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Age differences play key role in early learning

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Full-day kindergarten students in Brampton. (March 20, 2012)

ANDREW FRANCIS WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Sachin Maharaj

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With the Ontario government committed to implementing full-day kindergarten across the province, parents will be able to enrol their children in school full time as young as 3 years, 8 months.

The program promises a stronger start in school, which includes improving children's reading, writing and math skills. Yet research has shown that at such a young age, how a child fares in school can be significantly influenced by one seemingly insignificant factor: when they were born. How old a child is relative to their classmates when they start school

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can have a major impact on their future.

[Elizabeth Dhuey](#) is an assistant professor of economics at the University of Toronto. Her research has looked at the effects of a student's relative age on their success in school. The results have been startling. One study, which looked at performance on the [Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study](#) (TIMSS), found that the youngest children in a cohort scored as much as 12 percentiles lower than the oldest.

This means that if you take two children who are intellectually equivalent but were born at opposite ends of the cut-off date for school entry, the older child could have scores that make her appear gifted while the younger child appears to be merely average. And instead of disappearing over time, these differences seem to persist. In British Columbia, Dhuey found that younger students are almost 10 per cent less likely to be in the highest academic stream in high school.

This phenomenon and Dhuey's research was cited in *Outliers*, the best-selling book by [Malcolm Gladwell](#) and has led to an increase in "redshirting," parents holding their children back from kindergarten so they can start school when they are older and more mature. The practice of redshirting has more than tripled in the U.S. since the 1970s. While redshirting does not appear to be as prevalent in Canadian schools, the effects of relative age in our classrooms are very real. A more recent Canadian study by Justin Smith of Wilfrid Laurier University found that younger students performed significantly worse in reading and math in both Grade 4 and Grade 10.

After the release of *Outliers*, subsequent research by Dhuey has shown that relative age does not just affect academics. In a study on leadership, she found that younger students are less confident about their leadership skills and are as much as 11 per cent less likely to captain a high-school sports team or be the president of a school club. But perhaps the most disturbing finding is a study that found that the younger students are relative to their classmates, the more likely they are to be diagnosed as having a learning disability.

Why is this? It has to do with maturity masquerading as ability.

The youngest children who start kindergarten can be in classes with kids up to a full year older. These older children have had as much as 27 per cent more time to develop physically, socially and intellectually. It should thus be no surprise that they display greater skills in the classroom and on the playground, in addition to having fewer behavioural issues. This can lead teachers, coaches and others to confuse their greater maturity with greater ability.

The older students then get more attention, get placed in advanced groups where they develop even greater skills, and receive more training from coaches. As a result, they develop greater skills and confidence, perform even better next year, get even more attention, and the cycle continues. Meanwhile, younger, less mature children can appear to be just not as smart, athletic or well-behaved and are thus treated differently.

What can be done about this?

We should avoid ability-grouping and academic competition in elementary schools. The countries with the lowest incidence of relative age effects are those that avoid ability-grouping the longest. And schools should be working to attenuate performance differences among students, not reinforcing them, however inadvertently. So while full-day kindergarten offers the promise of improved learning for Ontario children, we should be vigilant and make sure that younger students are not disadvantaged in ways that can affect them for the rest of their lives.

Sachin Maharaj is a graduate student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto and an assistant curriculum leader in the Toronto District School Board.

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