



BY MARCY GUDDEMI and CRISTA MARCHESSEAU

The Goldilocks Dilemma

When is the 'right time' to start kindergarten?

It's Sept. 1, and a new school year is beginning, along with the "kindergarten dilemma" confronting many parents and teachers. A child is five years old, or will be five years old by the legal cut-off date for school entrance, is starting kindergarten now the right decision for every child who meets the age requirement?

Add to the dilemma that in Connecticut, the cut-off date is Jan. 1, Kentucky is Oct. 1, Georgia is Sept. 1, Indiana is July 1, and so on. Add to the dilemma that kindergarten curriculums have changed in the vast majority of schools in the US in the last decade or two. Most American kindergartners are now expected to sit at tables or desks, work independently, and learn what was traditionally taught in first grade—namely how to read.

Meet Megan and Max

Megan's birthday is Oct. 21. She is nearly five years, 11 months old and the youngest of three sisters. She has learned to read through exposure to print, letters, and sounds; and by listening to and following along with story after story read to her by both her parents and her older, third grade sister. She has been begging to go to school like her siblings all year. She can follow directions on Sunday School activity sheets, plays kindly with other children, and is curious about all insects and critters she discovers in the backyard. Her mother knows that she is ready for kindergarten and has been for some time.

Max is four, turning five in about one more month. His birthday is Sept. 26.

He is the middle child with two other brothers, each a year apart. He loves to run, run, run and be active every moment of the waking day. He still needs his afternoon nap so he can refuel and be on his way again. His mom describes him as "all boy," but she is worried that a full day at school will be too much for



her little guy. After all, he does not want to sit and listen to the "boring old story" at story hour at the public library. He tends to punch if he doesn't get his way or the toy he wants to play with now. In his world, that's how to survive with two other brothers. He can count to 10 and reluctantly write his name, but he could care less about letters, numbers, books or computers.

Max and Megan will be in the same kindergarten classroom. They will be expected to behave in the same ways and learn the same things at their local school because both children will meet

the cut-off date of five by Oct. 1. What are the chances they will have the same experience and both meet with success? If they are entering a "ready" kindergarten classroom with the resources and support to meet the needs of every child in a developmentally appropriate way, perhaps the odds are good, but in our current economic and political climate, even if recovering, most schools are still struggling to maintain funding and meet the demands and lingering effects of "No Child Left Untested."

What Should a Parent Do?

Parents with a child like Max may have more choices than they realize, and do have a responsibility to find out what the options are, rather than simply acquiescing to what other parents are doing. They can choose to push their child ahead regardless of the school climate and expectations because, after all, the child does meet the cut-off date. They can choose to keep their child out a year, if this is financially possible for the family, because they think he will benefit from the extra time to develop. Or they can search for — and perhaps more importantly advocate for — a school or classroom that meets and supports the learning needs of their child, where he is developmentally right now.

Hence, the Goldilocks Dilemma: Overplacement, Red-Shirting or Just Right

Parents are often left with a quandary between what may be "too hard, too easy, or just right" for their child's level

of development and learning needs. The first thing Max's parents should do is ask questions — whether or not they have options for where to send Max to school, they can learn more about the curriculum and expectations where he will be enrolled, and they can advocate for best practices at their local school.

One of the options that Max's parents might choose is to enroll him in kindergarten knowing that he might not be able to handle the expectations academically or behaviorally. The term overplacement refers to a child being placed in an academic setting that is beyond or over the child's developmental readiness, and in which the child's individual needs are not able to be met.

Another option is to wait a year and allow Max to grow emotionally, socially, physically, and intellectually, and be placed with children that are more his peers next September. The term red-shirting refers to a child being held back a year solely in order to be at an advantage physically, socially or academically.

Research has shown that there can be negative effects of either practice, making both "not quite right" for many children in most cases. On the other hand, parents find their "just right" option when there is a match between the child's developmental needs and the provided curriculum.

Not Quite Right: Issues of Overplacement and Red-Shirting

A child's readiness for a particular school program is indicated by his or her physical, social, emotional, and academic readiness, leading to his or her ability to cope and sustain in that environment without undue stress or awkwardness.

Some children may show signs of strain when placed in a school situation before they are fully ready to meet the demands of that classroom and if there are not the proper supports and resources in place to meet the child where he or she is developmentally. A child in this situation may exhibit the following behaviors.

Overt *(Easy to see)*

Physical — The child exhibits fatigue, frequent colds, inconsistent visual and hearing perceptions.

Social — Has few friends, may lash out in anger against peers, relates better with younger children. Those not showing anger may withdraw.

Intellectual — Has difficulty finishing work, erratic achievement (good one week, poor for two weeks). Low or average work despite high I.Q.

