



Kindergarten Readiness: A Challenge

Joseph Gulino

A child's readiness for formal education should not be determined solely by a calendar date and a simple skills test.

IN BRIEF

A principal cites research and personal experience to advocate major changes in the way young children are judged to be ready for kindergarten. They include restricting enrollment before the age of 5½, sharply focused screening, and early involvement of parents.

“Just try to pull them through!” said the kindergarten teacher when I observed that six of the children in her class of 21 did not seem ready for kindergarten. It was December 1999, I was new to the school, and I was concerned about some behaviors the kindergartners were exhibiting, such as inability to focus or sit still for more than a few minutes, lack of knowledge of letters and numbers, and—most of all—the desire to play rather than learn.

As I got to know the students in grades 1-8, my concerns heightened. There were five to 15 children in each grade who were either struggling or just not interested in learning. What troubled me most, however, was the lack of a formal readiness testing process as a criterion for kindergarten entry. There also was no process to inform parents regarding school readiness issues, and no organized counseling strategies to assist parents of children who were not ready for formal school experiences.

Assess Practices and Procedures

School accountability and student achievement are topics of paramount significance today. But I believe it is unfair to place accountability for student achievement on education systems that not only are financially strapped but are also hindered by current enrollment practices that set up students and schools for failure. That is why it is imperative for educational leaders and legislators to revamp the early years of formal schooling by designing, implementing, and assessing school enrollment practices and procedures founded on sound research.

When children enter school ready to learn, the world becomes their oyster and they flourish. Children who experience early school success tend to maintain higher levels of social competence and academic achievement throughout their school careers (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988).

There are eight important areas that affect a child's transition to kindergarten:

- **Knowledge**—The ability to identify numbers and letters or ideas;
- **Social adjustment**—The ability to interact with a large group of children and to respond appropriately to the teacher;
- **Skills**—For example, tying shoelaces and holding a pencil properly;
- **Disposition**—Attitude toward school;
- **Rules**—Expectations of behavior and action;
- **Physical attributes**—For example, age and physical health;

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- **Family issues**—Family interactions with the school; and
- **Education environment**—What happens at school (Dockett & Perry, 2002).

What's the Best Age for Kindergarten?

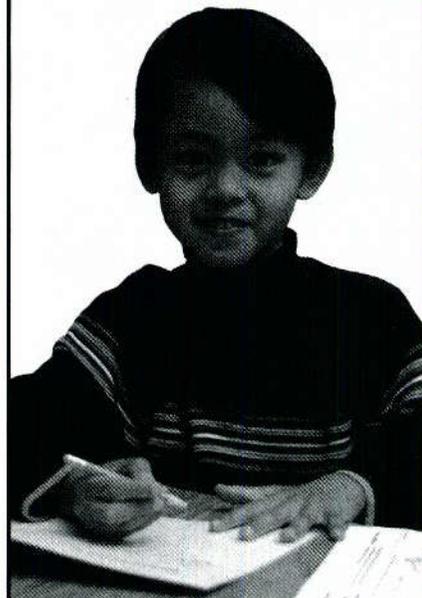
Entry dates for children to begin formal schooling vary throughout the United States. Six states have cutoff dates between Dec. 1 and Jan. 1, leading to a large mix of 4-year-olds and 5-year-olds in kindergarten. Thirty-five states have entrance cutoff dates between Aug. 31 and Oct. 16, which decreases the number of 4-year-olds, while three states have cutoff dates on or before Aug. 15, and six states leave the entrance age for the districts to decide (Kauerz & McMaken, 2003).

I believe that many children under 5½ years of age by the opening day of school are not ready to begin the formal kindergarten experience. When they are not ready, both they and their parents are exposed to unnecessary stress. Uphoff and Gilmore (1990) state, “We feel, on the basis of research we have done and after reviewing data provided by others, tempted to say that every child under the age of 5 years, 6 months should wait a year before starting kindergarten.”

Victoria Martino, co-founder of the Mountain View Academy in Colorado and a 2003 recipient of the No Child Left Behind-Blue Ribbon School Award, agrees. “We do get children who have been exposed to a wide range of

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preschool and day care situations,” she says, “but it really doesn’t matter as long as the children are old enough—almost 6 with boys and at least 5 and a half with girls. ... When children are ready to learn, they are self-motivated, learning is easy for them, and they love it. They’re unstoppable. I would rather have an average student that is very mature than a very bright student that is very immature.”

