

Why do schools recommend retention?

Although the majority of children are promoted to the next year level each year, schools might suggest repeating a year for several reasons:

1. Concerns about academic ability compared to peers, particularly in the areas of reading or mathematics
2. Concerns about the child's maturity level compared to peers (e.g. one of the youngest children in the class)
3. Concerns that frequent moves or absences from school have not allowed the student to have adequate opportunities to learn
4. Concerns that the student does not speak enough English and that they need more time to develop this skill
5. Concerns about the social/emotional effects of promoting a student who may not be ready to cope with the demands of the following year level.

Can retention help? What the research says...

- Students who are promoted are more likely to reach a higher level of academic achievement than similar students who have repeated a year.
- Retention does not appear to have a positive impact on self-esteem or overall school adjustment. Research suggests that children's anxious, inattentive and disruptive behaviours persisted and sometimes worsened after grade retention. Retention is often associated with significant increases in behaviour problems, with problems becoming more pronounced as the child approaches high school age.
- Children who have repeated are more likely to have lower self-esteem and/or lower self-confidence than similar children who have been promoted.
- Research indicates students perceive repeating as a negative and stressful experience.
- Research shows that most students do not "catch up" when they are held back. Similarly, repeating alone is unlikely to "fix" a learning or intellectual disability.

- There may be some academic gains during the year the student is repeating; however, research indicates that these gains disappear within 2-3 years of retention as the student falls behind again in later years. Retained children are at a much greater risk for future academic failure than their equally achieving, non-retained peers.
- Research shows that children who are youngest in their class are more likely to have lower achievement rates than peers. A difference of a few months may represent a significant portion of development in a young child's life. On average differences in achievement are small and disappear by year 3.

Retention is more likely to help children who:

- Missed a lot of school due to illness or family moves but only if the attendance problem is addressed and the child is only one year older than other children in the class
- Feel good about themselves, get along well with others and are not very far behind academically
- Receive well-designed, individualized instruction rather than a repeat of the same instruction.

In summary, the majority of the research suggests that promoting students to the next year level is more likely to be beneficial to the student than repeating a year. Neither retention nor promotion alone is likely help a child with special learning needs succeed in school. When children have difficulty learning, teachers need to try *different ways* to help them learn- not just repeat the same lessons that did not work the first time.

Alternatives to retention

With the implementation of the curriculum framework, education is more focused on the needs of individual students. This means that students do not necessarily need to repeat a grade in order to be provided with an opportunity to learn at an appropriate level. In addition there is more flexibility to cater for different learning needs. The school and parents need to work together to accurately identify the student's needs and if necessary develop a collaborative plan to meet these needs.

Some alternatives to repeating include:

- Identifying specific learning or behaviour problems and designing interventions to address those problems
- Developing an individual education plan
- Consulting with a school psychologist or special learning needs consultant to assist in educational planning
- Modifying curriculum, classroom environment or teaching style
- Providing additional support or appropriate special education services
- Establishing multi-age groupings within classrooms with teacher trained to work with mixed aged and ability populations
- Implementing effective school based mental health programs

Parents can help children succeed in school

- Talk to your child's teacher often about schoolwork. Parent involvement in school increases student success.
- Ask your child about homework. Help your child find a quiet time and place to study.
- Make sure your child goes to school everyday, eats balanced meals, gets enough sleep and receives good medical care to stay healthy and alert.
- Let your child know you think school is very important!
- Find out what kinds of help are available for students who are having difficulties learning (e.g. school psychologist, special learning needs consultant, health professionals).

Grade Retention

To Repeat or Not to Repeat?