

School Entrance Age, Social Acceptance, and Self-Perceptions in Kindergarten and 1st Grade

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Concerns about the effect of school entrance age have generally focused on academic achievement. The effect of school entrance age on the social acceptance and self-perceptions of kindergarten and 1st-grade students was examined in two studies. In Study 1, the social acceptance and competence of 476 children was assessed in kindergarten and first grade through peer nominations and ratings, teacher ratings, and report card grades. In Study 2, a subgroup of 116 students was interviewed in kindergarten and first grade to assess their perceptions of their school adjustment, loneliness at school, cognitive and physical competence, and peer and maternal acceptance. Few differences were found related to school entrance age. Teachers' ratings and peer nominations generally described initial social problems for the youngest children which were overcome by first grade. There were no differences in self-reported school adjustment, loneliness, perceptions of competence, or acceptance related to school entry age.

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Parents, educators, and policy makers have concerns about how old children should be when they start school. Recently, age at school entry in the United States has varied due to a combination of factors including state budgetary considerations and educators' concerns about the maturity required for increasingly demanding academic curriculum in the early grades. In addition, many middle-class parents have expressed their concerns about the maturity needed for school success by holding their children out of kindergarten until they are 6 years old (Holloman, 1990; Meisels, 1992).

Psychologists and educators who advocate the maturational views of Gesell (Gesell, Ilg, & Ames, 1974) have issued caveats concerning the fate of "overplaced" children who begin school before they are developmentally ready. The consequences described for overplaced children include lower academic achievement; greater likelihood of grade retention and referrals for special educational services; emotional and physical immaturity; lack of peer acceptance; poor school adjustment; and even a higher rate of suicide by adolescence or young adulthood (Hammond, 1985; Uphoff & Gilmore, 1985; Weinstein, 1968–1969).

Although concerns over the "right" age to start school have revolved around identification of an absolute age that is appropriate for kindergarten, research on the effects of school entry age have examined the impact of relative age, comparing the achievement of children who are among the youngest in the class with that of children who are among the oldest. Recent methodology (Morrison, 1992) comparing children on either side of a District's cutoff date, whose chronological ages are almost the same but whose school experiences vary, has allowed consideration of the impact of absolute age. The results of this research suggest that children who have been in school 1 year longer show advanced cognitive skills compared to children of the same age who have just begun school. This implies that absolute age does not serve as a developmental limit for these cognitive skills.

It is likely that research on the issue of absolute age will not resolve all the concerns expressed about school entry age; concern will continue to be directed to the youngest children who met the cutoff date. Relative age (i.e., standing within the age distribution of the group), may still be considered as an explanation for differences observed in the behavior, achievement, and special needs of elementary school children. Teachers may respond positively to the relative maturity of the oldest children in the group, or negatively to the relative immaturity of the youngest children. Because of differences between school district cutoff dates, the younger, less successful group in one study might well overlap the age range of the older, more successful group in another study. This perspective suggests that relative age, rather than absolute age, may be an important determination of school adjustment and achievement.

Most of the research on the relationship between age at school entry and success in school has focused on relative age and academic performance. In

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