



**RAISING
MULTIPLES**
a MOST Community

Should You Red-shirt (Hold Back) Your Multiple(s) before Kindergarten?

One family's Experience

My husband and I recently faced one question eventually all parents are faced with, whether to send their five-year-old (or five-year-olds) to kindergarten on schedule, or hold them back a year. The decision is an important but difficult one, which could influence a child's life throughout their school years. My husband and I found this decision, our first major parenting decision, daunting and terrifying in many ways. We responded to it by talking to everyone who would listen and by researching the issue extensively. In the end, the decision finally came down to what we thought would be best for our children. However, I would like to share some of our research and the thought process we went through in making our decision in the hope that it might be of benefit to other families.

The increasingly common practice of holding American children back until age 6 to begin kindergarten is often referred to as "red-shirting." Red-shirting is an option because in most states compulsory schooling is not required before age 6, and thus the question of whether to send a child to kindergarten at age 5 is ultimately in the hands of the parents. For most parents, the question is one easily answered and their child (or children) will begin kindergarten on schedule. For many parents with children born in late summer or near the kindergarten cutoff date, the issue requires more deliberation.

For parents of higher order multiples, the issue can be a challenging one, with far more issues to consider than whether the children have a summer birthday. Issues which may need to be considered include such questions as whether the children were born prematurely and/or experienced developmental delays, whether the children would have met the cutoff if born on their due date, whether the children will be able to keep up with their same-aged peers, what to do if one or more children is ready for kindergarten but the others are not, the expense of keeping a set of multiples out of school for an extra year, and even whether the multiples are much smaller than their same-aged peers.

In making this decision for our five-year-old quadruplets, my husband and I began discussing and researching the issue a full year in advance of kindergarten registration, just after our children's fourth birthday. Starting far in advance turned out to be a good decision because three of our children received services through our state's Early Childhood Special Education program (EI) and the kindergarten transition meetings began in early fall. Starting early meant we were ready to address these questions when the transition began.

Our quadruplets are BBBG, born at 28 weeks gestation. They had an intense and stormy NICU experience, with our son Noah, who had been born at 1 lb., 3 oz., remaining extremely critical and on a ventilator for three months. Our children all experienced a variety of developmental delays, and required significant early intervention in an attempt help them catch up to their same-aged peers. Noah in particular required a great deal of help, due to language processing and speech problems, sensory integration disorder, and a probable attention problem. He often seemed more immature than our other children, and indeed, sometimes seemed a full year younger than the others.

By the time they were four-and-a-half, all of the children had made tremendous progress. All were very bright and fully caught up on the academics (letters, numbers, colors, shapes and even recognizing some words); however, all continued to lag behind on fine motor and self-help skills and seemed somewhat

immature for their age. Although Noah was recognizing some words by site and was clearly bright, he continued to experience significant delays in speech and language, maturity and behavior. On the other hand, another of our sons showed signs of being academically gifted.

Despite their being caught up academically, I worried that they were not ready for kindergarten due to their immature social and self-help skills. I also worried because the children were very small for their age. Only one was on the charts for both height and weight, and he was in the third percentile. The children barely came up to the shoulders of their friends in preschool. Although we would never have held them back for that reason alone, it did add to our concerns about how they would make friends, get chosen for teams during recess, and fit in with the other children, all things which could affect their self-esteem. In fact, we had some trouble with this at preschool because some of the other children seemed to view our children as younger because they were so much smaller.

Like most parents, my husband and I had heard all of the stories about how beneficial it was to hold children back. We had heard how important it was to give children the "gift of time," and about how much better children who had been held back did in school. Therefore, we started our research expecting to find a wealth of literature supporting the idea that we should hold our children back. Although we discovered a wealth of information available with very simple internet searches, the research and literature pretty uniformly contradicted the conventional wisdom.

Almost every study I read on the subject indicated that there was no long term benefit to holding children back from kindergarten a year. In fact, several studies indicated that children who had been held back had more problems during their teenage years than children who had not been held back. According to the research, children who are held back do indeed do much better for the first year, but by third grade, the educational benefits have largely disappeared and children performed about the same in school whether they had been sent early or held back. In other words, it didn't matter educationally whether they were the youngest or the oldest in class.

Moreover, some research seemed to show that children who had been held back and were older than grade age, tended to start having social problems as they entered their teenage years because they began to mature faster than their classmates physically and emotionally, and felt out of sync with them. Thus, the suggestions of other parents that holding them back "couldn't hurt" appeared to be incorrect. In addition, although most families we spoke to who had held their children back were very happy with their decisions, I did find two families whose teenagers deeply regretted (and resented) their parents' decisions to hold them back a year as kindergarteners.

