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Kindergarten redshirting: Start school at age 5 or 6?

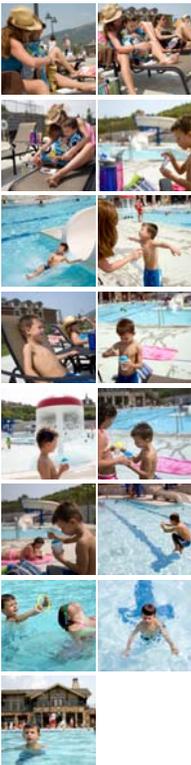
Education • Debate about what leads to success is ongoing.

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BY HEATHER MAY AND MELINDA ROGERS THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

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Amanda Moody began thinking about when to enroll her son in kindergarten soon after he was born on a late summer day.

She and her husband eventually decided it would be best for Asher to start kindergarten at Summit Academy this month — after he turned 6 on Aug. 1 — rather than a year ago, when he'd barely turned 5 by the first day of school.

Research and friends' opinion were split. "I did kind of waver a couple of times," she said. "For boys especially, I think that socially they can use that extra year at home before they are put into a group of other kids where they are expected to share and interact socially."

Moody joined the growing national trend of parents who "redshirt" kindergartners — a term borrowed from athletics — holding them back from school until they turn 6. Parents may hope that being an older student will give their child an edge in academics, sports or leadership, now or in the future. Others, like Moody, want to make sure their child is socially ready and mature enough to handle school.

A mixed bag of data • Some statistics estimate kindergarten redshirting has tripled since the 1970s. But in Utah, it's difficult to pin down whether more parents of 5-year-olds are opting to wait, said Brenda Hales, state associate superintendent at the Utah State Office of Education.

The state doesn't keep data on such decisions, Hales said, but in her previous position as an elementary-school principal, she saw parent concern ebb and flow over the years.

"In one building it was a big deal and in another it hardly ever came up," said Hales. "It's really a family decision."

The National Association for the Education of Young People advises against redshirting. In a 2003 review of the research, it questioned the supposed benefits.

While the oldest children in a class are more academically successful early in elementary school, the paper said, those differences usually disappear by third grade. Research has found no difference between younger and older students in their self-concept, peer acceptance or teacher ratings of behavior, though younger children were less likely to be nominated as well-liked by their peers.

While studies have shown some redshirted children worry they have failed and have poor attitudes about school, that may not be the case among middle- to upper-income students, according to the review. It concluded that holding children back may deprive them of important opportunities for learning.

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In other research:

- A 2000 review in the Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education said evidence on the effects of redshirting is mixed. Some kids who were redshirted because they were thought to be immature, it added, were later found to have special needs that could have been addressed earlier.
- A 2011 study published by the Center for Education Policy Analysis at Stanford University estimated that 4 percent of children delay entry into school — most often, they are white, male, from wealthy families and have birthdays in the months before school starts.

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Weighing impact, advantages • Parents who delay kindergarten typically are not worried about their child's social or academic skills. The Center for Education Policy Analysis study suggested parents do it because they're worried about their child being younger than classmates and their physical development.

The advantages are obvious when parents want their child to play sports, said one of the authors, Sean Reardon, education professor at Stanford.

But there isn't enough evidence on the academic side, he said in an interview. And parents may forget that delaying school means one less year in the workforce, he said.

He also noted that redshirting can affect classrooms and disadvantage children who didn't delay — such kids often are from low-income families who can't afford to keep them home.

If the classroom age is skewed higher, "the kindergarten teacher might aim the level of instruction a bit higher. ... That can make it harder for those kids younger and most behind to catch up," he said.

But Canadian researcher Elizabeth Dhuey believes there are lasting academic advantages. An economist at the University of Toronto, she has studied the school start dates of thousands of children in 19 countries. She believes kids who begin classes later often perform better on tests later and are more likely to attend college.

—

A personal choice • Roseanne Bowles has never regretted waiting until her daughter, Marie, was 6 to enroll her in kindergarten. Bowles wanted Marie and her younger sister to be two years apart academically so they could attend the same schools together.

Now in seventh grade at South Jordan Middle School, Marie is thriving, Bowles said. "I am really glad I did it because she is at the top of her class. ... I think she is better off."

Bowles wishes she had done the same for her sons, who have both graduated. With birth dates in July, they were among the youngest in their classes.

In the Jordan School District — one of the state's largest — 98.5 percent of kindergartners enroll at age 5, and there has not been a spike in redshirting, said Sandy Riesgraf, a district spokeswoman.

