

The retention dilemma: What parents should know if their child is held back in school

Grade retention, also known as non-promotion or being held back, refers to a child repeating his or her current grade level again the following year. Whether used to address low performance and/or behavior problems, research generally has not found favorable achievement or adjustment outcomes for students who are retained. Nevertheless, retention rates have been rising. This trend appears to be heavily influenced by the recent “reform” movement emphasizing national or state-wide educational grade-level standards and accountability (the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and the accompanying grade-level tests to determine which students are promoted to the next grade.

Whatever the reason, if retention is suggested for your child, it is vital that you as a parent make sure you know what options are available and are involved in making decisions about his or her education. By working together, parents and educators can discuss and identify specific strategies to help ensure the educational success of your child.

The retention dilemma

Sometimes children are recommended for retention when their academic performance is low or if they fail to meet grade-level performance standards established by the district or state. Some children may be recommended for retention if they seem socially immature, display behavior problems, or are just beginning to learn English. Occasionally, students who have missed many school days (for example, because they were ill or due to frequent moves) are recommended for retention.

Research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion (the practice of promoting students with their same age-peers although they have not mastered current grade level content) is likely to enhance a child’s learning. Research and common sense both indicate that simply having a child repeat a grade is unlikely to address the problems a child is experiencing. Likewise, simply promoting a student who is experiencing academic or behavioral problems to the next grade without additional support is not likely to be an effective solution either.

When faced with a recommendation to retain a child,

the real task is not to decide to retain or not to retain but, rather, to identify specific intervention strategies to enhance the cognitive and social development of the child and promote his or her learning and success at school. Given the evidence indicating that grade retention is an ineffective and possibly harmful intervention, “promotion plus” (i.e., combining grade promotion and effective, evidence-based interventions) is most likely to benefit children with low achievement or behavior problems.

The following information, taken from prolific research, can help parents better understand the possible effects of retention on their child and advocate for effective intervention strategies.

Negative effects of grade retention

The body of research on retention indicates that initial academic improvements may occur during the year the student is retained. However, many studies show that achievement gains decline within 2–3 years of retention. This means that over time, children who were retained either do not show higher achievement, or sometimes show lower achievement than similar groups of children who were not retained. Without specific interventions, most retained students do not catch up. Studies have also found that in adolescence, retained students are more likely to experience problems such as poor interactions with peers, disliking school, behavior problems, and lower self-esteem. And for most students, grade retention had a negative impact on all areas of achievement and social and emotional adjustment.

Alternative strategies

Research provides evidence that supports the effectiveness of other educational interventions. The following are evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion that better address academic and behavior problems:

- Parental involvement in children’s schools and education through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, and ongoing communication about school activities.
- Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instruction-

al strategies to accelerate progress in all classrooms.

- Early developmental programs and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills.
- Systematic methods to monitor progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, and identify the most effective methods of instruction.
- Early reading programs; that is, many low performing students have reading problems, and it has been found that developmentally appropriate, intensive, direct instruction strategies have been effective in promoting reading skills of at-risk students.
- School-based mental health programs to promote the social and emotional adjustment of children; for instance, addressing behavior problems has been found to be effective in improving academic performance.
- Student support teams with appropriate professionals to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions.
- Behavior management and cognitive-behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems that interfere with learning.
- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that focus on improving the development of academic skills.
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors who focus on promoting specific academic or social skills.
- Comprehensive school-wide programs to promote the social and academic skills of all students.

What parents can do to help

Parents know their children well and can provide much needed insight into their children's learning.

Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers, and other educational professionals to work together.

Finding out about school problems early can help parents and teachers to collaborate to spare children the feelings of failure. Addressing problems early improves chances for success. Parents can help:

- Discuss concerns as they arise with the teacher. It is important to know what assignments your child is expected to do and what type of work is difficult for your child to understand and complete.
- Ask your child's teacher what help is being provided to your child and what you can do at home to help him or her succeed.
- Help your child with homework by asking to see his or her assignments and creating a quiet time and place to study.
- Make sure your child is rested and ready for school each day. It is important that your child gets plenty of sleep, eats a nutritious breakfast, comes to school on time, and receives appropriate medical care.

Resources for parents

The National Association of School Psychologists — www.nasponline.org

Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion — www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention

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