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Repeating a grade: The pros and cons

Grade retention or social promotion -- which is best? Read what the experts have to say.

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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
- 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 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.

Kids with learning disabilities

Many kids with learning disabilities (LD) really struggle when taking district-adopted and state-adopted achievement tests. These tests require students to:

- Concentrate for long periods of time
- Work independently
- Persevere when faced with material they struggle to read and understand
- Record their answers using “bubble sheets”
- Work within specific time limits

Test results may not show what your child actually knows and can do. Instead, they may tell you how well she does on this type of test. When test scores are used as the only basis for whether a child will be promoted to the next grade, kids with LD can be at a great disadvantage.

Factors to consider

So, the big question is how you decide if retention is right for your child. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

Academic

- In what area(s) is your child struggling the most — reading, writing, math, science, social studies, social skills or others? Is it just one subject or most of them?
- What have you and the teachers done this year to help your child develop necessary skills?
- What has worked and helped your child learn? What hasn't worked this year?
- If your child were to spend another year in the same grade, what type of instruction would she receive in the areas she finds most difficult? Would a new teaching approach or new materials be used, or would the teacher do the same thing as last year? How do you know that "doing it over again" would make a difference?
- What level of performance would you set for your child to achieve if she were retained? What changes would you need to see to be satisfied that retention was effective?
- Realistically, will your child be able to meet the required standards to be promoted next year? What kind of change are you expecting in one year? Is that enough to make the retention worthwhile?

Social/emotional

- Is behavior a concern?
- How will your child feel about being retained? Will she be more motivated to learn and try, or will she be embarrassed and further withdraw from learning?
- What will happen to your child's peer supports and friendships? How will they be affected by retention?

Alternatives to retention

The National Association of School Psychologists favors "promotion plus" interventions designed to address the specific factors that place students at risk for school failure. With that in mind, here are questions to ask yourself about alternatives to grade retention:

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- Have you worked with your child's teacher to identify accommodations that could increase her success in the classroom? If interventions are working, will they be continued?
 - Is your child receiving extra support? Does she get one-on-one or small group help to understand new ideas and complete work?
 - If your child receives special education services, are her IEP goals and objectives/benchmarks related to the standards established by the school? If not, the IEP Team may need to revise them to focus on outcomes leading to promotion to the next grade.
 - What type of curriculum materials and instructional strategies does the teacher use? How effective are they with your child?
 - Could your child benefit from one-on-one tutoring or counseling?
 - Are options such as summer school, extended day or extended year available?
 - Does your child resist your help with schoolwork? If so, find alternatives — have a sister or brother help with homework, get help from a high school or college student.
 - Does your child participate in the school's homework club or other school programs that provide support?
 - Would your child's participation in extracurricular activities, such as soccer, dance, scouts or choir, help her make friends and become more motivated to do better in school?

The big picture

Before retaining your child, carefully consider your responses to the above questions. Read some of the literature on retention, and talk with your child and other family members. Speak to the teacher and other school staff who know your child. Talk to the principal about state law and district policy on retention to discover who makes the final decision and what the appeal process is. If your child receives special education services, be sure the IEP team is involved.

Whatever is decided, carefully monitor your child's academic and behavioral performance during the next year. Be sure to work closely with her teachers to ensure that you and the school are giving her the support she needs.



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