



## **Should You Hold Your Child Back a Grade?**

By Linda Balsiger, M.S., CCC-SLP

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Grade retention has increased dramatically over the past 25 years, and an estimated 15% of students in the US are held back each year. A deficit in reading skills is the most common reason for grade retention. Concern about reading is warranted - research shows that most students who are still reading below grade-level in third grade rarely catch-up in later years. Reading is the foundation for all future learning, and students who are behind in reading are likely to struggle in all academic areas.

What should you do if your school recommends that your child be held back to repeat a grade? Will they be traumatized by staying back while all their friends continue on? Or will it give them just the boost they need to catch-up, so that they can be more successful in school over the long term?

### ***Grade Retention Considerations***

If your child missed a lot of school due to illness or geographic moves, repeating a grade may be just what they need to catch-up. The same holds true if your child has experienced emotional trauma during the past year, such as the death of a close family member. If these factors do not apply, however, it is important to consider why your child has not made expected academic progress.

If your child is in kindergarten, are they developmentally immature for their age? If that is the case, your child is likely behind their peers in social/emotional skills, and struggling with many areas of learning. Giving them another year to grow in maturity may be just what they need. In contrast, if your child is on track in other areas and is only struggling with pre-literacy skills, repeating kindergarten is not likely to help. A research study by the National Center for Education found that most children who repeated kindergarten were still behind their non-retained peers in reading at the end of first grade. Problems acquiring literacy skills may be due to a learning disorder, and learning the same information in the same way a second time is not the most effective approach.

State accountability for educational standards has resulted in a heightened emphasis on grade retention as the solution for academic problems. Senator Karen Morgan of Salt Lake City is sponsoring a state bill that would mandate holding back any students in first through third grades who are reading below grade level. Exemptions are in place for children with learning disabilities or those on Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Many students have *undiagnosed* learning disabilities, however, and a 1996 study found that 71% of children with previously undiagnosed learning disabilities had been retained at least one time.

### ***Retention and Learning Disabilities***

Children with learning disabilities (including reading disorders) generally do not benefit from repeating a grade, unless they are taught with a different, more specialized approach the second time around. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) stated the following in their official position paper on grade retention:



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- “The weight of the evidence of literally hundreds of studies shows that retaining children does not produce higher achievement.”
- “Neither social promotion nor retention address the problems faced by children who find school learning difficult.”
- “More of the same does not work.”

According to the NJCLD, the “real problem” is a lack of specially designed school programs for children with academic difficulties.

### ***Psychological Impact***

It is also important to consider the emotional impact of grade retention. For many children, repeating a grade feels like a failure, and can damage their self-esteem. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) recommends seeking more effective alternatives to grade retention. Their official position statement states that:

- Retention negatively affects all areas of academic achievement and social-emotional adjustment.
- Grade retention is associated with an increase in behavioral problems.
- Grade retention is one of the strongest predictors of dropping out of high school.

### ***How to decide?***

The decision to hold your child back requires careful consideration of many complex factors. Foremost, however, is determining the reasons for your child’s lack of progress. If your child has not been tested for a learning disability, it is critical to have that completed as soon as possible. This will give you much needed information, and will also identify the type and intensity of intervention that is needed to help your child succeed in school.

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