

# Thrive in 2025: Holding Kids Back for Success

More and more parents are waiting an extra year to enroll their child in kindergarten. Is a late start a smarter start?

By Jacqueline Burt

## Parents

When the time came to register her older daughter for kindergarten, Tara D'Onofrio Bonawandt had an advantage over most parents. As a former kindergarten teacher, the Westhampton, New York, mother of two knew firsthand the types of skills required to succeed in class: the ability to listen attentively at storytime, follow directions, concentrate during lessons, share. Even though her child had turned 5 in July, five months before her school district's age cutoff, Bonawandt ultimately decided to wait. "I didn't feel she could handle all the work and so much less play, so I held her back," she says. "A lot of my friends thought that I should send her, but I reminded myself that each child is different."

Though Bonawandt's friends may have questioned her decision, an increasing number of parents nationwide would wholeheartedly support it. The beginning of each school year finds more and more families delaying kindergarten for a year so that the following fall their kids will be among the oldest in the class.

This trend is known as "redshirting." It's a term coined for college football players who maintain an extra year of sports eligibility by practicing with the team as freshmen but not playing in games. The idea of redshirting preschoolers has blossomed in the wake of a 2006 University of California at Santa Barbara study. Researchers Kathy Bedard and Elizabeth Dhuey found that grade-schoolers who are among the oldest in their class have a distinct competitive learning edge over the youngest kids in their grade, scoring 4 to 12 percent higher on standardized math and science tests. While the achievement gap narrows over time, it doesn't go away, since the skills acquired in the early grades are complementary to later education as well. The same study showed that the oldest middle-school students outperformed younger classmates by 2 to 9 percent, and that high-school students who were among the oldest in their class were nearly 12 percent more likely to enroll in a four-year college or university.

Another factor influencing redshirting has been Malcolm Gladwell's 2008 bestselling book, *Outliers: The Story of Success*. In it, he uses statistical analysis to prove that a disproportionate number of professional hockey players are born during the months of January, February, and March, lending further support to the theory that kids who are among the oldest in their class have a developmental advantage that boosts the odds that they'll excel in school, on the sports field, and in many other aspects of life.

These influences have helped turn the idea of holding kids back into a national trend, especially among boys (who are generally less mature than girls at age 5) and children born in the latter half of the year. The number of kindergartners over the age of 5 has more than tripled from 5.4 percent in 1970 to 17 percent in 2009, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. While about one quarter of the increase is due to modifications in states' age-cutoff rules, redshirting accounts for the rest, according to data compiled by the National Bureau of Economic Research. (Most states require a child to be 5, or turning 5, by the end of the calendar year when he starts kindergarten.)

For parents like Bonawandt, delaying the start of school is a logical way of working around what they feel are unwelcome changes in the elementary- education system. As a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools are now held directly accountable for student progress in reading and math and face sanctions, including potential closure, if they don't perform. To boost test scores, many districts have shifted the learning process downward, so that kindergarten now looks a lot more like first grade used to. For example, 5-year-olds are generally expected to read by year's end, and in some states they are taught to count by twos, fives, and tens, and to identify fractions such as halves, thirds, and fourths. A growing number of parents have reacted to this increased pressure to perform at a young age by refusing to send their child to kindergarten when the calendar says it's time, and instead giving him what proponents commonly refer to as "the gift of an extra year."

Still, redshirting's impact as an age equalizer may be overstated. A recent study published in the *Journal of Human Resources*, a quarterly academic publication from the University of Wisconsin Press, found that a number of related factors, including a family's economic status and how well-prepared a student is for kindergarten, have a greater impact on a child's predicted achievement than her chronological age does. So how can you determine whether your kid is ready to go or needs an extra year?

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### Observe her closely.

Before deciding whether to enroll your child, take notes on her behavior and development. "The most important thing you can do as a parent is to get to know your kid better," says Anatoly Belilovsky, M.D., medical director of the Belilovsky Pediatric Center, in New York City. This advice may sound obvious, but the fact is it's difficult to assess your child's abilities objectively. Maybe you couldn't wait to start school as a kid, so naturally you expect your child to inherit a similar sense of enthusiasm. Conversely, you may have cried every day for the first few weeks of kindergarten and worry that she'll revisit that traumatic experience. Perhaps you're concerned about the hefty expense of another year of preschool or simply hate the idea of holding her back.

