

STOP REPEATING

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It is that time of year when many teachers will sit down with parents and suggest that their child may not be ready for the next grade. It may sound something like this: "She is just a bit immature and would benefit from another year of second grade." Or, "He just needs the gift of time and a chance to really master fourth grade." Or, "We just can't keep passing him along; he's just not ready for the seventh grade."

When I was a kid, we called it "flunking." Now we use nice terms like "growth year" and "grade retention." The terrible truth is that whatever we call it, repeating a grade is a practice that often does not accomplish what is intended. Even though it may seem logical, nearly all the research data argue against holding children back. Although the motives behind retention are usually well intentioned, it is often a practice that is harmful to students.

Parents will be told stories about other students who spent another year in the same classroom. They will be told how that other student just blossomed during their second year in class. It will be explained that the standardized state testing is based on curriculum mastery, and moving a student along before they master prior material will doom their MEAP scores. And, you know, scholarship money goes only to those who do well on the MEAP test.

And of course, the parents will hear about the evils of "social promotion." Social promotion, it will be explained, is the thoughtless, liberal idea that just pushing students ahead to the next grade is a good idea. Social promotion suggests that even if students are ill prepared, they should stay with their peers in order to preserve their self-esteem.

School administrators, who feel held hostage by state and local assessments, feel compelled to improve the scores of underachieving students. Grade retention seems like a simple and appropriate way to insure that the low achiever gets an adjusted curriculum without additional cost. And when they later take the tests with their new grade-mates, their scores will likely improve.

And heaven knows that teachers already have a remarkably challenging job. Sending on ill-prepared students means that the next teacher will be teaching 4th grade Science to some students who did not understand 3rd grade Science.

There is no question that a child who is struggling with schoolwork needs help. And retention seems to be such a reasonable thing to do. So why am I so utterly opposed to it in nearly all cases? Here is what the research says.

1. Most low achievers do not catch up. Within two or three years, they are no better off than students who were not retained.
2. Because retained students often do better the year they repeat a grade, teachers and parents may feel that they made a helpful decision. But these "gains" are temporary and the students usually fall behind in later years. Teachers rarely witness the later effects of retention of their students. Elementary level teachers have little idea of how their retained students progress in middle and high school.
3. Graduation rates for retained students are much lower than for those advanced to the next grade. For students retained two years, nearly all of them drop out.

4. Immature students who are retained often end up with lower self-esteem, more behavior problems, and more negative school attitudes than non-retained peers.
5. Where retention is used, a disproportionate number of boys, minorities, and poor students tend to be retained.

Parents will not be told about my friend Tony. Tony had a lot of trouble in school and was retained in the third grade. "They said I was kinda small for my age, but I knew they thought I was dumb," he later told me. He did great that second year of third grade, but he missed his classmates. In fourth and fifth grade he started to struggle with the work. Middle school was a disaster and Tony not only failed some of his classes, he also started getting in trouble. When I met him as a high school student, he told me, "I hate school and it hates me." He dropped out two months before his 16th birthday.

Some middle schools are now using retention as a consequence for low achieving students. The implications of this are that immature 11-year olds will now share the school building with challenging 15-year olds. Apparently, there are those with the silly belief is that these teenage low achievers will somehow "wake up" and have a great second year with the their preadolescent peers. It sounds to me like a recipe for disaster. And it strikes me that retention can actually be punishment masquerading as educational policy.

Of course, not every child is damaged by retention; some seem to do just fine. We never know if the successful retained student would have done even better if not retained. We do know that students with positive self-esteem and good peer relationships and those who have had excessive absences sometimes benefit more from retention. And it seems that when retention is used, it is more effective with a new teacher or a school change the second year. Retention probably works best in kindergarten, but even here the research does not provide much support.

Parents may not be told of my friend Julie, either. Julie did not really figure out reading until second grade. The school provided some extra reading help and her parents worked with her every night. She continued to need some extra help all the way through middle school, and her parents spent many hours helping her with homework. Her grades were never very good, but she worked hard and had the help of some wonderful teachers who made special allowances for her learning difficulties. In high school, she never took Biology or Geometry, but did finally master the basics of English and Mathematics. She then found her passion in a vocational education program as a health care aid. She will be graduating with her class this spring and has already lined up a job.

It should not be revolutionary to point out that no two children are the same and that each child develops at a different rate and learns in a unique way. Psychologists have long pointed out that only about half the population at any age or grade level are average on any measure of academic performance. It is convenient to group children by age in classrooms, but any notion that *all* children are ready to read at age 6-0 and learn multiplication tables at age 8-6 is simply ignorant. Setting standards for grade levels can help us to have high expectations for all students, but to enforce the standards with retention is unconscionable. It just does not make sense to expect that every child will learn at roughly the same rate and in the same manner as another.

My experience with good teachers is that they are masterful at individualizing instruction and making accommodations for children who function at higher or lower levels. These teachers understand that all children learn in unique ways, and they vary their teaching to include various media and methods. And most high school curriculums acknowledge that students function at different levels and offer classes accordingly. The notion of individualized instruction is one of the keys to helping students who struggle in school.

But if we do not hold children back a grade, what else can we do? Here are some other ideas for parents and schools.

1. Offer classrooms that contain a mix of age and grade levels
2. Provide before or after school remedial programs
3. Use individual or small group tutoring during the school day using peers, volunteers, or school programs
4. Offer summer school remediation
5. Promote home assistance programs that give parents materials and techniques to with their child

The important thing to remember is this. Years of careful research have demonstrated that retention does not work as an intervention to help low achievers. Children who are retained do not usually get the gift of time, but they often pay a substantial price over time. Retention is bad policy and it is likely a poor choice for your child.