

Retention

Each year, many teachers face the problem of where and how to place children who do not seem to fit into the rest of the class. In many school districts, retention, or having the child repeat a grade, is an option that is frequently considered for children who appear to lag behind.

Characteristics of Children Who May Be Retained

A child may be considered for retention if he or she has poor academic skills, is small in stature or the youngest in the grade, has moved or been absent frequently, does poorly on a prescreening assessment, or has limited English-language skills. In addition, a retained child is more likely to be male and to have minority status, a high activity level, low socioeconomic status, and parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede for the child. Retention is also more commonly used in the primary grades. Since most schools have vague policies regarding retention, the decision typically falls to the classroom teacher.

Effects of Retention

Some teachers and parents believe that appropriate placement encompasses retention and that certain children will benefit from the maturity gained from an extra year in the same grade. However, cumulative research on the effects of retention shows that the negative effects usually outweigh the positive effects. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) notes the following among the negative effects:

- Most children do not "catch up" when held back.
- Although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades.
- Students who are held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than children who go on to the next grade.

"Flunking" a grade impacts a child's self-concept/esteem greatly. Also being held back twice drastically increases the likelihood of the student dropping out.

Why Do Schools Retain Children?

Professors Smith and Shepard at the University of Colorado found that teachers frequently exaggerated the perceived benefits of retention. They believed that retention in early grades prevented problems or the stigma of failure later on. But teachers lacked real feedback on how well students were doing as they moved through school (Smith & Shepard, 1987, p. 130).

There are also some philosophical differences among professional educators. Some teachers believe that children mature and develop school readiness along with physiological unfolding, while other teachers believe that any child of legal age is teachable if the program is adapted to fit that child's individual needs.

Options Other Than Retention

The first consideration should be that an appropriate instruction program is not being. A difficulty for a teacher or parent is the basic dilemma of choosing from the instructional and delivery options that are available in their school. It is important to become aware of alternatives to retention. These include:

- Research-based reading and instructional programs.
- Mixed-age classes. In this environment, students learn at their own rate and advance to the next stage when they have mastered the required skills without the restriction of grade-level labeling.
- Individualized instruction. This method is tailored to the individual student's style of learning.
- Tutoring. Through individual attention, students are helped in difficult academic areas during the year.

- Home assistance programs. These programs provide parents with structured specific information about ways to help their child academically with homework, sound study habits, or sound work habits.
- Smaller class size. Particularly in the primary years, can improve learning environments for all students.
- Seeking alternative educational settings. These may include summer school or after-school programs that are learning laboratories with opportunities for projects and a "hands on" approach to learning.

How Parents Can Respond

At the first sign that their child is struggling, parents should request early intervention and identification of specific difficulties or disabilities that the child may have. When parents are faced with retention as an option for their child, they can question which research-based instructional programs were used, for how long and what were the results. They should research this issue beginning with the resources listed. They can also write a letter describing their concerns about the school's proposal to retain their child. (See Wrightslaw article)

Whether or not a child repeats a grade, parents should work with school personnel to be sure that their child has a significantly different experience during the new school year from the previous year. New instructional programs and techniques should be selected and implemented. These should be monitored by the district and the parent and changed if adequate progress is not being made. If progress is limited and the child has not been evaluated to determine if they are eligible for special education, dyslexia or Section 504 services, written request for evaluation should be made.

Resources:

- National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). 1988; Position Statement on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion; www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/WhitePaper_GradeRetentionandSocialPromotion.pdf
- Smith, Mary L., & Shepard, Lorrie A. (1987). What doesn't work: Explaining policies of retention in the early grades. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 69(2), 129-134. EJ 359 345
- Wrightslaw, "Why Retain? It Didn't Work the First Time"; www.wrightslaw.com/nltr/09/nl.0317.htm

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