I did see some problems with the research that I thought bore consideration in reaching a decision for our family. Most importantly, none of the studies looked at the benefits of red-shirting for premature children, developmentally delayed children, or children who were markedly immature for their ages. Rather, the studies focused on children who had been held back purely because the children had summer birthdays, and not because of specific concerns about delayed development or maturity. Thus, even though it seemed clear that there was little support for holding a child back merely based on whether they would be the youngest in the class, I wondered whether the same held true for a child who had struggled to catch up after being born prematurely. Also, most of the studies by definition had to look at children who were held back years ago, when many fewer children were red-shirted. It seemed logical to me that the problems in the teen years might not be as prevalent today, because of the larger number of children being red-shirted now as opposed to 10 or 15 years ago.

Whatever the problems, the research I reviewed clearly indicated that red-shirting does not provide any long term benefit to most children. Given this, I doubt that I would ever hold a child back if my only concern was his or her late summer birthday. However, in our case, our main concerns were

developmental delays, maturity, and prematurity, not summer birthdays. Since the research really did not take these issues into account, my husband and I were still left with the question of what would be best for our children. In the end, we just had to watch our children and make what we thought was the safest choice.

Initially, my husband did not want to hold the children back. He felt that it would not be fair to either our gifted son, or to our son who has "caught up" (and a pretty typical child.) Although several people suggested that we send those two children to school on schedule and hold the other two back, we never seriously considered this an option. I have spoken to one or two moms with multiples who allowed their children to be split into different grades either because one was gifted or because one was delayed. I have also read articles and essays touching on the subject. Pretty uniformly, the parents seemed to think the first year or so that they had done the right thing because they were doing what was best for each child as an individual. Within a year or two, most of the parents indicated that they thought they'd made a dreadful mistake. This decision was said to have put a rift in their families and harmed family cohesiveness. Inevitably, the child who had been allowed to go forward formed a different group of friends from the child held back. The child in the higher grade began to think of himself or herself as older (because his or her friends were older) and thus not the equal of the same-aged sibling. This caused family strife and seemed to permanently harm the relationship between the twins, triplets etc. It also left the child in the lower grade feeling inferior. One mom of twins I know had a child with Down Syndrome (who was pretty severely affected). Even though the disparity in her children's abilities was pretty wide, by second or third grade, she deeply regretted her decision to let her typically developing child go to kindergarten on time while she red-shirted her son with Down Syndrome for an extra year. In the end, we decided that we would not allow two or three to start kindergarten while holding only one or two back.

With regard to the possibility of holding them back after kindergarten, if we let them go and then discovered that they really weren't ready for it, I can only say that our personal feeling was that it would be far less traumatic to hold them back from the beginning, than to do so after kindergarten. Right now, their immaturity means that they don't really care that they won't go on with their friends. We reasoned that a year from now, this might really change and we were afraid that they would feel devastated if left behind. A psychologist we consulted also strongly urged us to not hold them back at all once they began formal schooling. In her view, holding children back once they've started hurts more than it helps. I don't know that I entirely agree with her (and of course, we weren't discussing issues such as transitional 1st grades since we have no such program in our district), but both we and the psychologist agreed that it was safer to hold all four back now than to have to worry about it later. Plus, we were very worried that we would find ourselves with three ready to go on and only one who needed to be held back.

Some other interesting information we considered came from the teachers, therapists, facilitators and others who dealt with our children on a daily basis. In general, the consensus of those professionals was that a true disability which will be with a child throughout his or her life is not a reason to hold that child back. In the case of either mental or physical disabilities, holding a child back will not cure the disability and will not necessarily make things easier on the child. In fact, in their view, it frequently made things more difficult because children who are held back often do not get the same level of special education services as if they were in kindergarten. Thus, they cautioned, if all we were concerned about was our attention problems or a language processing disorder, we should not hold a child back. We were far more concerned, however, about our children's maturity level, and the degree to which the other problems might be affected by this level of immaturity. The educators and professionals were far more ready to acknowledge that social and maturity issues were good reasons to consider holding a child back a year.

