



# Grade Retention and Promotion: A Guide for Parents

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Grade retention and social promotion are controversial practices in education. Whether it is called nonpromotion, flunking, failing, holding back, or the “gift of time,” *grade retention* means having a child repeat his or her current grade level the following year. *Social promotion* means promoting a student to the next grade level regardless of his or her mastery of current grade level skills.

Although some schools and teachers recommend grade retention for students who are struggling with academic or behavior problems, research shows that grade retention does *not* help students improve in these areas. Nevertheless, an estimated 2 million students in the United States are retained each year. In addition to low academic performance, children are sometimes recommended for grade retention for such reasons as failure to meet grade level performance standards established by the district or state, social immaturity, disruptive behavior, lack of English language skills, late birthdates relative to peers, and small physical stature. Occasionally, students who have been frequently absent from school, or have changed schools several times, might be recommended for grade retention.

When faced with a recommendation to retain a child, parents can do more than agree or disagree. They can learn about the effects of grade retention and play an active role in decision-making about their child’s education. Parents and educators can work together to identify a child’s individual strengths and needs and plan specific strategies to promote educational success.

This handout is intended to provide parents with information they need about grade retention and more productive alternatives.

## IS GRADE RETENTION EFFECTIVE?

When considering the merits and drawbacks of grade retention, it is important not to let personal experiences and opinions overshadow the results of scientific research. The following points, drawn from a century of research, can help parents better understand how grade retention might affect their child.

Research on grade retention indicates that:

- After being retained, students may show academic improvements during the first year. These improvements can be misleading because achievement gains tend to decline within two to three years of retention. Over time, retained students may actually have lower achievement than similar nonretained students. Without the support of additional intervention strategies, most retained students do not catch up.
- For most students, grade retention has a negative impact on all areas of achievement (reading, math, and oral and written language) and also on social and emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).
- Retention may help students who have been frequently absent from school, but only if attendance improves and they are not considerably older than their classmates.
- Grade retention has been shown to be equally ineffective at earlier and later grade levels. It is not true that retention is more effective and less harmful for younger children than older children.
- Students report that grade retention is one of the most stressful life events that they could experience, surpassed only by the death of a parent or loss of eyesight.
- In their teenage years, retained students are more likely to experience poor interactions with peers, behavior problems, lower self-esteem, and a dislike of school.

- Students who were retained or experienced delayed kindergarten entry are much more likely to drop out of school. In fact, grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout, with retained students being 5 to 11 times more likely to drop out.

At this time, there are no specific indicators that predict which children could benefit from retention. Additionally, research has shown that simply promoting a low-performing student to the next grade level is not effective in improving school success.

### **WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES?**

Neither retention nor social promotion offers struggling students much hope for success. More effective alternatives include strategies such as Promotion Plus and an array of proven school-wide, classroom-wide, and home-based interventions. Parents can advocate for the use of such strategies to support their child.

#### **Promotion Plus**

*Promotion plus* is the practice of promoting students to the next grade level while also providing research-based interventions to address specific student needs.

There is no single intervention that will effectively address the specific diverse needs and backgrounds of all students struggling in school. However, systematic research-based interventions to address individual student needs will promote the academic, behavioral, and social/emotional development of students at risk for school failure.

#### **School-Wide Interventions**

The following are examples of research-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion that schools can provide to address diverse student needs:

- Early intervention and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills (rather than waiting until many difficulties arise before providing intervention)
- Early and intensive reading programs using direct instruction strategies (for example, programs to improve phonemic awareness and decoding skills)
- Structured follow-up support services throughout the primary grades (following completion of an early intervention program)
- Student support teams composed of multidisciplinary professionals and parents to assess and identify specific academic or behavioral problems, design interventions targeting these problems, and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions

- School-based mental health programs to promote social and emotional well-being
- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs to promote development of academic skills
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors to promote academic or social skills
- Comprehensive, school-wide programs to promote positive behavior, social skills, and academic skills among all students

#### **Classroom-Based Interventions**

The following are examples of research-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion that can be provided by classroom teachers:

- Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to improve academic progress
- Behavior management programs to reduce classroom behavior problems and increase academic achievement and positive behavior
- Ongoing systematic assessment strategies (for example, continuous progress monitoring) that allow educators to evaluate and modify instructional interventions over time

#### **Home-Based Interventions**

The following are examples of research-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion that parents can initiate:

- Frequent parent-teacher communication about student progress
- Parent-teacher collaboration to provide academic practice opportunities at home
- Creating home environments that help students complete their homework
- Parent supervision of homework completion
- Parent involvement in school-wide and classroom-based interventions

#### **WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO HELP?**

Parents know their children well and can provide much needed insight into their children's learning. Therefore, it is important for parents, teachers, and other educational professionals to work together. Finding out about school problems early can allow parents and teachers to collaborate and help children before they begin to feel like failures. Early intervention also improves chances for success.

Some specific ways parents can help include:

- Be empowered by the fact that you can help your child do better in school through working with your



child's teacher and being involved in his or her schooling.

- Discuss concerns as they arise with the teacher. It is important to know what assignments your child has and which type of work is difficult for him or her to understand and complete.
- Ask your child's teacher what is being done to help your child and what you can do at home to be helpful.
- Help your child with homework by asking to see his or her assignments and creating a quiet time and place to study.
- Make sure your child is rested and ready for school each day. It is important that your child gets plenty of sleep, eats a nutritious breakfast, comes to school on time, and receives appropriate medical care.

#### WHERE CAN PARENTS GET MORE HELP?

While it can be frustrating for parents when their child is having problems at school, there are many people at school and in the community who can help. Educational professionals at the school can give parents and teachers effective strategies for improving students' school success. These professionals may also suggest the child be evaluated to determine his or her specific strengths and weaknesses, how he or she may best learn, and if he or she may benefit from special education or other services at school.

Parents can contact people at their child's school who work with students experiencing academic and/or social problems, including the school psychologist, student support team, school counselor, school social worker, school nurse, special education teacher/reading specialist, and principal.

Grade retention may appear to be the simple answer to a child's learning problems, but more effective alternatives are available.

#### RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

##### Print

- Algozzine, B., Ysseldyke, J. E., & Elliot, J. (2002). *Strategies and tactics for effective instruction*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West.
- Gold, M. (2003). *Help for the struggling student: Ready-to-use strategies and lessons to build attention, memory, and organizational skills*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Harvey, V. S., & Chickie-Wolfe, L. A. (2007). *Fostering independent learning: Practical strategies to promote student success*. New York: Guilford.

#### Journal Articles Online

(<http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention>)

- Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review, 30*, 420-437.
- Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G., & Whipple, A. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*, 441-457.
- Jimerson, S. R., & Ferguson, P. (2007). A longitudinal study of grade retention: Academic and behavioral outcomes of retained students through adolescence. *School Psychology Quarterly, 22*, 314-339.
- Jimerson, S. R., & Kaufman, A. M. (2003). Reading, writing, and retention: A primer on grade retention research. *The Reading Teacher, 56*, 622-635.
- Jimerson, S. R., Pletcher, S. M. W., Graydon, K., Schnurr, B. L., Nickerson, A. B., & Kundert, D. K. (2006). Beyond grade retention and social promotion: Promoting the social and academic competence of students. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*, 85-97.

#### Websites

- The National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.nasponline.org>
- Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion: <http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention>

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