

Is my child ready for school???

This is not a checklist for school readiness but a collection of ideas about when children should start school for the best educational outcomes!

Well, where do I start? I promised a few weeks ago that I would do my best at putting together some information for those MANY families who are struggling with the decision of sending their child to school next year. The reason this is such a commonly asked question is because in NSW children must be enrolled in school (enrolled NOT commenced for those January/Feb birthdays) by age six, but they can start if they turn five by July 31 in their kindergarten year....this means that they would be four years and six months when they actually started in Kindergarten.

All parents, I believe, just want to make the right decision for their child however, I will say right now, regardless of the ideas I will present to you for consideration, every family will have a different decision making process to determine what is right for them. I am only looking at the education and long term learning of each child. I am well aware that there are Grandparents with opinions, financial pressures, friends who have different opinions than you or are making different choices to you and even siblings and work factors that will influence what is best for your family.

Apart from the information I have here for you to consider, please do NOT make a decision for your child based on what their (or your) friends are doing. The quickest change we see in school environments is new peer groups so to send your child just so they can go with their friends should be the one factor to rule out immediately. As a parent I understand that to think your child will have a friend and not be alone in the playground will make you feel better, but it will not make your child a successful school learner! New friends are made much more quickly than a new skills is mastered.

So to begin putting this together for you I collected as many articles as I could on school entry age. I did this because from my conversations it is the children in the January to July birthday ranges who have choices that also have confused parents struggling to make a decision. I am going to quote for you information that I found in the following articles:

- * "Starting a child's schooling is not as easy as 4,5,6. The best age for a child to start school depends solely on the individual." By Kim Arlington*
- * "Ban kids from starting school until they turn five to ensure they don't fall behind, experts say" By Sarah Blake*
- * "Record numbers of parents hold kids back from school in NSW" By Laura Speranza*
- * "School starting age-Latest Research on Australian Children" By Nicole Avery*
- * "Starting school: The debate continues. No, it's not about just coping; it's about having the time of your life!!!" By Kath Walker*
- * "Starting school: Is there a best age?" By Trevor Cairney*

I found these all together, one after the other in my recent Google search and I have the full articles available for anyone who is interested in reading all or any of them at further length. I have listed them like this as I am going to quote from them all and being that I am no longer doing my University referencing degree please accept that I am not going to reference them all individually but try to simply source relevant information for you from these sources!

So, all that explained....What did I find???

Well.... Kim Arlington agrees that the decision is getting very confusing for parents to know if they are doing the right thing, however, everyone agrees that the decision should be made on the needs and development of the individual child.

Educators though are looking for children to transition to school who are showing social and emotional maturity. They want children to be confident to speak to adults, to be able to make their needs known and not to go to pieces if something doesn't go quite right. In this article Kim also quotes the school principal who finds that due to the 18 month age difference, the growing use of technologies and more complex learning programs meant school is often difficult for younger pupils. It is not a best option to start them young, find they are not thriving and then request they repeat. "In general, we find that it's better for children to turn six, not five, in their first year of school. We like to see the children set up for success and to fly, rather than it be a struggle. We find the younger ones are tired, they have trouble concentrating...and they're not as ready to learn as the older children. The clever children who are young still find it harder than the older children to cope emotionally and socially at school." In conclusion, this article suggests you talk to the preschool about your individual child but parents should also consider the implications of children being young throughout their schooling and for the HSC.

In the article by Sarah Blake, we find that the international research shows that children who start school when they are older tend to do better, and that there has been no found evidence that starting school before five is of any benefit to children.

This article looks at school entry around the world and finds that interestingly the Scandinavian countries, where children must be six or seven year of age before starting school, repeatedly come out on top of the OECD'S International Program for International Student Assessment. Australia comes in ninth for reading and fifteenth for mathematics. This further supports the need for Australia to have a unified entry age and that younger than 5 is simply too young for a formalised school setting.

Laura Speranza researched why a record number of NSW parents are choosing to hold their children back from school for the year. She found that the parents concerns were that they were not socially and emotionally ready, however the researchers findings were that children aged four to five years did not have the attention span to sit for long periods of time listening to a teacher and that academically children who began school later were benefited by this time to grow and mature. Macquarie University supported that the social and emotional maturity was the best guide but continued to say "It's about looking at how the child separates from their parents, whether the child is comfortable being in a different environment, can make friends with other children and whether they are able to ask adults for help." The primary Principals association of NSW found that "Younger children often struggled with the social demands of kindergarten life....That important socialisation process that happens in kindergarten is where the variation occurs between a child who just gets over the mark, and a child who is well and truly over five and has been held back a year." They did also recognise that there are exceptions to this general rule and not every child who is young will not cope, and they may be the child who has developed emotional maturity at a younger chronological age or have a higher intellect.

This article by Laura also speaks to some parents who are trying to make the same decision you are. One mother stated "He can write his name and recite his ABC'S but he still very much wants to be close to me. I know his teachers need him to sit at a desk and do his work. There's no way

he can do that at this stage. I don't want to set him up to fail. That extra year will make a difference and then he'll be itching to go." These are great things to consider, it's not simply about what they can show in recited achievements at this point, it's about how a child can apply the concentration and thinking to apply any knowledge to new areas and to be excited about having new challenges to work on. This takes a good amount of self confidence and self belief.

