

EARLY ENTRANCE to KINDERGARTEN

Pros and Cons

BACKGROUND

When student should begin formal schooling has been a difficult question for centuries:

According to the apple-or-coin test used in the Middle Ages, children should start school when they are mature enough for the delayed gratification and abstract reasoning involved in choosing money over fruit. In 15th- and 16th-century Germany, parents were told to send their children to school when the children started to act “rational.” In contemporary America, children are deemed eligible to enter kindergarten according to an arbitrary date on the calendar known as the birthday cutoff — that is, when the state, or in some instances the school district, determines they are old enough. The birthday cutoffs span six months, from Indiana, where a child must turn 5 by July 1 of the year he enters kindergarten, to Connecticut, where he must turn 5 by Jan. 1 of his kindergarten year. Children can start school a year late, but in general they cannot start a year early.

~Elizabeth Weil, “When Should a Kid Start Kindergarten?”

The answer to the question “When is best time to send a child off to school?” depends largely on whom is asked. Proponents of starting kindergarten early believe it gives a child a valuable head start in life. Opponents argue that holding a child back until s/he is more mature provides an academic and social edge. Nowadays readiness rather than chronological age is often the deciding factor of when a child should start school.

According to Dockett & Perry (2002), there are eight important areas that affect a child’s transition to kindergarten:

- **Knowledge**—The ability to identify numbers and letters or ideas
- **Social Adjustment**—The ability to interact with a large group of children and to respond appropriately to the teacher
- **Skills**—For example, tying shoelaces and holding a pencil properly
- **Disposition**—Attitude toward school
- **Rules**—Expectations of behavior and action
- **Physical Attributes**—For example, age and physical health
- **Family Issues**—Family interactions with school
- **Educational Environment**—What happens at school

So, as parents seek to make this important decision, reviewing the commonly made arguments for and against early admission to kindergarten is imperative.

PRO: Common Arguments **FOR** Early Entrance to Kindergarten

1. Academic Readiness

- Providing a challenging environment and enriching curriculum when a child is ready for the next stage of learning is very important.
- Hitting the “window” of excitement and readiness by enrolling a child when s/he is excited and ready to go to “big school” is a positive.

2. Social and Emotional Maturity

- Some children (especially the gifted) are socially and emotionally mature enough to start school early.
 - They often prefer the company of older children
 - They frequently have fewer behavior problems when their classmates are older than they are.

3. Physical Maturity

- At times a child’s physical development may lag behind his/her emotional and intellectual development.
 - Waiting for his/her physical development to catch up can cause problems for them academically and socially.

EXAMPLE: Gifted children are notorious for their poor handwriting. They can think faster than they write, which causes them to scribble things down as quickly as they can. That does not lead to neat handwriting. Waiting another year will not solve this problem.

- There is no guarantee that waiting an extra year will make a child grow any faster.
 - Holding a child back an extra year might allow him to start out the same size as the older children, but they may outgrow him in a couple of years.

NOTE: We don't grade advance a child who is big for his/her age even though his/her size can lead to teasing. In that case, the importance of academic needs is understood.

4. Impact on Adolescence

- Children mature at different rates.
 - A child who is the same age as his classmates may not be socially or emotionally mature enough to date. There is no way to know for sure if a child who starts early is any more or less ready than children who are a year older.
 - Not all 16-year-olds drive, regardless of when they started school.
 - Not all children are interested in sports, so making a decision for grade placement based on a possible future desire is not necessarily valid. Additionally, some sports are not affected by physical size, track, for example.

5. Other Influencing Factors

- Reduces costs for day care and/or preschool

CON: Common Arguments AGAINST Early Entrance to Kindergarten

1. Academic Research

- The largest and most extensive study of the impact of age of entrance into school and its long-term effects on students argues against early entrance. After crunching the math and science test scores for nearly a quarter-million students across 19 countries, Bedard and Dhuey state,

"We provide substantial evidence that these initial maturity differences have long-lasting effects on student performance across OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development countries). In particular, the youngest members of each cohort score 4-12 percentiles lower than the oldest members in grade four and 2-9 percentiles lower in grade eight. In fact, data from Canada and the United States show that the youngest members of each cohort are even less likely to attend university."

