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## Redshirting: It's not just happening in sports

**WE ALL THINK** our kids are exceptional. But when my oldest son was stringing together complex sentences at 18 months, I started worrying about kindergarten. I was petrified that making him wait until the requisite age of 5 would somehow dull his intellect and ensure a life of school boredom and underachievement. Not to mention the fact that his birthday is Sept. 6 and he would miss the kindergarten cut-off date by just six days!

By his third birthday, he was already a

head taller than most 5 year olds. If I waited for him to be chronologically ready for kindergarten, he'd be the biggest and oldest one in his class. That can't be good, I fretted. What was I to do?

As my anxiety heightened, I decided to take action. As is often the case when I'm faced with an issue requiring serious thought and rational analysis, I turned to the masses. I confronted every parent with whom I came into contact about their child's kindergarten readiness, age of enrollment

and subsequent success or failure. I talked to waiters, cashiers, stockbrokers, religious fanatics. It really didn't matter to me. If you had children who were going to be attending kindergarten, were currently attending kindergarten or had ever attended kindergarten, I wanted to talk to you. "Did you hold your son back?" "Did you push your daughter forward?" "How was his social interaction?" "Was she academically challenged?"

Now I don't claim to have done this scientifically. But my data overwhelmingly confirmed that parents who held their "cusp boys" back a year so they could start kindergarten later were the happiest. These boys were doing well in school, had positive attitudes and were socially compatible with other kids in their grade. Coming in a close second were parents who had nudged their daughters forward when birthdays were close to the cut-off date.

While much of the factual research is inconclusive, most experts view the decision to hold your child back a year before starting kindergarten (a practice known as redshirting) as an important and individual choice that parents must make based on their child's physical, social and cognitive development. Arizona Education Code sets the date at which a child must be 5 to enter school at Sept. 1 but the governing boards of individual districts have discretion to allow exceptions on a case-by-case basis. For parents whose children's birthdays don't hover around the ominous cut-off date, the decision may not so grueling. But for those of us with kids whose birthdays fall anywhere from late spring through the end of summer, the decision to either push a child ahead or hold him or her back can be agonizing.

Diane Mote, M.A., M.C., L.P.C., is an educational consultant and a child and family therapist with a private practice in Phoenix. She spent the last two decades administering the Gesell Kindergarten Readiness Test and consulting with pre-

school teachers and parents regarding kindergarten readiness and redshirting. Mote believes that readiness for kindergarten depends more on development than chronology. Assuming that children will be ready just because they will be 5 by Sept. 1 could be setting them up for unnecessary failure, she says.

"The kindergarten curriculum is often a first grade curriculum," she says. "For children with summer and spring birthdays, the accelerated curriculum is stressful, to say the least, even when they are successful." Mote maintains that a child's self-concept as a learner and student is formed during the early elementary years. "If that self-perception is negative—'I don't like school,' 'School is hard,' 'I always get in trouble'—many times that can be traced back to being developmentally young with a summer or late spring birthday."

"The best way to assess a child's readiness for kindergarten is to consult with the child's preschool teacher," says Mote. "The preschool teacher sees the child in a group setting and can evaluate how well the child adapts to a semi-structured environment where he or she needs to pay attention, follow directions, complete tasks...interact well socially and demonstrate an appropriate level of independence."

"Studies have shown that overall maturity is more important to later life success than intellectual ability or academic performance. The ultimate goal is to provide your child with a kindergarten experience where he or she feels successful and becomes an eager learner."

My husband and I ultimately decided it didn't make sense to push our son into kindergarten just because he was 5 days away from his fifth birthday at cut-off time. He was clearly an exceptionally smart little boy. But socially and emotionally he wasn't anywhere near ready for the challenges of a more structured learning environment. We waited that extra year.

At almost 6, my son was the oldest (and of course tallest) boy in his class. He made friends easily, breezed through much of the academic material and developed an appreciation for and joy about learning that will last him the rest of his life. I couldn't be happier with our decision to wait. **rak**

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