a grade are more likely to experience problems. Those include failing grades, being labeled as "learning disabled," or scoring lower on achievement tests than the older kids.

"While the youngest children [in a grade] made up 23 percent of the total population of my study, they made up 75 percent of the 'failed one or more year' subgroup," says Uphoff, a professor and Chairman of the Department of Education at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. "The oldest children in my study, who had been given an extra year at home before starting school, made up nearly 10 percent of the total group, but zero percent of the failure group."

"Schools have a design flaw," says Grant, a former grade-school teacher and principal. The typical five-and-a-half-hour day, 180-day-a-year schedule is too rigid, leaving many kids struggling to keep up. "Different kids need a different amount of time to complete a task. The ones who can't do the required work feel disenfranchised."

"The first year of school is a crucial time for a child to form his identity," Grant stresses, "and an unpleasant experience can lead to low self-esteem and self-destructive behavior patterns. Enthusiasm can quickly turn to anger and sadness. The end result is a kid who

hates school." Grant feels it's important to recognize what a child is ready to learn and when, and to help him proceed by placing him where he can meet expectations and succeed. At age five, Uphoff adds, many kids are not physiologically ready for the sit-still, paper-pushing curriculum.

If you feel your child isn't ready for kindergarten, the answer is as easy as keeping him home for one more year. Or, Grant advises, enroll him in what many schools call a "readiness" or "pre-K" class, an extra year of supportive playtime or preschool.

But what if your struggling prodigy has managed to squeeze his way into the third or fourth grade? Isn't it too late to help? Grant feels passing a child along from grade to grade, hoping the problem will eventually solve itself is futile, and the child will simply fall further and further behind. He calls these kids the "silent sufferers," the well-behaved students who sit in the back of the classroom and never reach their full potential.

According to Grant, if a child is clearly behind in his grade, hold him back a year. While he admits that repeating a grade devastates some kids, many benefit. "Hundreds of thousands of kids have been left back," he says. "And they've gone on to set the world on fire. The trick is for parents to take responsibility, not blame the child. Sit him down and say, 'You're struggling because you're the youngest in the class. It's not your fault. It's Mom and Dad's fault.' Kids trust their parents," he adds. "There's no pleasant way to regroup. You pay now or you pay later."

While many educators feel summer school and/or remedial classes are more beneficial for a child's self-esteem than holding him back, Grant disagrees. "Schools attempt to embezzle nature," he says. "Remedial classes help intellectually, but don't address a child who is emotionally or physically not ready to advance to the next grade." To prove his point, Grant uses an analogy. "Have you ever dated anyone who was extremely immature?" he asks. "Do you think that if you had worked with him using flash cards and a reader that it would have helped the relationship?"

Yet not everyone agrees that holding an academically struggling child back is to his benefit. According to the report, *Failing Our Children: Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention*, written by Intercultural Development Research Association (www.idra.org), an independent, non-profit research organization that advocates quality education for all children, 50 percent of students who repeat a grade do no better the second time, and 25 percent actually do worse. In addition, retained students have a higher rate of dropping out of school altogether before completing high school.

Another study, *Retention and Social Promotion: Research and Implications for Policy*, published in 2000 by ERIC Clearing House on Urban Education, concludes that early retention is actually harmful. "Even the best-designed of recent studies that found in favor of retention in general also found that students retained in first grade do worse than expected, both academically and emotionally. There is also substantial evidence that retention in kindergarten is equally harmful. Being removed from a group of peers with whom a student has just gotten comfortable seems to compound the difficulty of adjusting to school and to set the child back rather than help."

Grant offers other options for a struggling older child who says being left behind is simply not cool. If you can afford it, pull him out of public school and let him repeat a grade in

private school; or, try a less rigorous academic track. If he does graduate, encourage him to take time off before going to college. "Do something nurturing," says Grant, who himself took two years off after high school to work. "I was mature enough to know I was too immature to go on to college," he laughs.

So what can you do now to ensure a happy and successful school experience for your little one? Most importantly, make sure he's properly placed in the appropriate grade. Develop his language skills through reading, singing, and chanting. Encourage his curiosity by including him in day-to-day family tasks such as cooking and gardening. Allow him to hone his fine motor skills by holding a pencil and writing his name or cutting paper. Don't push, but cheer his accomplishments on. And don't be afraid to say, "My child is not ready for school." Consider the whole child, not just the number of candles on a birthday cake.

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