One of the most useful things we did was to visit the classrooms. Our children have attended preschool at our school district's Early Childhood Center. The school district recommended that parents of children who would be attending school with IEPs (Individual Education Plans) prepare by visiting a kindergarten classroom in the fall (when the kindergarteners were still new to school) and then visiting their own child's preschool classroom. We were shocked to see how independently the kindergarten students were expected to work in our school, and knew our children would have trouble with this. We were further stunned to visit the preschool and to see how much more immature even our so-called typically developing child acted than his peers. He was rolling around and standing on his head during circle time, refused to try anything without the teacher's assistance, and was often unresponsive when asked a question. The teacher confirmed that this was pretty normal behavior for him and was forced to admit that he was immature when compared to other typical children in the classroom. We had to ask ourselves how our other children were going to cope with kindergarten if our most mature child was so immature compared to others their age.

During the course of making this decision, several people asked us to explain why it was that we felt our children were immature. These are some of things that we observed and considered in making that determination. First, as mentioned, our children had poor fine motor skills and poor self-help skills. They were very behind their peers in things like dressing themselves, putting on their own coats and shoes, washing themselves, etc. Although they were finally dressing themselves and beginning to master coats and socks, they were so far behind the others in their class, it was clear that this could be an issue.

Second, our children showed marked immaturity in their play skills. At least two of them had just begun coming out of the parallel play stage (which they should have been out of a year or two before). At first we were concerned because, even though separated into two classes, they really hadn't made good friends. Slowly it dawned on us that for at least a couple of our children, it was of more concern that they didn't care yet whether they even had friends. They were still perfectly content to play by themselves, next to the other children. By the time the children started coming out of that stage and wanted to start making friends, the other children in class had already paired up to some extent. Even once they started caring about friends a little, almost none of their emotional lives were invested in their friends at preschool. We could honestly say that they would not care a bit if they did not go on to kindergarten with the other children in their preschool classes.

By contrast, they seemed to play much better with children a year younger. Also, we noticed that our children retained interest in shows, toys and games for younger children much longer than the children of our friends who were the same age. Additionally, our children still had some tendency to just tear things up rather than play with them. They still found it difficult to do any work without constant attention and the teacher hovering over them watching them put paintbrush or pencil to paper. In general, they just needed more help more guidance, and more supervision than many children their age. With the exception of our son Noah, they did not have attention problems so much as they just were not ready to do independent work yet.

The final issue was that our children still had far more melt downs and crying spells over fairly minor frustrations than other children their age. We knew this because our children have two same-aged cousins to compare them to. One of their cousins is months younger than our children. His birthday missed the kindergarten cutoff and he would not go to school until the next year. Nevertheless, he often seemed more mature at times than our children. By contrast, the cousin who is a month older than our children seemed far more able to work independently, to care for his things, to be trusted outside by himself and on and on. This was the combination of factors that led us to question whether our children were ready for kindergarten. Still, we worried about whether they would be bored with another year of preschool.

Finally, we learned that a well-respected preschool in our area, which just happened to be at our church, had a classroom that was a combination Jr. Kindergarten/ accredited Kindergarten classroom. Essentially, it was a transitional kindergarten classroom primarily for children who had just missed the kindergarten cutoff or who were being held back. It was somewhat more academically rigorous because it was an accredited kindergarten classroom, but still had a looser structure. It seemed a perfect match for our bright, but immature foursome.

Our children would not be able to have their speech and occupational therapy integrated into their school day as they would at our public school kindergarten, but the class size was much smaller. The class was limited to 16 children with 2 adults in the classroom, as compared to public kindergarten, which would have been 20-25 students and 1 teacher in our district. We discovered that our children could qualify to get their speech and occupational therapies through the public school system in the evenings, allowing them to continue to advance their skills and prepare for attending public school kindergarten the following year. We hoped that the smaller class size and greater teacher to student ratio would help make up for not having the special services integrated into their school day.

It can be expensive to keep a set of multiples out of school for an extra year, either because of an extra year of day care, or an extra year of preschool. The transitional program we chose for our children, which was five half-days a week, would normally cost \$860.00/month for our four children. This was a pretty heart-stopping amount for a half-day program which would still require us to pay for our regular day care on top of it. However, because we were church members and there was some scholarship money available, the preschool agreed to give us a substantial break on the cost. It was nevertheless a financial sacrifice that we hope will be for our family's long-term good. We paid for it by refinancing the house to save a couple hundred dollars a month and by not replacing our five-year-old van. Families should always check to see if financial aid is available!

Finally, in making this decision, all parents must remember that their responsibility is to make the best decision they can for their own children. The research suggests that parents should not always assume that holding their children back is the best course of action, particularly if the child or children at issue are typically developing and merely have a summer birthday. However, our research led us to conclude that for our own family, significant immaturity, and the chance that our children would be able to close the gap regarding their various delays if they had an extra year to prepare for kindergarten, led us to conclude that red-shirting was the best decision for our family.