

## Grade Retention: The Great Debate

Has anyone at school talked to you about retaining your child in the same grade? Have you been thinking about whether your child should be promoted on to the next grade level?

### Reasons for Retention

Grade retention is a very difficult and emotionally charged decision. It may be considered when a child:

- Has significant struggles making progress in reading, writing, or math
- Fails to reach performance levels expected for promotion to the next grade, or
- Appears to be "immature" and "young" for her age.

In many schools today, tests are being used to determine whether a child will go on to the next grade or repeat the same grade. With the current push for high educational standards, more and more kids are facing the possibility of retention because they're not achieving test scores required for promotion. Retention is viewed as a way to ensure greater accountability — to guarantee the school is doing its job. In some cases, it's the new "get tough" policy to stop or reduce "social promotion" — automatically passing a child on to the next grade at the end of each school year.

### Outcomes of Retention

The idea of giving a child another year to "catch-up" and develop needed skills sounds like a positive alternative. However, research shows that outcomes for kids who are retained generally are not positive.

In *The Gram*, a newsletter published by the Learning Disabilities Association of California, David Krantz (2001) reports that a Chicago Schools study found that of kids retained in eighth grade, one-third ended up dropping out of school. Krantz projects that, if applied to California's general education students, "250,000 children will be retained, under tough new standards that require that they pass a standardized test before going to the next grade." Applying the one-third rule, Krantz estimates that approximately 75,000 of these kids could drop out rather than complete high school.

In its 2003 "Position Statement on Student Grade Retention," the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) reports:

- Academic achievement of kids who are retained is poorer than that of peers who are promoted.
- Achievement gains associated with retention fade within two to three years after the grade repeated.
- Kids who are identified as most behind are the ones "most likely harmed by retention."
- Retention often is associated with increased behavior problems.
- Grade retention has a negative impact on all areas of a child's achievement (reading, math, and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).
- Students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school compared to students who were never retained. In fact, grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout.
- Retained students are more likely to have poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood.
- Retention is more likely to have benign or positive impact when students are not simply held back, but receive specific remediation to address skill and/or behavioral problems and promote achievement and social skills.

