
JUNXION

FOR RESIDENTS, BY RESIDENTS

Bit by Bit

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The Gift of TIME

It's April. A decision-making time for many parents. Do we send our child to kindergarten this year or wait a year? The teacher is recommending pre-first for our son, whose birthday is August 26. Do we opt for pre-first or send him to first grade? What should we do? During my time in education, I was asked these questions each and every year.

Just because children turn 5 before September 1, it doesn't necessarily mean they're ready for kindergarten. Likewise, they may not be ready for first grade just because they are 6. All children develop in their own time and at their own rate. Some kids are gifted in gross motor skills but might be late talkers. Other kids talk a mile a minute and are still a bit awkward or tentative in situations requiring more athletic agility. Some children cry easily and don't want to be separated from Mommy or Daddy. And some kids are just late bloomers. These days there's another consideration: Although children historically learned to read at 6 and a half years of age when in first grade, there's now an expectation that kindergarteners head to first grade reading a required

number of sight words. Parents, just know that among other developmental milestones that are necessary for reading readiness, a 5-year-old may not have fully developed muscle coordination of the eyes, meaning the eyes can't line up or even focus on a word, which prevents the child from reading successfully. This can be a blow to a young child's fragile self-esteem. So how do parents know when and how to give their child the gift of time?

It turns out my husband and I had to ask ourselves these questions about our summer boy – the son who was born on August 26 but due in late September. If he had waited until his due date, there would have been no question. He would have missed the cutoff of September 1, and thus, he would have been almost 6 when starting kindergarten. Perfect! However, in reality, he turned 5 at the start of kindergarten, which made him one of the youngest in his grade. For us, the decision was easy and had been made the day our son was born. He would go to kindergarten at Unionville Elementary, where, fortunately, there was a pre-first program – a

program that was designed to give children who need an extra year to bloom in all areas that gift of time.

As it turned out, his kindergarten teacher agreed with us 100 percent and recommended a year in pre-first before first grade.



Resident and education specialist Perk Musacchio explains the benefits of delaying kindergarten for children born in late summer or still lacking skills to set them up for success

Our son knew his numbers, letters, colors, shapes, and all the academic skills that were required in kindergarten in 1991-1992. However, his social and emotional skills were not quite ready for first grade. He had trouble staying focused, was not confident, needed prompting to follow directions and complete tasks, and he often got teary and frustrated. He was the perfect pre-first candidate. Children who need the gift of an extra year in school tend to share many of the same characteristics, but the number one question to ask is: *Will another year make a difference?* In other words, will an extra year allow the child to mature and develop in the areas that were late to bloom? You can't tutor maturity. It just takes time. If a child needs different instruction, special services, and an alternate placement in order to learn, then an extra year may not be the answer. However, I have seen times where there were other circumstances that made an extra year in those cases the right choice. Most of the time, the kids who benefit from an extra year in preschool, kindergarten, or pre-first just need the gift of time – time to build their



confidence, independence, responsibility, language skills, gross and fine motor skills, social skills, and coping skills in order to be ready to learn.

HERE ARE SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF WHEN MAKING THE DECISION:

- Can your child delay immediate gratification?
- Does he have reasonable fine motor control? Can he separate his fingers between his "tall man" and "ring man" fingers?
- Does she relate well with peers?
- Is she able to separate from a parent?

- Can he sit still for a reasonable amount of time? The typical formula is 2-5 minutes per year of age, so a 5-year-old should be able to sit still for about 10-25 minutes. My experience tells me that these days 10-15 minutes is more realistic.
- If your child is a late bloomer in any area(s), will the academic nature and expectations of many current kindergarten programs allow for considering the developmental range of abilities and modify the pace and instruction?
- Is your child a summer baby or a young 5-year-old? Just know that those summer boys, like our son, are the perfect candidate for pre-first. As an added benefit, it helped our son to be successful in athletics, as well as in his academic endeavors.

No parent or teacher wants children to struggle during their school career. Sometimes the benefits of an extra year might not truly be seen until high school, college, or in the workplace. This was true in my son's case. At the

end of his junior year, he made a comment to us: "If I hadn't gone to pre-first, I would be graduating with my friends right now." We asked him if he felt that he was ready to be a freshman in college. He said no, but we agreed that he would be an awesome senior in high school, and he was!

On rare occasions, some students might have missed a large portion of the year's skill instruction. Perhaps, they missed a lot of school due to a serious illness, or sometimes a move from one school to another might mean a different curriculum or skill acquisition. Then, repeating the grade might be the best option in order to fill in the gaps and allow for future success in school. However, retention is always a controversial topic with mixed reviews. It's always best if that scenario can be avoided with the gift of a year prior to starting school or at least before first grade. Kids have a keen sense of how they compare to their peers and can be quite hard on

themselves. Plus, if you have a child who is struggling to keep up, you know how challenging it can be when doing homework or dealing with the aftermath of a tough day in school. Whenever possible, it's always better to be proactive rather than reactive.

There is a wonderful poem that was written around 1895 and eventually published in 1912 that is still relevant today. You might try googling "The Ambulance Down in the Valley" or "The Fence or the Ambulance" by Joseph Malins. The gist of the poem is this: Do we want to let people fall over a cliff, get hurt, and then react by having to call an ambulance, **OR** do we want to put a fence at the edge of the cliff? One is reactive, and the other is preventative. Being preventative is always the better option for overall physical and mental health and is typically less expensive for the individual and society as a whole. As Ben Franklin said, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." When in doubt, consider giving the gift that keeps on giving for many years to come – the gift of time.

Perk Musacchio is the co-author of No Manual, No Problem: Strategies and Interventions to Help Your Child Thrive in Today's World and A Student's Guide to Communication and Self-Presentation, and is the originator of the PeaceWalk®. For more information, visit her website at skillstosoar.com.

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