

Kindergarten and The Dilemma of Summer Birthdays

By Cathie Brooks

Summer birthdays provide fun options for party celebrations but prove challenging when considering the best time to start kindergarten. Some children miss school cut-off dates by days. Their parents ask, "With another year in preschool and being the oldest in class, will my bright child be bored?" Families with children who just make the cut-off dates struggle with the question, "Are there disadvantages to being the youngest in class?"

Research on this topic ranges from advocates for the 'gift of time' to those who refer to the trend to wait a year as "the graying of kindergarten". What is the answer? There are no absolutes for this dilemma but there are a set of considerations which can guide parents' decisions, noting that even within the same family placement considerations need to be individualized for each child. Considerations should focus on both developmental readiness and the academic program of the school. Specifically, these considerations include:

- Conditions surrounding a child's birth – especially premature births and/or any accompanying complications. Prematurity can bring developmental lags in gross and fine motor development which diminish over time, but can and should be considered when evaluating readiness.
- Birth order within the family ranges from second born children, with opportunities to observe and play with older siblings and may have some maturity advantages to those children who enjoy being the 'baby' of the family and covet a slower pace.
- Family events such as a move, a new baby, recent/prolonged illness (chicken pox, ear infections), a parent's loss of a job, divorce or loss of a close relative, may create temporary but real interruptions in a child's developmental progress.
- Each child has an energy level and a distinct personality, both impact how that child will respond to frustrations from new school experiences and expectations, the physical stamina needed for a challenging day and the emotional capabilities to make and support early friendships.

Parents need to evaluate the unique dimensions of their child in light of the academic program they are considering:

- Is the kindergarten program a half or full day event?
- How many children are in the class and, what is the adult to student ratio?
- What are the expected academic outcomes and to what level will your child be assessed/tested?

Other long term considerations are:

- How will my child feel being the last in tenth grade to receive his/her driver's license?
- Will being young affect my son's/daughter's athletic placements?
- Do I really want my child to enter college at seventeen?

Other parents, who have faced and answered this quandary provide a great resource for examining options. Seek out families with students who are now at a variety of scholastic levels. There is great wisdom in hindsight and this group can offer pragmatic reflections.

Beyond a dilemma, summer birthdays provide parents a time to reflect on the special history and unique attributes that define their budding student. The most important placement of any child is found in the center of a parent's heart!