The article on "School starting age-Latest research on Australian children", again finds why in Australia it is such a difficult issue with so many contradictions between each state and territory. However, after a lengthy explanation of the research conducted the findings were that one year after school entry " *Girls do better overall, but entry age matters more for boys.

* Entry age affects cognitive but not social-emotional outcomes.

* Males benefit more from going to school older than females on verbal outcomes.

The parents who commented on this article also wrote "We had other issues apart from age when it came to making this decision. While our children probably would have done OK all be it with a few struggles, the opportunity to allow them an extra year to grow and more importantly to play and enjoy their childhood before becoming part of a more constricting system of schooling seemed such a positive with very few negatives for us....What I really want is for them to love school, to enjoy learning and being part of the community and to be happy and that is what we based our decision on for our children." Another parents comment was "I can't see any down fall in having her home with me another year to play and learn to become more confident in herself before I entrust her care to a school system." They are in school for a long time, if they are not succeeding and repeating is an option that's 14 years! Is there really a rush to get that started in the hope that it will be OK?

I found an article by Kath Walker, who is so animated as she writes that you can feel her passion and love of children. Kath writes "Starting school should not be like hoping onto a conveyor belt as soon as you can hop, and getting off as early as you can. Starting school, part of being educated, is a journey that needs special preparation, care, and a wonderful time where one can make the most of the opportunities.....We often say that life and education is not a conveyor belt and it is not about who gets on first and who gets off first. It is certainly about avoiding anyone falling off along the way or having to run to keep up. We do however, believe strongly that when and if there is a question mark over as child's readiness for school, that parents are provided with the option of providing their child with another high quality early childhood year before commencing school." Kath is completely focused in her writing on seeing children experience success and to have the opportunity to develop that life long love of learning we all want for them.

Kath recognises that someone will always be the oldest and someone will always be the youngest. She is about recognising that all children are given time to be a little older "...providing them with more time to mature, enjoy their childhood and ensuring they have the benefits of a play based early childhood program in the years before they start school." She concludes her writing with "Life and education is not a race to be won, but a journey of discovery, mastery, exploration and fulfilment. Let's ensure it starts with a strong foundation and an unhurried and more patient world that allows us to wait, to think and to prepare with time."

In her other article, Kath continues her writings with "Children are going to be in school for at least 13 years. Being at school if you don't like it, or if it's a constant struggle, is not conducive to reaching your potential. Educators are focusing more on giving children the best start possible to

ensure they can make the most of their learning opportunities while feeling positive about themselves and their learning.”

“Many believe that school readiness is about being able to read, write or count. In fact these skills develop and are taught at school. They are not a priority for school readiness. To enter school ready to thrive, flourish and enjoy the challenges-rather than mealy just cope- we are taking the issue of school readiness more seriously and carefully. Readiness is mostly about social and emotional maturity-aspects of development that we cannot fast track. We cannot make a child who lacks the necessary maturity become mature. Emotional and social maturity includes an ability to deal with separation, to show initiative, to demonstrate interest and to play alongside others. It also involves that ability to concentrate, to deal with frustration, to follow instructions, to express needs, to demonstrate self-help skills and to participate in small groups.”

“There is no long term research that shows disadvantages in starting a little older. Parents are encouraged to consider carefully the decision of when to start school. Sometimes parents ask me if starting later has become a trendy thing. I say it is a trend to consider giving children an additional year of maturity and development but whether or not it is trendy is in the mind of each parent. The trend of more carefully considering if a child is mature enough to start school is a sensible one-and a significant shift from the days when it was just assumed that all children will be ready at the same time. We know so much more now about individual needs. Educators strive to help parents make a more informed and considered decision.”

I know that as I read back over this, it appears that I am strongly suggesting that all children be held back....I am not! I recognise that each family will have a different decision to make. I am simply providing the information available and there is not information to be found that supports sending children young. At best there are children who can cope and show no significant difference to those who are older, at worst...well we create an environment that is challenging and we put up a barrier to the enjoyment of education and being at school that is held with them for a long time.

I am happy to talk to anyone about my own experiences. I have a child who was born in March, for this reason I have been researching this ongoing since before my child started school and just this year she started high school. The research over that time has simply expanded 10 fold towards starting children later. I can say that from my observations with my daughter and her peers, in Kindergarten you can tell the child who is young very easily. It does disappear somewhat in early primary and it is very obvious again in year 5 and 6 and again it is the emotional maturity not the academics. I personally was also very focused on the other end of her schooling, not just would she be OK in kindergarten but what about in year 12? I have seen 1 of her peers who has repeated and her mother asked me “Why didn’t you tell me”! It was not my place, and it probably would not have made a difference for her back then. But as an educator of this service, I do want to give you all the information I can. I am not going to make the decision for you, and neither will the school. It is ultimately your decision as a parent to make, we are here to support you in any way and if you are confused...Good! It means that at the very least you are thinking about it and that’s more than any parent did 20 years ago so well done.