

# Did You Know?

## Starting Kindergarten **TOO** Early

### THE HIDDEN ADVANTAGE OF AGE

New data informs new thinking. Our thoughts about kindergarten readiness and the optimal age for a child to start kindergarten have changed in recent years. Many parents struggle with this big decision. At Mandala, we have become clearer and clearer that children with fall birthdays (and some with late summer birthdays—often boys) do better waiting to enter school until they are fully mature developmentally. We believe the research shows that there are tremendous payoffs for giving a child “the gift of an extra year.”

#### The Secret of Success

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell set out to look at success: what are the qualities or special talents that explain how a person gets to the top? Is it skill, inborn talent, a lucky break, parentage or endowment? Surprisingly, Gladwell makes his case that personal explanations of success don't work. People don't rise from nothing. He contends that relative age contributes to success. Being in “the top rung” to begin with significantly benefits a child. Passion, talent, and hard work (10,000 hours of practice seems to be the magic number for greatness in any field) do matter—these he found to be important ingredients in success. “But there was another element,” says Gladwell, and that was age.

“Personal explanations of success don't work. People don't rise from nothing. But, in fact, they are invariably the beneficiaries of *hidden advantages* and opportunities... that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot.”

Malcolm Gladwell, *The Outliers*, p. 19

Age makes a difference!

#### A Lesson from Canadian Youth Hockey

The way Canadians select hockey players for their age-class teams is a beautiful example. In Canada, the eligibility cutoff for age-class hockey is January 1<sup>st</sup>. This means that a child who turns ten on January 2<sup>nd</sup> could then be playing alongside a child who turns ten at the *end* of the year--a difference of almost one year. This represents an enormous difference in physical maturity--especially with pre-adolescents. By looking at birth date records of all players, Gladwell discovered that Canada tends to pick the *oldest* children every year as the “best players” for their ‘rep’ squad of all stars. Of course this makes sense. When the hockey scouts are traveling the country looking to select the best nine or ten-year-olds, they are more likely to view as talented the bigger and more coordinated players, those who have had the benefit of critical extra months of maturity. Now physical maturity alone does not make these kids “all stars.” But Gladwell makes the point that the way Canadian teams treat these “all stars” ends up making these children look like the best in the end. That is because these players go on to receive better coaching, more playing with better teammates, practicing twice as much, and playing 75 games a season, instead of the 20 games those left behind in the ‘house league’ play. In the beginning, this age advantage isn't really so great. It's just that these players are a little older. But by the age of 13 or 14 years-old, with the benefit of all the extra coaching and practice, these children really are very *much* better!

#### Success Patterns in Education

Gladwell goes on to show that this same pattern is true in education. And it starts with kindergarten entry:

*Hockey and soccer are just games, of course, involving a select few. But these exact same biases also show up in areas of much more consequence, like education. Parents with a child born at the end of the calendar year often think about holding their child back before the start of kindergarten: it's hard for a five-year-old to keep up with a child born many months earlier. But most parents, one suspects, think that whatever disadvantage a younger child faces in kindergarten eventually goes away. But it doesn't. It's just like hockey. The small initial advantage that the child born in the early part of the year has over the child born at the end of the year persists. It locks the children into patterns of achievement and underachievement, encouragement and discouragement, that stretch on and on for years.*

### **Arbitrary Cutoff Dates Cause Long-Lasting Effects**

Two economists (K. Bedard and E. Dhuey) recently looked at the relationship between scores on a math and science exam (TIMSS) given to children in many countries around the world and the children's month of birth. They found that among fourth graders, the oldest children scored somewhere between 4 to 12 percentile points better than the youngest children. That is a "huge effect," says Dhuey. "It means that if you take two intellectually equivalent fourth graders with birthdays at the opposite ends of the cutoff date, the older student could score in the 80<sup>th</sup> percentile, while the younger could score in the 68<sup>th</sup> percentile. That's the difference between qualifying for a gifted program or not." Just like in sports, schools do 'ability groupings' early on in classrooms. "In kindergarten and first grade, teachers are confusing maturity with ability. They put the older kids in the more advanced stream, where they learn better skills; and because they are in the higher groups, they do even better; and the next year, the same thing happens, and they do even better again" (p. 28). The same researchers even looked at college students, and they found that the initial difference in maturity doesn't go away with time. Sadly, it persists.

### **Startling Facts**

Gladwell found even more social phenomena has been linked to relative age. Students who attempt suicide are more likely to be born in the second half of the school year. He said researchers suggest poorer school performance can lead to depression.

### **Kindergarten Looks Different Now**

Changes have happened in education, too. Both teachers and parents report that kindergarten looks much like first grade did ten years ago. This means that there is more pressure and the expectations are much higher. Children are expected to sit still for longer periods without a chance to move around, to stay on task, to be quiet and not talk out of turn, and to do lots and lots of writing. After school, children are expected to come home and do more homework, which takes still more concentration. Even very bright kids are having trouble sitting for so long!

### **More Parents Are Delaying Kindergarten Entry**

Parents of Mandala graduates come back to tell us that their young child is sometimes nearly two years behind the older children in his or her kindergarten class. The younger ones are already having to struggle extra hard to keep up. They know the difference. They lack the confidence and the ability they see other children have. They feel defeated.

### **New Law - Sept 1<sup>st</sup> Will Be the New Cutoff in 2014**

Sacramento has finally listened to teachers, who have been complaining for years about California's Dec. 2 cutoff (one of the latest in the country). Thanks to Palo Alto teachers Natalie Bivas and Diana Argenti, who were the driving force behind the Kindergarten Readiness Act, the legislature has voted to change the birthday cutoff for children entering school from Dec. 2 to Sept 1. These two women were motivated to work for a change because "they saw how children who started kindergarten before their fifth birthday were more likely to struggle with today's beefed-up academic curriculum. Both felt those kids would have a better chance of succeeding if they had another year of preschool in which to mature." Sen. Joe Simitian's bill also establishes a year of "transitional kindergarten" for those who miss the cut off. This change will take effect gradually over the next several years, ending in 2014.

### **Not All Children of Kindergarten-Age Are Ready to Move On — Especially Fall Birthdays**

A child must have matured to a certain level in *many* areas of development in order for his school experience to be successful. This includes emotional, social and physical maturity, as well as academic. Children who start school before they are mature enough often lack the confidence to succeed as they go through school. They may do fine in kindergarten, but they typically become overwhelmed as more and more is demanded of them. Their stress increases when school becomes more difficult. Real problems start occurring in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades, when teachers find that these students start to fall behind. By junior high, teachers report that the younger youth *really* stand out because of their problems in the social-emotional area. They are unprepared to handle the challenges.

### **If You Are Undecided, Give Your Child the Gift of an Extra Year**

You will never regret it. In our 35 years, we have had many parents tell us how much they regretted not holding their young child back another year, especially after watching their child struggle with school year after year. Eventually, it starts to erode a child's self-esteem. However, we have NEVER, ever had a parent come back to tell us that they regretted giving their child an extra year of preschool to gain more maturation and confidence before starting elementary school.

### **Please Talk With Us**

If you have any questions about your child's kindergarten readiness, do talk with your child's teachers, our Preschool Director or myself. We can offer you our perspective and help you gain a clearer picture of your child's readiness.

#### **Sources:**

Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers, The Story of Success*. Penguin Books, 2008.

Patty Fisher, *Palo Alto Teachers Show That Grassroots Politics Can Work*, *San Jose Mercury News*, 11-7-2010.

