Kindergarten: Is Starting Later Better?

As a principal, one of your responsibilities is to candidly discuss kindergarten enrollment issues with parents, who look to you to assist them in deciding when they should send their children to school for the first time.

Consider this scenario: A parent comes to you with a 4-year-old son who will be 5 on Sept. 30. The cutoff date to attend kindergarten is Oct. 1 and your district’s policy is that a child must attend kindergarten the year he or she turns 6. The parents want to know if you think their child is ready for kindergarten. Should they send him now or wait until next year? This can be one of the most important decisions parents make in their child’s life.

Here are some questions that the principal should ask:

- At age 4, is your son ready for school emotionally and/or socially?
- Why do you want him to go to kindergarten at such a young age?
- Are you getting pressure from family or friends to send him to school?
- Do you want to send him because he is academically precocious?
- Do you feel he is too old for preschool?
- Are you really assessing his readiness or comparing him to another sibling?
- Does he play with younger children?
- Do you see separation anxiety behaviors?
- Does he follow directions without constant reminders?
- Can he sit and listen, and follow two- or three-step directions?

These are all questions that require thought and logic when placing a child in school for the first time. In working with children for more than 20 years, I have seen the struggles that parents face every year concerning their child’s placement in school.

“Children at age 5 are capable of doing most academically challenging activities... Unfortunately, being academically ready does not always ensure that the child is ready in other areas.”

The Principal’s Responsibility

Being open and honest with parents is paramount in assisting them with this decision. As a principal, it is imperative to make yourself available to discuss these issues with parents, to listen to their concerns, and to avoid making inferences or judgments before you receive all needed information. Explain to parents their right to decide when school is the best option for their child. Give them information about readiness levels for children ages 4 to 6, lists of books to read to their children, and games that will provide higher-level thinking skills as well as fine and gross motor skills. Plan a kindergarten orientation for parents and children.

The Parents’ Responsibility

As primary caregivers, parents understand their child better than anyone else. In making their decision about when to send their child to kindergarten, they must talk with their pediatrician about readiness and health issues related to sending their child to school at a young age; observe their child’s play habits and attention span; and consider waiting a year if the child was born after April 1 to allow the child to grow physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Children at age 5 are capable of doing most academically challenging activities. They are like sponges, soaking in everything that comes their way. Unfortunately, being academically ready does not always ensure that the child is ready in other areas. I’ve seen many 3-year-olds who could read, calculate numbers, answer questions galore, and recite alphabet, numbers, rhymes, etc. However, their social and emotional behaviors were that of 4-year-olds.

Make It a Win-Win

When parents decide to wait before sending their child to kindergarten, they make it a win-win situation for all involved. The parents win because they see a more mature child who is ready for the structure of kindergarten; the child wins because he or she is ready and willing to listen and follow directions; and the teachers win because they see a child with the advantage of being a year older, a year wiser, and ready to learn.

Mary Lou Yeatts is an associate professor of education at Murray State University in Kentucky. Her e-mail address is marylou.yeatts@coe.murraystate.edu.

Here’s Your Chance to Speak Out

The author recommends that parents wait a year for kindergarten if their child doesn’t turn 5 until after April 1. Do you agree with this policy? What should be the cutoff date in determining kindergarten readiness? What should be the criteria in determining if an age-eligible child is ready for kindergarten?

Share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to www.naesp.org/speakingout.