Adding to the problem of children entering into kindergarten before they are developmentally ready is the fact that half of today’s preschoolers are affected by at least one of the following risk factors, and that 15 percent are affected by three or more:

- Mother has less than a high school education;
- Family is below the official poverty line;
- Mother speaks a primary language other than English;
- Mother was unmarried at the time of the child’s birth; and
- Only one parent is present in the home (Zill, Collins, West, & Hausken, 1995a)



When a Child Starts School Too Early

There is so much that a child can lose when he or she enters school not fully ready for the experience.

Cognitively:

- A stress-free pace of learning;
- The time to explore skills other than those he or she is not ready to learn; and with which he or she may struggle; and
- The possibility of achieving above-average performance or grades.

Behaviorally:

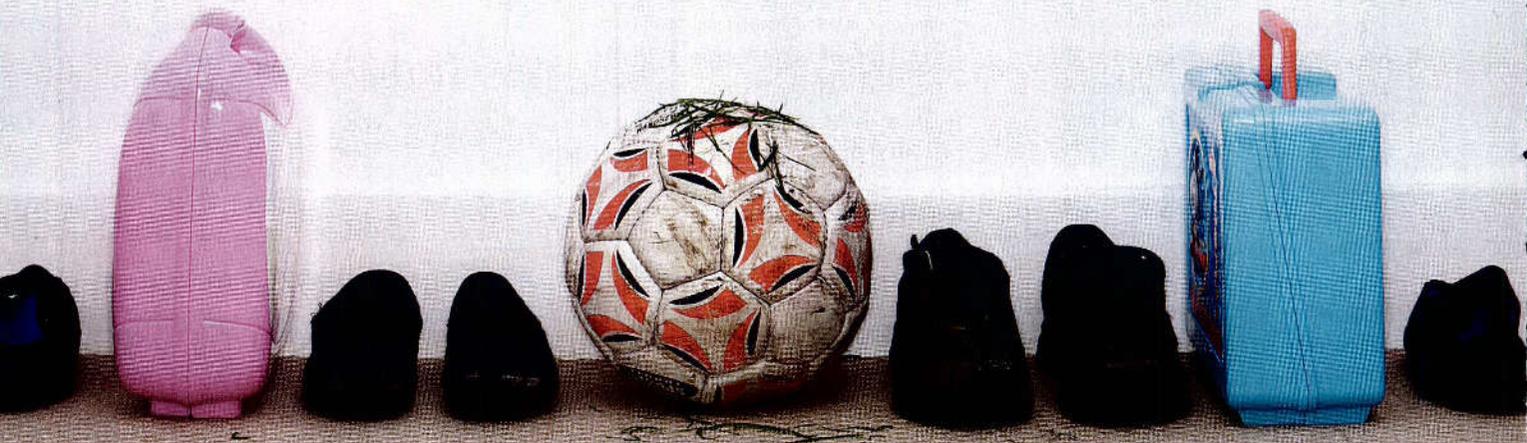
- Freedom for the child and family from the stress of trying to learn that which the child is not ready to learn;
- Family time, due to increased work and practice;
- Time to associate with age-appropriate peers; and
- Opportunity for a 5-year-old to be treated like a 5-year-old.

Emotionally:

- The opportunity to develop confidence, relish success, and feel an inner desire to achieve continued success;
- The possibility of being a leader, rather than a follower; and
- The ability to connect with peers without being overwhelmed or fearing rejection.

Physically:

- Another year of physical maturity that could help the child reach his or her full physical potential among his or her peers (Fournier, 1999).



When Children Aren't Ready

The population of children coming to kindergarten is becoming increasingly diverse and schools are expected to respond to this diversity in children's backgrounds and educational needs by providing them with appropriate activities and instruction (Zill, Collins, West, & Hausken, 1995b). But while it may be honorable to believe that a school system can provide every kindergarten student the instruction that he or she needs at this early developmental level, it is not very realistic. When class sizes are too large, facilities are inadequate, funding is lacking, or teacher preparation is wanting, children who are not ready for the school experience will suffer.

When children enter school and are not ready, they may:

- Develop negative self-esteem that stays with them throughout their entire school careers and possibly beyond;
- Not receive the extra help they need

to survive the kindergarten experience;

- Tax the system by requiring remediation in kindergarten and future grades;
- Experience negative relationships with peers; and
- Take valuable time away from the children who are ready.

To better ensure that eligible children of any age are prepared for the formal kindergarten experience, they should complete a sharply focused kindergarten readiness screening to confirm that they are cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally ready. If a child's performance is questionable, a rescreening should be scheduled prior to making a final decision.

