

Kindergarten: Ready, set, go — or not

BY JILL JENKINS
Special to the Record-Eagle

There's a lot to consider when sending a child to kindergarten. From updating immunization cards to buying the proper size backpacks, parents do their best to make sure their children's school experience begins well.

But parents whose children have late summer or fall birthdays have a bigger issue to tackle. Though the state of Michigan requires public schools to accept all children into kindergarten who turn 5 by Dec. 1 of that year, that doesn't mean they're necessarily ready to handle it.

Diane Charron, who has taught in Traverse City since 1979, said the kindergarten of today is more demanding than it once was.

"It can be pretty rigorous for some of the children, particularly the younger children," she said.

Because of curriculum

changes in kindergarten, Traverse City Area Public Schools (TCAPS) brought back its young fives program three years ago. This program is targeted at those who are age-appropriate for kindergarten, but whose parents feel they could benefit from having another year to mature.

TCAPS has young fives programs at two schools: Oak Park and Long Lake. Both sites offer a free five-day, half-day program. Parents can choose either the afternoon or morning session but must provide transportation.

Charron, who taught the young fives program at Oak Park for the past three years and who will teach third grade there next year, said many similarities exist between the young fives program and kindergarten. But the major difference is the most important: pace. Parents can also look to area preschools for a simi-

lar pre-kindergarten experience.

"The kindergartners have certain curriculum that they have to cover within a certain time," she said. "Many of our activities are similar to what kindergartners do, but you can scale them back and not have to cover as much as what you do in kindergarten."

But choosing where to send a young five is secondary to deciding if they're ready for kindergarten in the first place.

For Carol Roehrich, a teacher at East Junior High in Traverse City, the answer can be found in looking not at a child's chronological age but rather at developmental age. Roehrich argued in her master's thesis that placing children in school according to their developmental age is a more reliable predictor of school success than placing them by their chronological age.

When assessing a child's developmental age, the most important factors are social and emotional maturity instead of intellectual ability.

"Parents need to look at their kids on an individual basis. There are things that will be helpful to you, starting with when the child's birthday is," she said. "Most of the time it isn't an academic thing. It's a social thing, an attention-span thing."

Kathy Colbert agrees. Formerly a first grade teacher in the Detroit area, she now directs Alphabet Soup Preschool and Child Care in Traverse City.

"I had a couple of kids who were gifted, but this one child couldn't put his coat on," she recalls of teaching third-graders. "Developmentally, they're just not there."

In fact, Roehrich feels bright young fives may often be sent to school too soon because people assume that since they are strong intellectually, they're ready.

"The brighter kids have the most to gain by waiting and the most to lose by being sent early," she said. "The brighter the kid, the more aware he or she is that something is amiss, but they can't figure out why."

Both Roehrich and Colbert feel that children sent too early will most likely, at some time in their school career, have difficul-



Meegan M. Reid

Patti Goudey and son Trevor at home. Trevor, 6, begins kindergarten this fall.

ties keeping up with the routine of school.

"You see kids, in middle to late elementary school, who you know have more potential than they're showing, but they're not applying themselves," said Roehrich. "They're too busy trying to keep it together socially and emotionally."

While more parents are becoming aware of the disadvantages of sending young fives early, Colbert feels children should understand that it's not because of anything they've done wrong.

"They need to know that it's okay," she said. "Some of the brightest kids I know were late bloomers because they had time to mature."

And it's that extra time that is so crucial. Roehrich is fond of telling parents they can't make their kids

be ready for kindergarten any more than they can make their teeth come in faster.

"Growth is orderly and structured," she said. "Everybody has their own rhythm. You can't 'grow up' your kid."

However, some young fives are ready for school and will function very well. And waiting too long can be just as harmful as sending too early.

"It's not a blanket rule. There are exceptions," said Roehrich. "Kids who are under-placed are as at risk as kids who are over-placed developmentally. You just need to find that happy medium where they're comfortable socially and emotionally; not too young or too old."

Jill Jenkins is a local freelance writer.



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When is the right time for kindergarten?

So how do parents know when the time is right for kindergarten? Teacher Diane Charron offered some signs to look for, including:

- How do they separate themselves from their families emotionally?

- How do they interact with friends?

- Do they enjoy being read to?

- Can they listen for 10 minutes to a story or be involved in an activity for 10-15 minutes?

For teacher Carol Roehrich, one way to know is through a Gesell Test — a tool that assesses a child's kindergarten readiness. Another, though, is relying on their "gut."

Following their intuition is just what Jennifer Givens and Patti Goudey did. Givens's son, 7-year-old Cam, will be entering second grade next year. Givens recognized that Cam, who has a September birthday, wasn't quite ready for kindergarten and decided to keep him in preschool an extra year.

"I didn't struggle a lot with the decision because he already had problems with separation anxiety," she said. "He was ready for it academically but emotionally he wasn't mature enough."

Givens admits that some people tried to assure her that he would be fine starting early, but she and husband Chris didn't allow them to sway the decision.

"I remember one or two people who said 'Oh, I know kids who started and they were fine,'" she said. "But mostly people said we were making the right choice — especially friends who are teachers."

Goudey agreed that the decision to wait with her son Trevor, who has an August birthday, wasn't difficult.

"I guess because he's my fourth child, I just knew that is where I needed to go with it," she said. "Maybe if it was my first child I would have felt more pressure."

Goudey sent Trevor to the young fives program last year at Traverse City Cooperative Preschool because of the strong element of parental involvement.

She also said she got some good advice from the school's teacher, Nancy Render, about how to avoid potential problems with her son wondering why he wasn't going to kindergarten even though he was 5.

"I never put an age or a date on it," said Goudey. "I always said 'When it's your turn you'll get to go.'"

Parents who are struggling with the decision might just take the advice of preschool director Colbert: "Will it matter 20 years from now? Who's going to care whether you started school at 5 or 6? It's the end result that matters."

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