

Why are schools so rigid about the birthday cut off date?

Well, because there has to be some sort of parameter for deciding when a child should begin formalized schooling. In the US, most formalized schooling begins with kindergarten, though not all states either require it or fund a full-day program. Entrance age for kindergarten children is age 5. The question becomes, age 5 on what date? And, what if my child misses the cut-off by just a few days, or a couple of weeks? Does it really make a difference?

Most educators would argue that yes, it does. In the United States, the educational system is based on a rich history of experiential and developmental theory. The curriculum and instructional methods are based on the work of such greats as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Friedrich Froebel, among others. The idea is that each of us grows and matures at our own unique rate within some broad, predictable stages. For example, some children will become quite verbal by 12 months, while others may not speak until a bit older. Some children will walk as early as 8 months and others will not stand up until they are over 12 months. The good news, however, is that most children are walking and talking fairly adeptly by age three.

Educators tend to take the long view when it comes to questions of whether or not a child should start school at an age earlier than the prescribed school age cut off. Especially when looking at very young children, it can be hard to predict future levels of achievement. School achievement is dependent upon so many variables....intellectual ability, intrinsic motivation, physical development and emotional development. These are the four major foundational attributes that support a high level of performance throughout a school career. Each of these develops at its own pace.

It is not unusual to have a three-year-old child who can read a little bit. At first look, this child may appear to be one who is ready to be jumped ahead into a prekindergarten program and set up for rapid advancement through school. However, a well trained early childhood educator will also look to see if that child has equally advanced fine and gross motor skills; whether the child is still emotionally derailed if he/she does not get his/her own way; and if the child can manage a higher degree of independence in a classroom setting. Rarely, does a child possess all of the necessary degree of development to navigate a classroom of older peers. Eventually, all of the pieces and parts that will allow this child to have a happy and successful school experience will equal out. However, it does not make good sense to advance a child based on the demonstration of one advanced area of development.

Most teachers in the U.S. would concur that children are served best when they tend to be on the older side of their class age span. An enormous part of the school experience is the social and emotional development that takes place. Students who are older tend to have the ability to take on leadership roles and to navigate peer relationships with greater ease. This is certainly true as students enter into the middle school and high school years. A little bit more emotional and physical maturity to balance that high functioning brain increases the chances for better decision making during some very tricky years.

So, does that age cut off matter? Yes! Should you consider trying to push your school to ignore it in order to advance your child academically? If your child is unusually self motivated and is also advanced

in every way....intellectually, physically, emotionally...then he/she might be a candidate for “skipping a grade.” This phenomenon is quite rare. History shows that most children, even those with great intellectual capacity, do best when they are part of a class that is best matched with them chronologically. Give it very careful consideration, seek advice from well regarded teachers, and look at your child in his/her entirety. The whole of your child is made up of several beautiful parts, all of which deserve love, attention and the opportunity to grow.