~Kelly Bedard & Elizabeth Dhuey, "The Persistence of Early Childhood Maturity: International Evidence of Long-Run Age Effects" in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 121, Issue 4, p. 1437, November 2006

2. Academic Readiness

- When children enter school and are not ready, they may...
 - Develop negative self-esteem that stays with them throughout their entire school careers and possibly beyond.
 - Not receive the extra help they need to survive the kindergarten experience
 - Tax the system by requiring remediation in kindergarten and future grades
 - Experience negative relationships with peers
 - Take valuable time away from students who are ready

3. Social and Emotional Maturity

- A four-year-old is not mature enough to start school.

Typical Kindergarten Expectations: be able to pay attention to the teacher, follow directions, obey rules, sit and listen to stories, stay focused on a task, and understand the difference between work and play. Moreover, know when each is appropriate.

- If the child is immature emotionally, socially or behaviorally, placing them in kindergarten early may be setting him/her child up for failure or frustration.

- If your child has demonstrated in preschool or day care an inability to sit and attend to a lesson, get along well with peers, or transition easily from one activity to another, s/he may be put in a situation for which he is not ready, and it may set his entire educational experience off to a negative start.
- Social immaturity can make it difficult for a child to interact appropriately with other children.
- If for whatever reason, your child is not developmentally ready for kindergarten, other behavioral or emotional problems may pop up.

4. Physical Maturity

- A child may not be physically ready for school.
 - Note: Physical readiness includes gross and fine motor skill development as well as physical size.*
 - Children who start school early are typically smaller than the other children and may encounter social problems, including teasing by the other children.
 - Some younger children have not yet fully developed the ability to control their bladder for the periods necessary at school. Accidents can lead to social and emotional stress.
 - If a child starts school early, he or she may not have the fine motor skills to be able hold a pencil properly and write well.

5. Impact on Adolescence

- A child who starts school early may be unable to participate in sports due to small physical size.
- When other teens are going to camp or participating in other summer programs, a child who started school early may not meet age requirements and will not be able to attend or participate.
- Early admission has negative effects on a child's life in high school that can lead to them feeling like an outcast and a misfit.
 - S/he will be the last to be eligible to drive.
 - S/he will not be mature enough when his or her classmates begin dating.

REGARDING GIFTED STUDENTS

- Even if a highly gifted child is socially, emotionally, and academically ready to start school early, the pace and depth of instruction still may be too slow and shallow.
- Parents need to consider their child's emotional and social maturity, but they need to consider it in terms of the child's chronological age. A gifted four-year-old may think like a six or seven-year-old, but have the emotions and social skills of a five year old. This can make them look too immature for school, when in fact they would fit in with the other five-year-olds, at least emotionally. Intellectually, they might still be ahead.
- How far ahead of his/her peers a gifted child is should be considered. The more gifted a child is, the better off the child will be starting school early. In fact, the child might have to be advanced again at some point. Each year the child's progress should be monitored and placement reassessed.
- One of the most important things for parents to understand is that the evidence for early entry and other types of acceleration of gifted children is overwhelmingly positive. (See [A Nation Deceived](#).) Virtually no evidence supports holding a highly gifted child back -- if he or she is socially and emotionally ready. Determining whether a child is socially and emotionally ready is not always easy. Parents can talk with their child's preschool teacher and with their child's pediatrician for help with this evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The decision to put a child in school early is difficult. Parents worry about which option will allow their child to fit in best with the other children and best set them up for the future. Like most things in life, there is no simple answer. Ultimately, parents are best served when they have a clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of early entrance, have access to clear and useful data about their child's academic abilities, and can accurately recognize the physical, social, and emotional levels of maturity in their child.

A parting thought:

Bedard and other economists cite Heckman's theories of how people acquire skills to help explain the persistence of relative age on school performance. Heckman writes: "Skill begets skill; motivation begets motivation. Early failure begets later failure." Reading experts know that it's easier for a child to learn the meaning of a new word if he knows the meaning of a related word and that a good vocabulary at age 3 predicts a child's reading well in third grade. Skills like persistence snowball, too. One can easily see how the skill-begets-skill, motivation-begets-motivation dynamic plays out in a kindergarten setting: a child who comes in with a good vocabulary listens to a story, learns more words, feels great about himself and has an even better vocabulary at the end of the day. Another child arrives with a poor vocabulary, listens to the story, has a hard time following, picks up fewer words, retreats into insecurity and leaves the classroom even further behind.

~Elizabeth Weil, "When Should a Kid Start Kindergarten?"

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