



# Retention and Promotion

## A Handout for Parents

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### Background

Every year, many children are held back in the same grade. Teachers and administrators might recommend retention (or nonpromotion) when children have difficulty keeping up with their classmates in academic subjects or fail to master grade-level “standards” in district or state-wide testing. Retention might be recommended because children are smaller than classmates, appear “immature” or have later birthdays and seem to need a chance to grow. And, retention is sometimes recommended to help children who have missed a lot of school due to illness or frequent moves, or who are just beginning to learn English. Although in some school districts, retention is used frequently, especially with kindergarten and first grade children, the practice is very controversial among educators and researchers. Some note that research does not support the notion that retention helps children to “catch up”, while others note that “social promotion” — sending children on to the next grade regardless of performance — merely pushes children through the school system without requiring mastery of basic skills.

### What Does the Research Say?

Retention has been studied for many years, and the results of most studies consistently show that:

- Most children do not “catch up” when they are held back. Although some retained children do better at first, they often fall behind again in later grades, and are often referred for remedial help or special education during elementary school.
- Some children seem to suffer no ill-effects from retention. However, by the time they enter middle school, many children who were held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than do children who were never retained. There is some evidence that retained children are more likely to have mental health problems than those who are not retained.
- “Transition kindergarten” is a type of retention and generally is no more helpful than promotion to first grade.
- The most consistent finding is that retained children have a much higher likelihood of dropping out of school than nonretained children.
- Retention might be less harmful for children who feel good about themselves, get along well with others, and have the skills to catch up easily. It is often difficult to predict which children will benefit from retention, however.
- Retention might be helpful for a child who missed a lot of school due to illness or family moves, if the attendance problem is solved and the child will be only one year older than classmates.
- Simply promoting a low performing child on to the next grade is not an effective practice.

### What Can Parents Do to Help?

Neither retention nor promotion will help a child learn! But in order to succeed, your child might need different instruction, not the same things again that didn't work the first time. Parents and teachers can work together to help children succeed. By catching the problem early, there are more opportunities to help children before they have a sense of failure, and there are greater chances for success.

**Discuss concerns with your child's teacher.** Find out what work your child is expected to do, and what work your child finds difficult. Ask a lot of questions — how does he or she get along with classmates? Does he or she understand and remember to follow directions? Does he or she finish assignments on time? What changes has the teacher tried to help your child? Are there other ways to teach the same material? Are there other books and materials that might help your child learn? What are some activities that you can help with at home to help your child catch up? Ask the teacher for some ideas! And try to find a time to visit the classroom and watch your child at work.

**Help your child with schoolwork at home.** Ask your child about homework each day. Help him or her to find a quiet time and place to study. Check to see if your child can explain the assignment to you or read the directions. Make sure your child understands that you think schoolwork is important.

**Make sure your child is ready for school each day!** Be sure your child attends school on time every day, eats balanced meals, gets enough sleep and receives good medical care. Children need to be alert and healthy to succeed in school!

## Where Can I Get More Help?

It can be frustrating to know your child is not succeeding at school. It can make a parent feel upset or angry. Before considering retention, parents can get help from other professionals at school. These people offer ideas for parents and teachers about how to change instruction. They also provide testing to find out if a child needs other services such as tutoring or special education and may have some different learning materials that will work with your child. They can help children who have low self-esteem or poor social skills so that they "fit in" and feel better about themselves. At your child's school, you might contact the:

- School psychologist
- School problem-solving or support team ("Intervention Assistance Team")
- School social worker
- School nurse
- Guidance counselor
- Special education teacher
- Reading specialist
- Principal

For more information, contact your school psychologist or:

The National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway #402, Bethesda, MD 20814; Website at <<http://www.naspweb.org>>

## Resources

Mack, A. (1997). *A+ Parents: Help your child learn and succeed in school*. McBooks.

Martin, M. & Waltman-Greenwood, C. (Eds.). (1995). *Solve your child's school-related problems*. New York: HarperPerennial.

National Association of School Psychologists (1988; 1998). *Position Statement on Retention*. (Available from above address)

*Retention in grade: Looking for alternatives*. (1992). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

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*Should My Child Repeat a Grade?* (Brochure published by NASP; see above address)

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## A Handout for Teachers

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### Background

Every year over 2 million American school children are retained in the same grade. By ninth grade, approximately 50% of all students will have been held back at least once. Teachers and administrators might recommend retention (or nonpromotion) when children have difficulty keeping up with their classmates in academic subjects or fail to master grade-level “standards” in district or state-wide testing. Retention might be recommended because children are smaller than classmates, appear “immature” or have later birthdays and seem to need a chance to grow. And, retention is sometimes recommended to help children who have missed a lot of school due to illness or frequent moves, or who are just beginning to learn English.

