



Fact Sheet #10

Staying Back: Does it Help or Hurt?



Every year, many parents are faced with a difficult decision: should they keep their child in the same grade another year to give them a chance to catch up academically, or will “staying back” cause their child social and emotional strain?

Estimates based on census data suggest that as many as 30% of all students have been retained at least once by the time they reach high school. Retention is most common during the elementary years. Boys repeat grades more often than girls, as do children who are young or small in stature, children who have high activity levels, and children who are minorities or English language learners.

Years of research on the effects of grade repetition have yielded mixed results that are very much in line with parents’ hopes and concerns. Studies that demonstrate the benefits of retention show immediate and dramatic increases in the academic achievement of children who are held back. They also note the easing of the child’s frustration level with schoolwork. Interviews with parents whose children repeated a grade have typically reported positive results.

There is also a significant amount of research that demonstrates negative effects of grade repetition. Recent studies suggest that the social and emotional impacts of staying back may be greater than previously believed. Some evidence suggests that these negative effects of retention may be the greatest in kindergarten and first grade, contrary to the popular belief that “earlier is better.” There is also research that shows the initial burst of academic growth does not last long term, leveling off by the third year after retention. The National Association of School Psychologists has issued statements advising against grade retention, particularly in the earlier years.

If your child’s teacher suggests having your student repeat a grade, it’s important that you work together to decide what is best for your child. Ask your child’s teacher for specific reasons and areas of concern. It’s important to have a good understanding of the school’s grade level expectations, and to see how your child is scoring on standardized assessments. Since some children do not test well, it’s also important to look at other information. Ask to see examples of your child’s work. Reflect on your child’s overall development. Has your child been on target or typically a little bit behind? Does your child make new friends easily? This can be an important factor in the decision to remove a child from their current peer group. It may be helpful to talk to other people who have worked with your child, including preschool teachers and care providers. Parents can also request assistance from support staff in the school, including guidance counselors and social workers.



Many recent studies suggest that parents and teachers should move beyond the retain-or-promote question and look at other options for struggling students. There is some research that shows children who were promoted and given extra support did better in the long term than their peers who were simply held back. Examples of extra support include tutoring, mixed-age classes, mentoring, summer school, after-school programs, guidance counseling, and smaller class sizes. Be sure to ask the school what has been done to help your child so far, and to find out what other supports are available.

You can find more information and read the research used to create this fact sheet at the National Association of School Psychologists' website, www.nasponline.org, and at the Educational Research and Information Clearinghouse, www.eric.ed.gov. Maine's Parent Information and Resource Center (Maine State PIRC) can also provide parents with individual phone support, information, and printed materials on retention, grade level expectations, and other educational topics.



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