

Is Your Child Ready for Kindergarten? **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

It's that time of year again, when hundreds of thousands of families have to make the decision as to whether to send their preschoolers to kindergarten in the fall, or to re-enroll in Pre-K for another year. For most families it's a simple decision. Perhaps the child's birthday is in the fall or winter and she'll be a solid five and one-half-year-old upon kindergarten entrance. And, to top it off, she loves to sit quietly on the circle line listening to her teacher read a book. Or, your son runs pre-academic circles around his peers in Pre-K and is chomping at the bit to go to "big boys school" like his older sibs. These are no-brainers—if the preschool teachers say that your son or daughter is ready, the age at kindergarten entrance is appropriate, and you have few if any doubts about readiness then sign the kid up and have a great summer! *Try to remember that kindergarten is the child's first experience at "real school" and it should be fun and enjoyable with the focus being upon social and emotional development, not academic skill development.*

On the other hand, though, if your son or daughter will be a very young five at kindergarten admission, or has significant difficulty staying on task, or is developmentally delayed in language or motor skills, it may be wise to give him or her another year of preschool to mature and to develop. If your daughter appears to be very shy and anxious in preschool and refuses to respond to her teacher's queries is this a red flag deserving a second look at kindergarten for next year? What if your son is *really scrawny* but on most other fronts he seems to be ready to go to kindergarten with his buds and hasn't stopped talking about it since you took him for a quick visit to the new school? Do you hold him back a year so that his height may more closely approximate that of his classmates, or do you enroll him in kindergarten and hope that physical stature won't be an issue with his peers?

Good, yet tough, questions deserving of reasonable and guaranteed-to-succeed answers. Problem is, there are no guarantees when it comes to kid behavior, learning and developmental issues. As a mom myself for over twenty years and a clinical psychologist for a quarter century, I've learned to gather as much data as possible, taking the individual child's personality, learning strengths and weaknesses and emotional status into consideration and to make the best possible decision that I can. Whether to send a child to kindergarten who is "borderline" in terms of maturity, self-control, pre-academics or self-assertion is an important decision that falls upon parents to make. Unfortunately the psychological research focusing on Pre-K retention is not much help. Most studies show that children given an extra year to mature in Pre-K do better in kindergarten and first grade. However, the initial leg-up seems to dissipate as they grow through the elementary school years. What's confusing is the fact that we can't compare an individual child to him- or herself—there's no accurate way of knowing how a particular child held back in Pre-K would have fared if allowed to move directly to kindergarten. Personally, both of my own kids were "old fives" at the time to make the move, so we didn't have to grapple with the decision. But, I have counseled many

families whose kids were “iffy” for admission, and I’ve learned a great deal from their experiences.

In a nutshell, I’ve personally *never* had a family regret giving the child another year in a Pre-K situation. Holding back a child in preschool is a bit of a controversy, though, and some experts believe that this practice is becoming too widespread. Keep in mind that families with kids who are shoe-ins for kindergarten wouldn’t be in my office with this question in the first place, only those who have seen red flags themselves as parents or who have been approached with concerns by the teachers. On the other hand, I have had numerous parents say to me that they wished that they had held their child back before entering grade school, especially when learning or peer problems crop up in the later grades. Of course, there’s no way of knowing whether this would have changed anything, but it’s a demon that just doesn’t seem to dissipate from their thoughts.

When parents question whether the child will feel awkward being left back, I suggest that they ask themselves the following: “A week (or a month) after school starts in the fall will it really matter to Johnny that he’s remained in Pre-K? Will he still feel different or awkward that his preschool buds moved on and he didn’t, after some time has passed?” Most parents understand this, and believe that Johnny will adjust—if not in the first week, then certainly by the end of the first month. And they’re right. Little kids generally don’t hold a grudge, or for that matter even seem to mind that the old crowd is no longer there. They’re too busy making new friends to worry about what the old ones are now up to.