Whatever the case, your job is to focus exclusively on your child's classroom skills. This doesn't merely mean whether she knows her ABCs but also whether she knows how to get along with her classmates. Ask your preschool teacher whether she plays cooperatively and works out her differences on her own. "Your child's social interaction with peers and adults is key to her kindergarten success," says Claire Haas, vice president of education for Kiddie Academy, a national education-based child-care provider. Also watch how your child interacts with her peers at birthday parties, on playdates, and in classes. If she's the only girl at ballet who sits on the sidelines while everybody else dances, or if it's virtually impossible to pry her off your



leg at a group gathering, she might have a challenging adjustment period when she starts school.

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### Check out your local kindergarten.

School cutoff dates vary widely -- from July 1 in Indiana to December 31 in the District of Columbia -- and they may change from year to year (visit [superpages.com/supertips/age-to-start-kindergarten-by-state.html](http://superpages.com/supertips/age-to-start-kindergarten-by-state.html) to find yours). Beyond the average age of students, kindergarten classrooms vary significantly in personality, often even within the same district or school. Teachers' personalities too play a large part in setting the tone. Whereas one instructor might favor traditional learning methods, like a heavy dose of repetition, another may emphasize free thinking and creative problem solving. The school's curriculum will also shape your child's kindergarten experience. By the end of the year, will he be expected to count to 100, add and subtract, and recognize sight words -- and will your child be able to handle these challenges?



Cheryl Roberts, Ed.D., vice president of The Source for Learning, a nonprofit that provides educational resources for parents and teachers, recommends sitting in on a local kindergarten class the spring before your child is scheduled to start. Afterward, ask the teacher to describe the curriculum and the rules, how she handles kids who misbehave, and what she does to help those who are struggling. If your school doesn't have a visiting day, ask to make an appointment with the teacher (or, if she's not available, with the principal) to discuss the kindergarten program.

When you have a clear idea of what's in store for the coming year, analyze what you know about your child and the kindergarten, and ask yourself, Will he thrive or flounder in this environment? Keep in mind that since it's another three to six months before your child would start, he'll be further along developmentally and may surprise you by excelling at things that seem impossible right now. So as long as he's making progress, he'll probably be right on target come September, especially with a little coaching from Mom and Dad.

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### Accept that there is no one correct choice.

Although your decision concerning the proper time to start school may seem to have endless ramifications for your child, try not to stress about it too much. "Don't look for *the* answer, look for *an* answer," says Dr. Bellilovsky.

Kindergarten marks the beginning, not the end, of your child's academic journey. Regardless of when she starts school, her success will depend largely on support you give her. Don't wait for parent-teacher conferences. Check in with her teacher regularly to see how she's doing and what you can do to help her at home. Offer to volunteer in the classroom to help out with special projects. And expose your child to as many educational experiences as possible, such as museum trips, storytime, and homemade science experiments. Being hands-on with her learning will help ensure that she's exactly where she needs to be, in kindergarten and well beyond.

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### Ready -- or not?

Most states let parents enroll a child in kindergarten in the spring and then decide to defer entry up until school starts. You can feel comfortable sending your kid if she can do the following.

- Sit still and listen to a story attentively for ten minutes.
- Play cooperatively with others (take turns, share, resolve conflicts amicably).
- Follow simple, two-step instructions ("Please choose a book, and then take it to your desk").
- Ask for help when she needs it.
- Express herself in complete sentences of at least five words and be understood by non-family members.
- Use the bathroom on her own.

Although these skills aren't first-day prerequisites, you should start working on them with your child one to two months before kindergarten begins.

- Cutting with scissors.
- Recognizing some rhyming sounds and the starting sounds of words.
- Counting from 1 to 10.

- Zipping or buttoning a jacket by himself.
- Packing and unpacking his backpack.
- Using a pencil or crayon properly.
- Reading a few common sight words, like Mom and go.
- Singing the entire alphabet song.
- Writing his name.

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