What to Do with Lee?

Academic Redshirting of One Kindergarten-Age Boy

My son's birthday is at the end of August. Even before Lee was eligible to attend kindergarten, we were bombarded with advice from every direction on what we should do about him entering school. Local teachers told us that although the kindergarten cutoff date is September 15, boys with summer birthdays need an extra year to grow and mature, thus ensuring success in learning. Many of our friends advised us to hold Lee out one year so that he would be among the oldest in his class, giving him an academic advantage over his younger peers, not to mention the physical advantage in sports.

Our family advised us to send Lee to the local public school alternative kindergarten program and then let his teacher decide if he was ready for first grade or if he needed a year in a regular kindergarten class: “Teachers know best if a child is ready for school.” Finally, my brother-in-law, who lived in South Africa, told us that in some tribes a child is not considered ready for school until he can reach over his head with his right hand and touch his left ear.

Although the advice for redshirting Lee was abundant and backed by personal testimonials, it did not reflect the findings of educational research and academic literature (Tanner & Galis 1997). As parents, my wife and I were determined to examine the research and academic literature. We wanted to be well-informed consumers of the education system, not just followers of the academic fad of the day.

We found that the majority of research reported in education journals indicates few academic and social benefits for children with summer birth dates who are held out of kindergarten for one year (Brent, May, & Kundert 1996; Mantzicopoulos 1997; May & Kundert 1997; Pianta, Tietbohl, & Bennett 1997; Shepard 1997). Although the information in the journals indicated no real benefits, the idea expressed in popular media and by word of mouth was that “good” parents reduce the risk of academic failure by giving their children more time to mature.

We were still confused as to what to do with Lee.

Our decision

Although the research shows no proven long-term benefits from early retention, this has not affected the current trends in kindergarten redshirting. Within our school district, parents retain their young children with summer birth dates.

This is true even with preschool-age children. Lee was the youngest boy in his preschool class; the majority of boys were already five years old and were in their third year of preschool. Lee struggled to make friends and seemed frustrated that the older children could outperform him both socially and academically. Since the other boys had attended school for one year more than Lee, they could already write their names, identify colors and shapes, and cut with scissors. Lee struggled with his fine motor skills and was unhappy that his work did not look like the others.

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We watched during Lee’s last year of preschool as he stopped trying to write, draw, and read and focused his attention on getting the older kids to like him by being silly. His teachers had to focus on managing his behaviors. The other children did give him attention, but did not include him in activities. When Lee would join a play center, the other children would leave or tell him to go away.

Lee’s preschool teacher suggested that the best thing for him would be to have one more year to prepare for kindergarten by attending the alternative kindergarten program. As a result, we made an appointment to observe a typical morning of the program.

Using the results of all of our research, along with what we knew about Lee, we decided to enroll him in the alternative kindergarten program.

The alternative kindergarten program in our district is designed for children with summer birth dates, with enrollment limited to 15. To attend, a child needs to turn five before the September 15 cutoff, thus being eligible for kindergarten. The class follows the local kindergarten curriculum. The teacher is marvelous and is in her fourteenth year of teaching alternative kindergarten. She has a good understanding of how to teach young, high-energy boys and actually enjoys a class full of them.

During Lee’s year in the program, we have watched him transform from young, silly, and out-of-place to being one of the group. He loves learning to read and writes his name everywhere. Academically, he still is not ready for first grade, but he is ready for kindergarten. Being a school psychologist, I closely followed his progress with early literacy by monitoring his scores on standardized tests for preliteracy skills. It took him until spring to approach the benchmarks for prereading expected of children at the end of kindergarten. He was not quite where he should be by the end of kindergarten but was making steady progress.

We have no doubt that Lee will reach or exceed the early literacy kindergarten benchmarks by next year. However, we believe he would have been either identified for special services or retained if he had attended the regular kindergarten class, and to us those results would have had longer lasting negative effects on his self-image than having attended an alternative kindergarten program. We believe the experience in that program is preparing him to be successful in kindergarten. We are confident that when he begins kindergarten he will have the skills he needs to be successful and he will be motivated to do well.

Conclusion

The decision we made to redshirt Lee was a difficult one. As a professional I like to make decisions using data, not suggestions. I personally feel that redshirting boys with summer birth dates is done too often and decisions are not always based on the needs of the child. As a result of the practice, and the creation of alternative kindergartens, regular kindergarten is becoming what first grade was 20 years ago. In some states children now are expected to enter kindergarten already knowing how to read.

As a parent, however, I feel we made the right decision for our son. We were glad our school district had a program designed to meet the needs of young, high-energy boys.

Just recently, to confirm our decision, we had Lee try to reach over his head with his right hand and touch his left ear. He is not quite there yet, but will probably be able to do it by the time he starts kindergarten this fall. It seems the tribes in South Africa may have a quick and inexpensive school readiness test.

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References