I can’t guarantee that Johnny will be better off with another year of maturation under his belt, but it makes common sense that he will be. First, studies show that red-flagged children held back in Pre-K do tend to adjust to and do better in kindergarten and first grade than those identified but not held back. There’s no definitive way of proving that Johnny, in sixth grade, will be better off because of the decision, since there’s no going back and doing it the other way and comparing the data. What makes sense, though, is that Johnny will have entered kindergarten better prepared to learn and to socialize with another year of maturity and social experience, and because of this will be more confident and secure—emotionally, academically and socially. And, that means a lot. Kids who feel comfortable with the work and with peer relationships are more relaxed, less anxious and more eager to learn than are those who are constantly being told by the teacher to keep their hands to themselves or chided to finish their seatwork. And, I believe that this kind of confidence follows them for years to come, forming the emotional foundation for the later grade school years.

Keep in mind that there are alternatives to the kindergarten decision available. If you’re worried about your child’s readiness she may best be placed in a different, perhaps more challenging Pre-K program. Or, some school districts and private schools offer a K-4/Kindergarten mix that essentially places older preschoolers with kindergartners in the same classroom. Throughout the year the teachers will have the opportunity to observe your child’s progress and to determine if she has completed the kindergarten curriculum

appropriately and is ready to move on to first grade, or that she should be placed in a regular kindergarten class the following year.

What are the signs of kindergarten readiness?

Emotional/Behavioral Issues:

- Knows how to communicate his needs—can assert himself about his own materials and work, need to go to the bathroom, or feeling ill
- Can choose a preferred activity and complete it satisfactorily
- Can separate from parents without excessive anxiety or fussiness
- Can get along with peers in terms of sharing, taking turns, and appropriately entering into games on the playground
- Displays emerging independence in terms of making choices, asking for help from an adult other than a parent, and working alone on tasks
- Can sit still long enough to listen to a story or a lesson
- Is able to keep hands and feet to self and to not be disruptive in the classroom (excessive chatter, touching others' possessions, not using an "inside voice")
- Is cooperative and mature enough to complete tasks, especially those she's not particularly interested in

Pre-Academic Readiness:

- Has shown an interest in listening to stories and having books read to him
- Recognizes some uppercase alphabet letters, especially those in her name
- Recognizes and knows the names of the primary colors as well as the basic shapes (circle, square, triangle, rectangle, diamond)
- Can count to 10 and understands the number/symbol relationship from 1 to 5 (child is able to count out 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 pencils when placed in front of her)
- Can *copy* some letters and numbers. Don't expect the child to have memorized the letters and numbers at this stage of development, just the ability to copy some in rough format. Also, expect lots of reversals—"p" looks a lot like "q" and a "2" is often mistaken for a "5"!
- Fine motor skills are developed enough so that the child can color a large picture and keep the crayon on the page, although the crayon may not stay between the lines.

Social Skills:

- Can interact during play with another child—does not engage exclusively in either solo play or parallel play
- Can take turns, does not cut in line, understands and accepts the concept of "not always being first"
- Shows some empathy for others beside self—shows some concern if another child is crying or hurt

- Is not excessively grabby—allows others to use playground equipment or enter into the various classroom “centers”
- Can use words to express negative emotions, not aggressive actions
- When upset with a classmate, will seek out the teacher to help solve the problem
- Is not excessively shy, to the point of not being able to participate in classroom activities or to let needs be known

Kindergarten placement is truly the parents’ decision. Never again will you have such a voice in whether your child moves on to the next grade or not. The decision should be based upon knowledge of the combination of your child’s emotional, behavioral, social and pre-academic readiness and maturity. Also, keep in mind the ambience of the particular kindergarten that you have in mind, as well as the teachers available. The latter may take a bit of snooping on your part, but talk to the parents of kids who have recently graduated kindergarten at your chosen school and check out which teacher might best mesh with your child. Some schools enjoy getting this information from parents, although they may not be able to honor all requests. Other schools, though, maintain a “no teacher pre-selection” policy, so don’t be surprised if you encounter that.

Whatever your final decision, try to keep it in perspective. Once you’ve done your homework, evaluated your child’s progress via your own as well as the preschool teachers’ observations and made a decision, put it to rest and have a good summer. Think about it—that’s probably just what your kid is doing right now!