Although in some school districts, retention is used frequently, especially with kindergarten and first grade children, the practice is very controversial among educators and researchers. Some note that research does not support the notion that retention helps children to “catch up”, while others note that “social promotion” — sending children on to the next grade regardless of performance — merely pushes children through the school system without requiring mastery of basic skills.

A survey of the research literature shows that student retention, for the most part, is of questionable educational benefit and may have negative effects on achievement, self-concept, attitudes toward learning, and school drop-out rates. The practice of retention costs American taxpayers more than \$9 billion dollars each year! Furthermore, retention appears to be a discriminatory practice as boys, Blacks and Hispanics are far more likely to be retained than are other students.

### Research

Commonly held beliefs about the benefits of retention have been dispelled by decades of research:

**Low achievers rarely “catch up.”** Most children do not “catch up” when they are retained, and in fact are more likely to fall further behind. Some children show initial gains following retention but long-term studies show that these gains “wash out” within two or three years. Promoted peers with similar skills fare at least as well academically, and often do better.

**Retention is generally unsuccessful even at kindergarten or first grade.** While some research suggests that retention has more negative effects for older students, even retention of kindergarten children appears to be an ineffective intervention. Research indicates that students are more likely to be hurt by retention than helped, regardless of grade level. “Transition kindergarten” is a type of retention and generally has not been proven to be effective. Furthermore, research suggests that early retainees are most likely to be identified for special education or other remedial services later, making it critical that failing young children are thoroughly evaluated to determine need for specialized instruction rather than merely retained.

**“Immature” children do not benefit from an extra year to grow.** There simply is no evidence that children will mature faster or adjust better when retained. Students do not benefit emotionally from retention, and many retained students experience more mental health problems later in middle school and high school.

**Retained students are more likely to drop out of school.** The drop-out rate among retained students is much greater than for similarly achieving students who have never been retained. The probability of dropping out increases with multiple retentions. Even for single retentions, the most consistent finding from decades of retention research is the high correlation between retention and dropping out.

**Social promotion by itself is also an ineffective practice.** Merely pushing a failing student through the school curriculum has no impact on achievement. Failing students need changes in their instruction!

## Does Anyone Benefit From Retention?

Under some circumstances, retention is less likely to yield negative effects:

- Students who have positive self concepts, good peer relationships, and have adequate skills to catch up easily are less likely to have negative retention experiences.
- Students who missed a lot of school due to illness or family moves might be helped by retention. However, this assumes that the attendance/health problems have been resolved and that the student is no more than one year older than classmates.
- There will always be individual students who appear to have positive experiences with retention. Unfortunately, educators are unable to consistently predict which students will be successful.

## How Can Teachers Help?

Since research fails to support retention, it is imperative that schools implement more effective strategies that enable at-risk students to succeed in the regular classroom.

**Effective teaching strategies will enhance student success.** Mastery learning, direct instruction, adaptive education, team teaching, peer tutoring, cooperative learning and curriculum-based assessment have all been shown to produce academic gains in students at all achievement levels. If the child works slowly, cut down the number or length of assignments. Look for ways to modify the curriculum. Reward students for their efforts! Teachers may need inservice training and consultation to help implement new methods in the classroom.

**Catch the problem early.** If a child has difficulty keeping up with classmates, look for ways to help before the problem becomes serious. Observe the child while he/she works on assignments to determine the skills the child is missing. This can lead to a minimal amount of reteaching.

**Establish activities that encourage parents to become involved in school.** Teachers can offer parents opportunities to observe instruction, to learn about class assignments, and expectations for success. Support staff can work with parents to increase their skills as "teachers" and as advocates for their children's learning. An atmosphere that welcomes parents as partners will promote better communication between home and school, and in turn will promote learning and appropriate behavior.

**Seek assistance from the members of the school multi-disciplinary team.** Teachers can't be expected to solve all classroom difficulties alone! Members of the school team (psychologist, social worker, counselor, principal, nurse, Chapter 1, etc.) have training and expertise to support efforts in the classroom and to help involve parents and appropriate community resources. It's important that students receive supportive services before they are entrenched in a cycle of failure.

**For more information about retention, contact:** The National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway #402, Bethesda, MD 20814.

## Resources

Comer J. (1995). *School Power*. New York: Free Press.

NASP (1989; 1998). *Position Statement on Student Retention*. (Available from NASP office)

*Retention in grade: Looking for alternatives*. (1992). Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa.

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