

New study discovers the best age for starting school

Heidi van Dort | October 10, 2015

New research has revealed there are mental health benefits associated with delaying school.



It's the question that can make decision-fearing parents like myself anxious – when is the [right age to send my child to school](#)? It seems there are so many differing opinions on what is right, but this new study seems to have some pretty compelling evidence.

New research shows benefit of ‘holding back’

A [new study](#) released this week has shown that delaying the start of school until the age of seven provides mental benefits for the child.

Yes, seven.

The study, published by the [National Bureau of Economic Research](#), was conducted in Denmark, where the children don't start school until the year they turn six.

So for them, it would mean holding back for one year. [For us in Australia](#), it would mean holding back for two years or more. It seems like a stretch, but perhaps there is something in it.

There is strong evidence to suggest that delaying school until age seven reduced inattention and hyperactivity, with the benefits still showing until they are 11 years old (where the research ended).

Professor Thomas Dee, who co-authored the study with Hans Henrik Sieversten, explained the findings in a [Stanford press release](#):

“We found that delaying kindergarten (until age seven) reduced inattention and hyperactivity by 73 percent for an average child at age 11,” Prof. Dee said, “and it virtually eliminated the probability that an average child at that age would have an ‘abnormal,’ or higher-than-normal rating for the inattentive-hyperactive behavioral measure.”

But what does that mean?

Reducing levels of inattention and hyperactivity is a key indicator of improved self regulation.

Self regulation is a person's ability to control their impulses and modify their behaviour when they are trying to accomplish goals. A higher level of self regulation is linked to student achievement.

This study showed that children who started school later were able to sit still, pay attention and stay focussed for longer, which eventually resulted in higher scores at school.

“This is some of the most convincing evidence we've seen to support what parents and policymakers have already been doing – choosing to delay kindergarten entry,” Prof. Dee said.

Is my child ready for school?

Prof. Dee agreed that a parent needs to take into account many factors when deciding on the right age to start school, and that this study has only addressed one area.

Kathy Walker, Melbourne education consultant and early childhood expert at [Early Life Foundations](#) spoke previously to Kidspot about how to make this big decision. She said that parents are not expected to make the choice completely on their own:

“The best person to assess school readiness is the child's preschool teacher,” Kathy said. “And it's important parents listen to the advice given because this person has been trained in early childhood development.”

Read more tips from Kathy [here](#).

Is your child ready to start school? It's the perennial question many parents agonise over.



Age-wise your little bundle of joy may be able to start school in the next intake, but are they actually ready to embark on 13+ years of education?

In the preschool and kinder car parks around the country mums and dads are discussing whether they'll send their kids to school early, on time, or hold them back.

For those parents whose child falls into a grey area because of when their birth date is, what year to send them to school can be one of the most difficult decisions to make.

Do you start your child at four and a half years or do you wait until they're going on six? Will they be bored with another year shared between home and preschool or will they struggle if sent to school too early? Are they emotionally mature enough? Will they be able to keep up academically?

Kathy Walker, Melbourne education consultant and early childhood expert at [Early Life Foundations](#) has spent so much time talking about school readiness with parents that she's written a book about it called, [Ready Set Go](#).

“When to start your child at school is a major decision for parents,” she says. “And understandably because parents, and the school, want their children to thrive and to flourish and not struggle to keep up and on top of things.

“What I tell parents is that there’s no need to rush – children are going to be at school for a long time, so let’s ensure they are great years.”

To take the pressure off parents she is calling on the Federal Government to introduce a national starting age – and she is pushing for it to be at the older end of the scale rather than the younger.

“Australia has one of the youngest starting ages in the world, yet there is no evidence or data to suggest that starting school early is better,” she says.

School readiness: How can a parent know?

Kathy says parents can’t be expected to make a completely independent decision on whether their child is ready to start the school journey.

“The best person to assess school readiness is the child’s preschool teacher,” she says. “And it’s important parents listen to the advice given because this person has been trained in early childhood development.”

She stresses that school readiness is not about being able to read or write, know colours or count.

“These skills will be taught at school so they are not a priority for starting school,” she says.

“To enter school ready to thrive, flourish and enjoy the challenges – rather than merely just coping – we are taking the issue of school readiness more seriously and carefully.

“Readiness is really mostly about emotional and social maturity – aspects of development that we cannot fast-track. We cannot make a child who lacks the necessary maturity become mature.”

Expert checklist to assess school readiness

The key areas of maturity and development are the social and emotional areas, says Kathy.

While she is reluctant to have parents tick off a checklist, here are some of the questions she asks when assessing school readiness:

- Can they make an independent decision and follow through on this?
- Do they have ideas of their own?
- Can they follow two or three instructions at the same time?
- Can they move on to new activities easily?
- Do they separate well from their carer?
- Do they show interest in other kids?
- Do they interact with other children?
- Can they recognise and express their feelings and needs?
- Can they concentrate on a task?
- How do they deal with frustration?

Does it matter if kids repeat their first year?

There is a feeling that repeating their first year at school is no big deal. Kathy Walker disagrees.

“Why would you start your child at school knowing that there is a good chance they will need to repeat that year?” she asks.

“Once you are on the conveyer belt of the school system, it becomes much harder for everyone to make the decision for the child to repeat.

“Don’t send a child to school already thinking they can repeat if they have to. You want the first year of school to be exciting and successful, not just one where the child attempts to ‘cope’ and then has to do it all again.”

How can parents help with school readiness?

There are many activities that parents undertake with young children that have a positive effect on their development and promote school readiness. These include:

- reading with your child
- teaching them songs and nursery rhymes
- playing with letters and numbers
- taking children on excursions
- creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends and other children