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Life / Parent

## Should you put off kindergarten for your child?

An increasing number of parents are opting to 'redshirt' kids born late in the year.

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RICHARD LAUTENS / TORONTO STAR

Dianne Horn kept her son, Cameron 5, at home for an extra year before he went to kindergarten. He's now finishing his first year in junior kindergarten and there are no regrets, she said.

By: [Jessica McDiarmid](#) News reporter, Published on Mon Jun 17 2013

Dianne Horn was shocked when the school her son was to attend mentioned the possibility of putting him into a class for kids born a year later.

Cameron had stayed in preschool instead of going to junior kindergarten in 2011, the year he turned 4. As a Dec. 30 baby, his parents felt he was too young — about 3 years and 8 months old at the start of that school year. And his preschool offered junior kindergarten curriculum, but with more adult supervision and fewer kids.

The following spring, the private Leaside school Cameron would attend suggested starting him in junior kindergarten, rather than senior as his family had planned.

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"We were completely blindsided by it," said Horn. "Then I started reading about it and researching it. I just had to open my mind to it and it started to all make a lot of sense."

She also talked to her mother, who shares Cameron's Dec. 30 birthday, about what it's like to always be the youngest in the class.

"He was always going to be the last one," said Horn.

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A healthy mind is key to a woman's well-being

Often referred to as "redshirting," — a term borrowed from college sports where it signifies keeping an athlete out of varsity competition for a year to better develop skills — an increasing number of parents are opting to delay kindergarten for kids born late in the year.

Many experts attribute the increasing popularity and discussion of redshirting to [Malcolm Gladwell's book \*Outliers\*](#), particularly the opening chapter where [Gladwell discusses the fact that a huge proportion of pro hockey and soccer players are born in the first three months of the year](#).

Estimates of how many children are redshirted vary widely. Researchers in the United States, where redshirting is presumed to be more common, [have put the number at anywhere between 4 and nearly 20 per cent](#).

In Ontario, children are eligible for junior kindergarten the year they turn 4, though they aren't required by law to attend. They are required to be in Grade 1 the year they turn six, unless special arrangements are made with their school to hold off.

Statistics for how many families hold their kids back an extra year in Ontario aren't available, but Patrick Keyes, superintendent of student success for the Toronto Catholic District School Board, said it's still relatively rare. If parents request it, educators will meet with them and determine the best course of action.

"You don't usually wind up holding them back," said Keyes.

John McNamara, an educational psychologist at Brock University, said studies have shown boys are more likely to be held back, as are children from wealthier families, who are more likely to have the resources to provide alternate care for an extra year.

"I think the number of families that are choosing to redshirt is increasing," he said.

Parents may hold kids back to give their child an extra competitive edge, or because they feel their child isn't ready, said McNamara.

There are developmental differences in children of kindergarten age who are, say, six or 10 months apart, he said. Most of [that gap](#) in ability "washes out" by Grade 3, but not all, said McNamara, who kept his own son out of school for an extra year.

His son, with a Dec. 23 birthday, had other characteristics that, combined, led them to believe he'd benefit from waiting a year.

"He didn't have many vulnerabilities but we could tell he was sensitive ... and would benefit from being an older kid in that class, and maybe not benefit from being the younger kid in the class," said McNamara. "It was a very hard decision for us. ... And I have to say, that was probably the best parenting decision that we've made because he's thriving."

For the Horn family, assessments indicated Cameron was solidly prepared for junior kindergarten, but middle-to-below average for senior kindergarten. That clinched the decision. Now 5, he's finishing his first year in kindergarten and there are no regrets, she said.

"His confidence has soared, it's been a really, really great experience for him."

Elizabeth Dhuey, a University of Toronto professor who [studies the effects of relative age on school success](#), said research shows strongly that older students tend to do better academically and socially, are more likely to go to university and less likely to receive special education. No research, however, has suggested that holding a child back a year is beneficial, said Dhuey.

"It's not clear whether if your kid is relatively young, it's a good thing for them to wait out a year," she said.

She cautioned that any decisions to hold a child back should involve education professionals and be based on the individual child.

"I feel like we've started to worry about this issue way too much," said Dhuey. "Being relatively old is good . . . but the magnitude of these positive effects are pretty small compared to other things. It's probably not the thing that parents should worry about the most."



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