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Giving pupils the 'gift of time'

Parents and teachers debate the merits of academic redshirting for kindergarten, writes Janice Tibbetts.

Janice Tibbetts, The Ottawa Citizen
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"I think when you decide to redshirt a child, they automatically become the oldest in the class and there can be some alienation," said Mr. McNamara.

Furthermore, studies suggest that the advantage of the older children is short-lived and that there is no difference in the oldest and youngest students by the time they reach Grade 3.

"It seems to wash out," said Mr. McNamara, who decided against holding back his son, Joe, from kindergarten this year, even though his Dec. 23 birthday falls only a week before the cutoff date.

Mr. McNamara said he believes incidences of redshirting in Canada are similar to the those in the U.S.

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Mary Scissons, a Saskatoon educational psychologist, said she would hold back her daughter, Brigid, if she could do it all over again.

"She's very bright and I thought she had to be challenged intellectually," says Ms. Scissons, who put her late-October child into kindergarten when she was four.

"I think I kind of got caught in the parental treadmill. To do it all over again, I would just slow down a little bit more."

Brigid, who is now almost 16 and is starting Grade 11 this fall, remains one of the brighter children in her class, but lacks the more sophisticated social and emotional skills of her older peers, Ms. Scissons said.

Research on the long-term effects of redshirting is murky.

A paper published last November in the Quarterly Journal of Economics suggested being the youngest in the class can haunt a child throughout his or her school years. Kelly Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey, economics professors at University of California, who studied more than 200,000 children in 19 countries, concluded that the youngest students scored substantially lower than the oldest students at the fourth-grade and eighth-grade levels.

They also found that in British Columbia, the relatively youngest children were 10-per-cent less likely to be in the pre-university stream in their final year of high school.

"Relative age may play a role in determining educational success throughout the educational process, even into college," their study concluded.

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Education experts, however, say that deciding whether to hold a child back must be made on an individual basis, rather than making across-the-board assumptions based on birth date.

Ms. Thiessen says she will make a final decision about her unborn baby by gauging whether the child appears to be ready for school when the time comes in four or five years.

And how does one define school readiness? "It's an eagerness to learn," she said.

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