Delay Kindergarten at Your Child's Peril

By Sam Wang and Sandra Aamodt

This fall, one in eleven kindergarten-aged children in the US will not be going to class. Parents of these children often delay school entry in an attempt to give them a leg up on peers, but this strategy is likely to be counterproductive.

The practice is called "redshirting," after a rule that allows college athletes to extend their eligibility by sitting out freshman-year games. In childhood, athletes who were slightly older than their teammates gain an early but lasting competitive advantage. Physical maturity allows older children to perform better. Coaches mistake this difference for natural aptitude and respond by giving the older children more opportunities to improve their skills. Does a similar approach work for academic achievement?

Teachers may encourage redshirting because more mature children are easier to handle in the classroom and initially produce better test scores than their younger classmates. In a class of twenty-five, the average difference is equivalent to going from thirteenth place to eleventh. This advantage fades by the end of elementary school, though, and disadvantages start to accumulate. In high school, redshirted children are less motivated and perform less well. By adulthood, they are no better off in wages or educational attainment—except that their lifetime earnings are reduced by one year.

In short, the analogy to athletics does not hold. Instead, let us step back and ask a better question: what approach gives children the greatest opportunity to learn?

Parents who want to give their young children an academic boost have a powerful tool at their disposal: school itself. In a large-scale study at 26 Canadian elementary schools, young-for-year first graders made considerably more progress in reading and math than old-for-year kindergarteners just two months younger. In another large study, the youngest fifth-graders scored a little lower than their classmates—but five points higher in verbal IQ, on average, than fourth-graders of the same age. In other words, school makes children smarter.

The benefits of being younger are even greater for those who skip a grade, an option available to many high-achieving children. Compared with nonskippers of similar talent and motivation, these youngsters pursue advanced degrees and enter professional school more often. Acceleration is a powerful intervention, with effects on achievement that are twice as large as programs for the gifted. Grade-skippers even report more positive social and emotional feelings.

These differences may come from the increased challenges of a demanding environment. Learning is maximized not by getting all the answers right, but by making errors—and correcting them quickly. In this respect, children benefit from being close to the limits of their ability. Too low an error rate becomes

boring, while too high an error rate is unrewarding. A delay in school entry might therefore still be justified if a child is very far behind his or her peers, leaving a gap too broad for school to allow effective learning.

Parents want to provide the best environment for their child, but delaying school is rarely the right approach. The first six years of life are a time of tremendous growth and change in the developing brain. Synapses, the connections between brain cells, are undergoing massive reorganization. Indeed, a four-year-old's brain uses more energy than it ever will again. Brain development is not a process that can be put on pause, so the critical question is how to provide the best possible context to support it.

For most children, that context is the classroom. Disadvantaged children have the most to lose from delayed access to school. For children of low socioeconomic status, gaining a month of additional schooling closes one-tenth of the gap between them and more advantaged students. Even without redshirting, a national trend is afoot to move back the cutoff birthdays for start of school. Since 1970 this date has advanced by six weeks, with a current national average in mid-October. This delay hits children from low-income families the hardest.

Emotional development, a concern that arises especially often for boys, also may be aided by the presence of older children. Kindergarteners show age-related differences in social acceptance and self-perceptions, but these differences even out by first grade. The benefits of older children may extend to empathetic abilities. Empathy requires the ability to reason about the beliefs of others. This capacity relies on brain maturation, but it is also influenced by interactions with other children. Having an older (but not younger) sibling speeds the onset of this capacity in three- to five-year-olds. The acceleration is large: up to half a year per sibling. Although nearly all children reach a mature level of understanding by age six, there may be lasting social advantages to developing this ability earlier. Parents concerned about a child's emotional maturity might consider that frequent interaction with more mature classmates can help the developmental process along.

The initial redshirt advantage may disappear because children are not on a fixed trajectory but learn actively from teachers—and classmates. It matters very much who a child's peers are. Redshirted children begin school with others who are a little further behind them. Because learning is social, the real winners in that situation are their classmates.

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