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ESSAY

Should Children Be Held Back for Kindergarten?

Many parents are holding back their 5-year-olds from school for a year, but the benefits are doubtful

By JENNIFER BREHENY WALLACE

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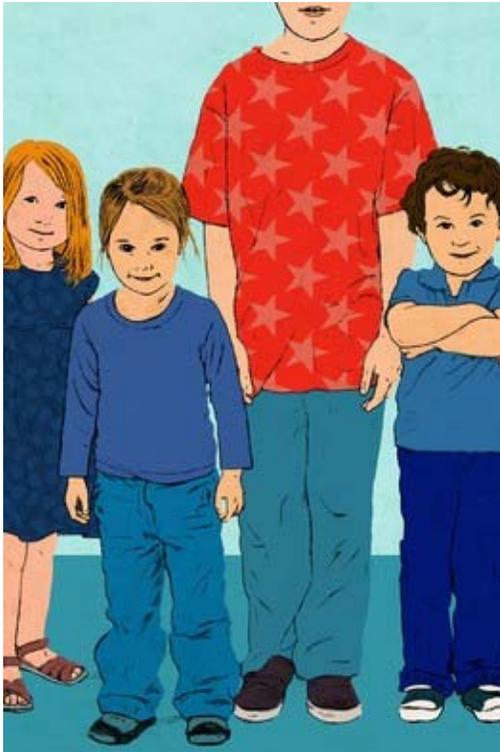
Many parents choose to hold their children back from kindergarten to give them an extra year to mature. How much does this really help? WSJ contributor Jennifer Wallace discusses. Photo: Getty

Erin Odom and her husband, of Mooresville, N.C., spent months last year debating what to do about kindergarten for their daughter. They worried that her fifth birthday fell too close to their school's cutoff date, which would make her one of the youngest children in the class. Their nursery schoolteacher assured them that their daughter would do "just fine" moving ahead, Ms. Odom says, but "we didn't just want her to survive school—we wanted her to thrive."

What ultimately persuaded them to hold her back for a year was talking to other parents. "Those who had pushed their children ahead came to regret it," says Ms. Odom, "while parents who held their children back didn't." She estimates that in her daughter's preschool class of nine children, roughly half were held back, too.

This sort of voluntary delay is known as "academic redshirting," after the practice in college sports of benching a hot prospect for a year to give him time to practice and become an even better player during his four years of eligibility.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, some 6% of kindergartners are redshirted nationally. But the numbers can vary by neighborhood. Data from Connecticut's department of education show the incidence of redshirting ranging from 2% in poorer school districts to 27% in wealthier ones. Redshirting is easier for families that can afford an extra year of child care or preschool tuition—and the practice can be controversial because of the perceived advantage that it gives to such children.



Ruth Gwily

When Jamie Bakal, an educational consultant with L.A. School Mates in Los Angeles, started her business eight years ago, she saw that children who turned 5 over the summer were often held back for schools with Sept. 1 cutoff dates. She says it then expanded to include children with birthdays in April and May. Today, she says, schools are accepting children who have turned 5 as early as the previous February and March—potentially allowing for a 19-month age spread between classmates.

With the rise of demanding academic standards, states have employed their own kind of redshirting by moving up cutoff dates for kindergarten entry. In 1975, only a few states required children to be 5 before Sept. 15. Today, about three dozen states mandate it. Legislators in Connecticut are considering moving up their kindergarten cutoff date as well, from Jan. 1 to Oct. 1.

Some parents redshirt for the competitive edge that they think an extra year brings—time for a child to grow bigger, smarter, more assertive. Yet Meg Meeker, a pediatrician in Traverse City, Mich., and the author of "Strong Mothers,

Strong Sons," says that she sees too many parents redshirting children for the wrong reasons. "While some children really do need that extra year to mature," she says, "I've found redshirting often isn't about what's best for the child. It's about what's best for the parents." Today's hypercompetitive parents, she says, want their children to win in the classroom and in sports, not only so the child looks good but so the parents themselves can feel superior.

The research on the benefits of being older is mixed. Elizabeth Dhuey, an economist at the University of Toronto Scarborough, didn't specifically study redshirting, but she has published several studies showing that being relatively older in a class has some advantages. In one large-scale study, Prof. Dhuey and co-author Kelly Bedard compared the birth months and test scores of more than 200,000 students in several countries. They found the oldest students in fourth grade scored 4% to 12% higher than the youngest, a trend that continued in eighth grade. In another large-scale study, Prof. Dhuey and economist Stephen Lipscomb found the relatively oldest students were 4% to 11% more likely to hold leadership positions in high school.





According to the National Center for Education Statistics, some 6% of kindergartners are 'redshirted' -- or voluntarily delayed -- nationally. *Getty Images*

Many researchers say that studies on redshirting show no long-term advantage, with any early benefits fading by the time of middle school. As one researcher put it: If you're redshirting as a way to get your child into Harvard, you should rethink your strategy.

Princeton neuroscientist Samuel Wang, co-author of the book "Welcome to Your Brain," says that being around more mature peers actually benefits younger classmates, both behaviorally and academically. He points to a large study that found schooling influences intelligence more than age: The youngest children in a grade scored higher on IQ tests than children the same age one grade lower.

Dr. Meeker cautions parents to think twice before holding a child back who doesn't truly need it. "Redshirting is the initial seed that can grow into a devastating parenting philosophy," she says. In essence, you're telling your child that high achievement comes first—and if you can't do it yourself, then we'll hold you back so you can. She adds, "Every redshirted kindergartner eventually comes to know his parents' motives."

—Ms. Wallace is a freelance writer in New York.

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