She cautions parents who consider holding their children back solely for athletics: The Utah High School Activities Association has a participation cutoff at age 18, so 19-year-old high school students may be disappointed.

But, she acknowledged, "If a parent really feels that for developmental reasons it is in their child's best interest to wait to start, we won't stand in the way."

If a child starts kindergarten and a teacher spots that he or she is not ready, the school will talk with parents about the child restarting the next year, Riesgraf said.

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'Your kid is more likely to turn out more or less the same' • Private schools with preschools and kindergartens report a higher interest among parents to repeat kindergarten.

Karla Pardini, director of programming at the Jewish Community Center in Salt Lake City, said a couple of kids a year — from a class of about 20 — attend the JCC kindergarten and repeat it at another school. The center doesn't offer grades above kindergarten.

While some parents aim to give their children an academic, social or athletic boost, she also blames schools' emphasis on testing.

"There's a lot of pressure put on parents to get their kids performing," she said. At the JCC, "We feel like children, as long as they're [meeting social and emotional] milestones, they should move into the grade they should be in."



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Parents may not think about one possible ramification of repeating kindergarten — a child may hit puberty a year ahead of his or her peers, she said.

The McGillis School, a private K-8 school in Salt Lake City, does enroll 6-year-olds who have already completed kindergarten at another school.

Principal Matt Culberson and school psychologist Melanie Battistone said parents of such children usually think their child — mostly boys — aren't socially or emotionally ready.

"Your physical and emotional maturity in middle school can play a significant role in your self-esteem and how you see yourself," Culberson said. "That's certainly worthy of consideration."

Lars Lefgren, a BYU economics professor who studies education and the effects of holding kids back for academics, says parents should consider children individually.

But with all the research and debate, he said, "My take on this is in the long run, your kid is more likely to turn out more or less the same."

hmay@sltrib.commmrogers@sltrib.com —

Utah's kindergarten rules

A child must turn 5 before Sept. 2 of the enrolling year. Each district chooses a date to begin school. Although most start mid- to late August, some year-round schools start in late July, and others do not begin until September.

Most schools will hold kindergarten registration in the spring before the upcoming school year.

In many school districts, kindergartners do not start school on the same day as the rest of the school. Many schools reserve the first few days of school for individual interviews with parents and students. After completing the interviews, kindergarten classes begin for all students.

Source: Utah State Office of Education •

Start times

When does school start at Utah's largest public school districts?

Alpine • Aug. 21

Canyons • Aug. 27

Davis • Sept. 4

Granite • Aug. 27

Jordan • Aug. 28

Ogden • Aug. 27

Provo • Aug. 21

Salt Lake • Aug. 22

Weber • Aug. 22

Source: Utah State Office of Education

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bluefighter • a year ago

Don't red-shirt the special need or handicapped kids. They need help in getting brains to function better.

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Yes, and they will receive services through the age of 21 and an extra year at the end for job training skills will be much important in their life than an extra year with Mom & Dad while 5.

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Lady_Ashmire • a year ago

I know this is about something different but I can't help thinking of the Star Trek meaning of "red-shirt" and feeling slightly horrified at the mental image when associated with parental treatment of children!

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Matt • a year ago

Huh. Interesting.

I mean, we have LOVED having our 4 y.o. twins in pre-school. They've been in two different "teaching pre-schools" this past year (one at a H.S. Fall/Winter and one at a university for the summer, and they'll be back at the H.S. this Fall.) Honestly, from what I can tell, it's been very good for them - both from a learning perspective and a social perspective.

I would never think about delaying their kindergarten next year. (I'm not saying it's a horrible idea to do so, but it's just not something I would ever have considered.)

I had forgotten that that was what Sandy Riesgraf is up to these days...

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Dirk • a year ago

The benefits extend far beyond third grade. With a September birthday It was a great advantage being 16 almost my entire sophomore year. In drivers ed we were seated in order of birthdays and I found myself sitting in front of several Juniors. They spent their first year of HS without the ability to drive. whereas I was driving by the start of the second month of high school. The advantage also showed up my senior year as I was 18 most my senior year. I wasn't one to sluff but on the odd occasion I did feel sick I didn't need to track down a parent to check me out, I could check myself out.

Acedemically they are probably right in that there is little advantage after the first couple years of school, but socially the benefits are substantial and they don't disappear by the end of 3rd grade.

I also want to point out an item of flawed logic in the article, it

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