

Instruction expert to parents: Don't delay school entry

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If you have reservations about whether your son or daughter is ready for kindergarten, you're not alone. Many parents agonize over concerns that their child might be among the youngest or smallest in the class. They often wrestle with doubts about their child's social, emotional or academic readiness.

If you are thinking that it might be better to delay your child's entry into kindergarten for another year, Beth Graue has some simple advice: Don't.

Graue, a University of Wisconsin-Madison professor who once taught kindergarten, has been researching school readiness since earning her Ph.D. at the University of Colorado at Boulder in 1990. During her 17 years on the faculty of the UW-Madison Department of Curriculum and Instruction, she has become a widely recognized expert on the contentious subject, sought out by such national media as the New York Times.

Her research has found that delaying entry — called "academic redshirting," after the college sports practice of deferring eligibility for freshman players — has few positive effects. Children who are older when they start kindergarten might experience initial academic and social advantages, but those generally disappear by the end of third grade. Meanwhile, "redshirts" have higher than expected placement in special education and more social, emotional, and disciplinary problems.

Yet many parents are reluctant to heed the research because they believe that their child is different, Graue says. Many simply don't want their child to be the youngest or smallest student in the class. Some even go as far as to time conception to avoid a birthday close to the Sept. 1 enrollment cut-off date.

"Readiness is a relative thing," she says. "There are some kids who always color outside the lines, and that extra year will just make them bigger, not necessarily more ready."

She has found that parents are less likely to delay entry for girls with fall birthdays, and these girls tend to do well. When entry is delayed, the consequences are similar, regardless of gender.

"We will always have some kids who are more or less ready, no matter what the cut-off date is," says Graue.

Parents delay entry for a variety of reasons — most often for social, emotional, physical and biological concerns. They are usually trying to avoid something, such as their kid being the last picked for kickball.

Middle-class parents are more likely to be familiar with redshirting as a strategy from reading parenting magazines and blogs. These families are also better able to provide an enriching home environment. Working-class parents tend to want their kids in school sooner.

Graue recently completed a study on how the media portrays readiness. In her interviews with reporters who had interviewed her on the subject, she found that most had a personal experience with readiness before writing about it and tended to soft-pedal the research findings to appease their audiences.

Although research on this topic continues, Graue will keep urging

parents not to delay. Instead, she puts the responsibility on the schools to be more adaptable to students' diverse needs.

Here are a few tips from Graue on preparing your child to start school:

- Reading to your child every day is the best foundation you can provide.
- Make the most out of everyday tasks. For instance, having your child set the table with one fork at every place teaches such concepts of one-to-one correspondence and how to follow directions.
- Give your child lots of play time with peers to practice cooperating with others.
- Tour the kindergarten your child will be attending; a prepared child will be more confident.

Source: UW-Madison

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