

The Kindergarten Choice

BY CHIP WOOD

In most American school districts the rite of passage into public school begins the year of your child's fifth birthday. That birthday may be in November and your neighbor's child may have been born in February, but the law says both are ready for the same educational program when the yellow school bus comes by in September.

However, not all children are ready for a regular kindergarten program just because they are five years old. Child development experts at the Gesell Institute in New Haven, Connecticut, estimate as many as 30 percent of children are starting school before they are ready. Despite what you may be hearing, today's children are *not* different from those of a generation ago. They do not grow faster, mature younger, nor learn sooner. Yet they are being asked to do work in kindergarten their parents didn't see until they were in first grade. What's the rush?

In many ways kindergarten entrance is more important than college entrance. The first school experiences can establish attitudes that can last throughout a student's school career—too early a start can lead to frustration, stress and early failure. Children who are forced to "keep up" often fall behind under the intense pressure of today's faster-paced kindergarten curriculum. As a parent you have the right and responsibility to make an informed judgment about whether or not kindergarten is, in fact, the best choice for your child this year.

Following is a list to help you bring your particular situation into focus:

- ✓ My child's birthday is _____.
- ✓ The cut-off date for school entrance in my school district is _____.
- ✓ My school district provides kindergarten screening to determine a child's readiness to begin school.
- ✓ My school district holds parent meetings to explain school readiness and the nature and content of the kindergarten program.

✓ My school district provides an alternative program for five-year-olds who may not be ready for school.

✓ My state does not require children to be enrolled in school until the age of six.

If the only question you could answer was the first one, then you have some research to do. But before you march down to the school office for answers, here are three points to consider:

1. Intellectual ability is not the same thing as school readiness. Your child may be "gifted and talented," possess a very high I.Q., and still not be ready for school this year. A good kindergarten screening program will assess your child's readiness for a school program by looking at her maturity in many areas. Make sure your school is as interested in knowing about your child's physical, social and language development as they are in measuring her intellectual development. Studies have shown that overall maturity is more important to later life success than intellectual ability or academic performance.

2. An extra year at the beginning of school is better than being held back later on. If your school provides a pre-kindergarten or developmental kindergarten program for five-year-old children who are too young for the regular kindergarten, consider yourself fortunate. Such programs allow young children the extra time they need to blossom at their own rate through this longer "germination" period at the beginning. Often children who are given a longer school beginning sail ahead with confidence.

3. If your child is not ready for school, and your district has no programs to assist him, it may be better to keep him in day-care another year—even if this may be more difficult for you. Another option is to see how your school feels about children spending two years in kindergarten.

After you've found out about your school's procedure for kindergarten entrance, you will want more informa-

tion about your child's specific readiness level. In addition to the school's own testing, you may want to:

Speak to the director or the teachers at your day-care center. They are professionals who can advise you about the developmental stage of your child, and whether they think it would be wise to start school this year.

Talk to your child's pediatrician. Some pediatricians are knowledgeable about the developmental guidelines that describe child behavior at various ages and can help you with your decision.

Take the advice of relatives, friends, and neighbors into consideration—but carefully! Their opinions are usually well intended, but not always accurate or informed. The prevailing attitude in the supermarket may not be in the best interest of your child.

Read further. Many noted researchers in this field have written extensively on the subject of education for young children. Their books are available through your local bookstore or library. Among those advocating caution regarding early schooling are:

Don't Push Your Preschooler. Louise Bates Ames, Ph.D., Joan Ames Chase, Ph.D. Revised Edition. Harper and Row, 1980.

Child Behavior. Ilg, Ames and Baker. Revised Edition. Harper and Row, 1981.

Children Without Childhood. Marie Winn. Pantheon, 1983.

Give Your Child a Headstart in Reading. Fitzhugh Dodson, Ph.D. Simon and Shuster, Fireside Books, 1981.

The Hurried Child. David Elkind. Addison-Wesley, 1981.

Consider carefully and make up your own mind. Remember, the final decision and responsibility for when and how your child starts school is in your hands. It is a first step and a giant one. □

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