



Early Entrance to School: Making the Decision

There are many factors to think about as you consider the option of early entrance to school. While you will get different opinions if you ask people about accelerating your child, here is some research and information regarding school readiness.

Readiness: According to Dockett & Perry (2002), there are eight important areas that affect a child's transition to school:

- **Knowledge** - the ability to identify numbers, letters, and ideas
- **Social Adjustment** - the ability to interact with a large group of children and to respond appropriately to the adults in the building
- **Skills** - the ability to do things such as hold a pencil properly, cut with scissors, tie shoes
- **Disposition** - attitude toward school
- **Rules** - expectations of behavior and actions
- **Physical Attributes** - age, physical health
- **Family Issues** - family interactions and attitude toward school
- **Educational Environment** - what happens at school

Keeping those eight in mind as you assess your child's readiness may help you with your decision about whether to pursue early entrance or not.

Common Arguments and Research Regarding Early Entrance to School

FOR early entrance:

- **Academic Research**
"Acceleration has long-term beneficial effects, both academically and socially."
~*A Nation Deceived: How Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* by the University of Iowa, 2004

"Acceleration supports the social and emotional development of students by placing them with other like-minded peers. It provides academic challenges and stimulation, which are needed for continuous development of students' abilities."
~ *A Nation Empowered* by University of Iowa, 2015
- **Academic Readiness**
Providing a challenging environment and enriching curriculum when a child is ready for the next stage of learning is important. Hitting that "window" of excitement and readiness is a positive.
- **Social and Emotional Maturity**
Some children are socially and emotionally mature enough to start school early. These are often children who prefer the company of older peers. Allowing these students to start school early can actually decrease behavior problems when the social, emotional, and academic match is appropriate.
- **Physical Maturity**
At times, a child's physical development may lag behind his/her emotional and intellectual development. Waiting for his/her physical development to catch up can cause problems academically and socially.
- **Impact on Adolescence**
All children mature at different rates. Early entrance does not mean a child will not be ready to do typical things teenagers do such as drive, date, or participate in sports.

AGAINST Early Entrance

- **Academic Research**
The largest and most extensive study of the impact of age of entrance into school and its long-term effects on students contains data that argues against early entrance. Bedard and Dhuey (November 2006) reviewed math and science test scores for nearly a quarter million students across 19 countries and found, "...substantial evidence that these initial maturity differences have long

lasting effects on student performance across OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development countries). In particular, the youngest members of each cohort score 4 - 12 percentiles lower than the oldest members in grade four, and 2 - 9 percentiles lower in grade eight. In fact, data from Canada and the United States show that the youngest members of each cohort are even less likely to attend university."

~Kelly Bedard & Elizabeth Dhuey, "The Persistence of Early Childhood Maturity: International Evidence of Long-Run Age Effects" in *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 121, Issue 4, p. 1437, November 2006

- **Academic Readiness**

If a child enters school early and is not ready, they may...

- ~ develop negative self-esteem that stays with them throughout their entire school career and possibly beyond
- ~ may need more remediation in kindergarten and future grades
- ~ may experience negative relationships with peers

- **Social and Emotional Maturity**

School expectations include being able to pay attention to the teacher, follow directions, obey rules, sit and listen to stories, stay focused on a task, and know the difference between work and play.

If a child is not mature enough to start school, early entrance may set a child up for frustration or failure. If your child has demonstrated in daycare, preschool or Kindergarten an inability to attend to a lesson, get along with peers, or transition easily from one task to another, early entrance may be putting that child into a situation for which he/she is not ready. Social immaturity can make it difficult for a child to interact appropriately with other children, impacting friendships and cooperative tasks. If your child is not developmentally ready, other behavioral or emotional problems can surface.

- **Physical Maturity**

Physical maturity includes gross and fine motor skills, as well as physical size. Children who are much smaller can be teased. If a child's fine motor skills are not as developed, holding a pencil, cutting with scissors, and other like tasks can become frustrating.

- **Impact on Adolescence**

The decision for early entrance has lasting effects. Smaller physical size or age requirements can impact sports participation. A younger child may not "fit in" as easily in high school if he/she is not yet ready to participate in typical activities such as dating, getting a driver's license, or going to college.

- **Impact on Families**

If early entrance will result in siblings being in the same grade, this can have a negative impact on family dynamics and is not advised.

"Such a move will introduce the accelerated child into the social and academic territory of the older sibling."

Iowa Acceleration Scale, The Belin-Blank International Center for Gifted Education And Talent Development, 2003.

Conclusion

The decision to start a child in school early is a difficult one. Parents worry about which option will allow their child to fit in appropriately and to be learning at an appropriate level. There is not simple answer. Ultimately, children are best served when the parents have a clear understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of early entrance, have useful data about their child's abilities, and can accurately recognize the physical, social, and emotional levels of maturity in their child.