Parents must understand the pros and cons of school entry and be made aware of information regarding kindergarten readiness. Following their child's readiness test, they must be counseled regarding the child's

strengths and areas of growth. Parents also must be given time to digest the information and question the process. Therefore, parent information meetings should be held early in the school year *prior* to the year of their child's possible entry.

What I've Learned

Our school maintains the state-mandated entry age of 5 by July 31, but during the past three years we have established a team assessment process for children eligible to attend, placed a strong focus on informing parents of the pros and cons of children entering school before the age of 5½, and strongly encouraged parents of students with significant concerns to wait until the following year before enrolling. In each of the past three years, 12 to 14 sets of parents with children's birthdays from March to July have chosen to wait that extra year to allow their children time to really be ready for the school experience.

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Our current enrollment process has led to an increased number of students who experience early success in school, a greater degree of positive self-esteem for more students, fewer referrals for special services, and higher test scores.

I suggest the following to ensure greater school success for young children:

- Establish 5½ years of age by the opening day of school as a criterion for entry into kindergarten;
- Assess all eligible children and provide parents with clear-cut information and counsel regarding their child's strengths and areas of growth;
- Establish and maintain district-supervised preschools staffed by professionals with knowledge of developmentally based school readiness programs and skilled at preparing children for the kindergarten curriculum and experience;

- Adhere to manageable kindergarten class sizes of 15 to 20 students maximum;
- Establish tutorial programs in which older students help kindergarten children who need one-on-one help; and
- Base decisions to move children to first grade on their performance in kindergarten. It is not fair to allow parents to make this decision based only on what they feel is best for the child.

Each school district should develop a program and meaningful set of expectations appropriate to its community. Entry into kindergarten must be based on appropriate research and not simply on a calendar date or cognitive ability.

School districts should begin by spending more dollars on the front end of schooling by designing, implementing, and assessing early education prac-

tices that will lead to greater student success in school, positive student self-esteem, and increased achievement test scores. Schools will then have to appropriate fewer dollars for remediation and behavioral issues, and can focus resources on learning experiences for all students.

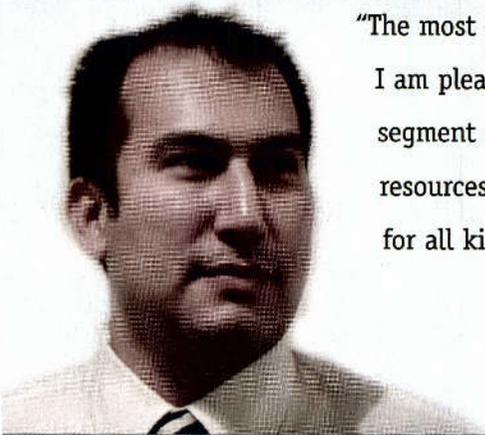
This is my challenge to legislators, education professionals, school boards, parents, and school districts. Are you willing to accept it? ☐

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WEB RESOURCES

Kimberly L. Keith's article "Is My Child Ready...?" offers suggestions to parents for determining when to enroll their child in kindergarten. <http://childparenting.about.com/cs/k6education/a/schoolreadiness.htm>

The article "Ready or Not, Here I Come: When to Start Kindergarten" is available on the Family Education Network's parenting Web site. <http://life.familyeducation.com/preschool/kindergarten/53895.html>

The Gesell Institute of Human Development is a nonprofit that focuses on how children grow and learn. The institute offers pamphlets and publications on child development to parents, teachers, and administrators. www.gesellinstitute.org



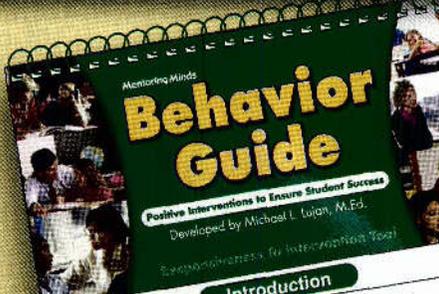
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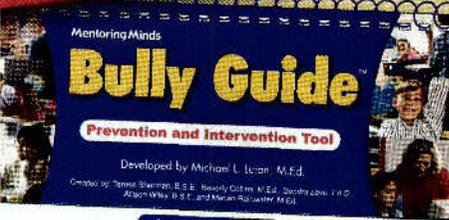
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SOURCE: Principal 87 no5 My/Je 2008

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