Emotional — May be moody and easily upset, does not enjoy or want to go to school.

Covert *(More difficult to spot)*

Avoidance — May avoid dealing with problems, daydreams.

Conformity — Wants to please others, does only what is asked, tries to make the teacher happy, exhibits very little creative thinking.

Passive Resistance — Does not argue, may even be pleasant and agree with everything, but is resistant when it comes to doing anything.

Overdrive — High social and academic skills; may not be



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very creative, is interested in obtaining good grades. This child appears to “have everything” but may be at great risk for eventual burnout.

While research has shown that delaying kindergarten alone does not have a long-term affect on academic success for the average child, there may be immediate short-term benefits including less stress associated with the learning environment, increased motivation to learn, and stronger self concept. One of the most important goals of Kindergarten is to love learning and create an “I can learn!” attitude in the child. When children are overplaced, they often feel like they are failures and may complain of stomach aches so they don’t have to go to school.

On the other hand, waiting a year so that a child is the biggest football player or because waiting a year is the trendy thing to do to “get ahead,” is not wise either. The decision whether or not to enter kindergarten should be made with the child’s best interest in mind. This is why it is imperative to understand the demands and expectations of the kindergarten program where a child will be enrolled, so that an informed decision can be made in regard to what is best for the child. Parents should talk to the teachers and administrators at prospective schools before making enrollment decisions.

Just Right: The Developmentally Appropriate Classroom

The “just right” kindergarten classroom is one that meets the developmental needs of the child. In these developmen-


tally appropriate classrooms, teachers trust in children’s natural abilities and recognize their individual developmental needs. They plan environments that balance active, child-initiated learning with teacher-directed instruction. They allow for physical movement, freedom of expression, active communication and interaction, and individual and group problem solving.

Activities are open ended so that the outcome for each child will be at his or her individual level of development. For example, in a child’s daily journal, one child may be using complete sentences while another still primarily scribbles pretend letters and uses pictures to convey thoughts. Neither is “wrong” or out of place.

Such classroom structure fosters the child’s innate drive for purpose, competence, autonomy, and responsibility. Initiative is nurtured when children are encouraged to take appropriate risks. The resulting choice and decision-making produce interest and motivation and lead to learning which is meaningful, relevant, and lifelong.

Optimal learning is dependent on children’s manipulation and experimentation with materials, and questioning and communication with adults and peers. The developmental kindergarten classroom is activity centered, drawing directly from the child’s interests and abilities. Integrated theme learning allows children to live and think in the classroom as they do naturally outside of the classroom.

The curriculum fully incorporates music, art, movement, and drama. Learning through instructional themes encourages



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spontaneous and instructive play in the classroom and draws on the developmental progression in content areas such as reading, math, writing, science, and social studies. Perhaps most importantly, the developmentally appropriate classroom meets the needs of the individual child, providing activities and experiences that meet the child where he or she is on the developmental spectrum.

Unfortunately, the demands of our current educational system, in large part thanks to the No Child Left Behind legislation or the “Testing Legislation” as others have called it, have left many schools and programs with a great dilemma — with cuts in funding, resources are low, and with huge demands on accountability and test scores, more and more kindergarten programs are being forced to take on a more academic focus.

With this, truly developmentally appropriate practice is left at the curb. When parents find this is the case in their child’s school, they should talk to the teachers and administrators about

this problem, and work together to find the best solution for their child.

Parents shouldn’t make decisions for children based on personal greed, vicariously living their child’s life, or on adult peer pressure. Desiring the brightest child in the class, longing for the best athlete in the class, or pushing a child solely to “keep up with the Jones” does no child any good. When considering what’s best for a child, parents should remember three guiding principles to help ensure his or her success:

1. Know the child, not just what the child knows – recognize and understand natural developmental behaviors in a variety of situations.

2. Know the program — beyond the specific academic demands, know what behaviors will be expected of the children in the program as well as what the program offers in terms of play time, social-emotional development, parent involvement, and more.

3. Know that every child is in a constant process of growth and development — respect and cherish each stage of a child’s development, and be

informed about developmentally appropriate expectations for the individual child.

Conclusion: Goldilocks Goes to Kindergarten

Goldilocks tried the first kindergarten and it was too HARD. She tried the second classroom and it was too EASY. Then she tried the third classroom and it was just RIGHT.

Children should not have to bounce around from program to program to find the right fit. There already exists a growing epidemic of preschool expulsion, in large part due to a disconnect between developmental behavior, expectations, and proper supports in the classroom. Parents and teachers can and should be working together to understand the individual child, and to provide the best possible — “just right” — kindergarten experience for every child.

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