Grade Retention and Promotion: Information for Parents

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Grade retention, also known as nonpromotion, flunking, failing, being held back, or the gift of time, refers to a child repeating his or her current grade level again the following year. Whether used to address low performance and/or behavior problems, research generally has not found favorable achievement or adjustment outcomes for students who are retained.

Nevertheless, retention rates have been rising. This trend appears to be heavily influenced by the recent "reform" movement emphasizing national or state-wide educational grade-level standards and accountability (the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and the accompanying grade-level tests to determine which students are promoted to the next grade.

Whatever the reason, if retention is suggested for your child, it is vital that you as a parent make sure you know what options are available and are involved in making decisions about his or her education. By working together, parents and educators can discuss and identify specific strategies to help ensure the educational success of your child.

The Retention Dilemma

Sometimes children are recommended for retention when their academic performance is low or if they fail to meet grade-level performance standards established by the district or state. Some children may be recommended for retention if they seem socially immature, display behavior problems, or are just beginning to learn English. Occasionally, students who have missed many school days because they were ill or because of frequent moves are recommended for retention.

Research indicates that *neither* grade retention nor social promotion (the practice of promoting students with their same age-peers although they have not mastered current grade level content) is likely to enhance a child's learning. Research and common sense both indicate that simply having a child repeat a grade is unlikely to address the problems a child is experiencing. Likewise, simply promoting a student who is experiencing academic or behavioral problems to the next grade without additional support is not likely to be an effective solution either.

When faced with a recommendation to retain a child, the real task is not to decide to retain or not to retain but, rather, to identify specific intervention strategies to enhance the cognitive and social development of the child and promote his or her learning and success at school.

Given the evidence indicating that grade retention, when compared with social promotion of similar children, is an *ineffective and possibly harmful intervention,* "promotion plus" (i.e., combining grade promotion and effective,

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evidence-based interventions) is most likely to benefit children with low achievement or behavior problems.

Too often, anecdotal evidence, clinical experience, and folklore overshadow the results of empirical research. But what does research show? Is retention effective? The following information, taken from research during the last 100 years, can help parents better understand the possible effects of retention on their child and advocate for effective intervention strategies.

Effects of grade retention. The body of research on retention indicates that:

- Initial academic improvements may occur during the year the student is retained. However, many research studies show that *achievement gains decline* within 2–3 years of retention. This means that over time, children who were retained either do not show higher achievement, or sometimes show lower achievement than similar groups of children who were not retained. Without specific interventions, most retained students do not catch up.
- In adolescence, retained students are *more likely to experience problems* such as poor interactions with peers, disliking school, behavior problems, and lower self-esteem.
- Students who were retained are *5–11 times more likely to drop out of school.* The probability is even higher for students who are retained more than once. Actually, grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school drop out.
- For most students, grade retention had a *negative impact on all areas* of achievement (e.g., reading, math, and oral and written language) and social and emotional adjustment (e.g., peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).
- A study of sixth graders' perceptions indicated that they consider retention as one of the *most stressful* life events.
- Retention *may help* students who have missed many days of school, but only if their attendance improves and if the child will not be considerably older than the other students. At this time, however, there are *no specific indicators* that predict which children could benefit from retention.

Alternative strategies. However, research *does* provide evidence that supports the effectiveness of other educational interventions. The following are evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion that better address academic and behavior problems:

- Parental involvement in children's schools and education through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, and ongoing communication about school activities.
- Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to accelerate progress in all classrooms.
- Early developmental programs and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills.
- Systematic methods to monitor progress, identify strengths and weaknesses, and identify the most effective methods of instruction.
- Early reading programs; that is, many low performing students have reading problems, and it has been found that developmentally appropriate, intensive, direct instruction strategies have been effective in promoting reading skills of at-risk students.
- School-based mental health programs to promote the social and emotional adjustment of children; for instance, addressing behavior problems has been found to be effective in improving academic performance.

The National Mental Health & Education Center for Children & Families

As one of many NASP public service programs, the Center fosters best practices in education and mental health by providing information on topics affecting today's youth, families, and schools. The Center's goal is to improve outcomes for children and youth by helping parents, teachers, and other related professionals work more effectively together to promote healthy learning and development. The Center offers free or low cost resources, programs, and services that promote effective strategies, greater collaboration, and improved outcomes on a wide range of psychological, social/emotional, and academic issues. Resources can be downloaded or ordered from the Center website or ordered directly from the Center.

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- Student support teams with appropriate professionals to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions.
- Behavior management and cognitive-behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems that interfere with learning.
- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that focus on improving the development of academic skills.
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors who focus on promoting specific academic or social skills.
- Comprehensive school-wide programs to promote the social and academic skills of all students.

Considering their diverse needs, there is no single intervention that will effectively address the specific needs of low achieving students. Rather, systematic evidence-based interventions should be selected to facilitate the academic and socio-emotional development of students at risk of school failure.

What Parents Can Do to Help

Parents know their children well and can provide much needed insight into their children's learning. Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers, and other educational professionals to work together. Finding out about school problems early can help parents and teachers to collaborate to spare children the feelings of failure. Addressing problems early improves chances for success. Parents can help by:

- Discussing concerns as they arise with the teacher. It is important to know what assignments your child is expected to do and what type of work is difficult for your child to understand and complete.
- Asking your child's teacher what help is being provided to your child and what you can do at home to help him or her succeed.
- Helping your child with homework by asking to see his or her assignments and creating a quiet time and place to study.
- Making sure your child is rested and ready for school each day. It is important that your child gets plenty of sleep, eats a nutritious breakfast, comes to school on time, and receives appropriate medical care.

Where to Get More Help

While it can be frustrating if your child is having problems at school, there are many people who can help. Although retention may appear to be the simple answer, professionals at your child's school can give you and the child's teacher some effective alternatives to help your child do better. They may also suggest conducting evaluations to find out what specific strengths and weaknesses your child has, how he or she best learns, and if he or she may benefit from special education. You can also contact people at school who can work with your child if he or she is experiencing academic and/or social problems, including the school psychologist, social worker, counselor, reading specialist, school nurse, special education team, or principal.

Remember, retention may be more commonplace today, but there is no evidence that it is effective. Rather, there are many other alternatives to helping children who are experiencing difficulties in school. By asking questions and working collaboratively with school personnel, you can help your child succeed.

Resources

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Websites

The National Association of School Psychologists—*www.nasponline.org*
Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion—*www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention*

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website ***www.nasponline.org*** and the NASP Center for Children & Families website ***www.nasponline.org/families.*** Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_sp/spsych.aspx

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/resources/culturalcompetence

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.aspx

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/links_state_orgs.aspx

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www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/position_paper.aspx

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.nasponline.org/resources/toolkit