

Should Your Child Be Held Back a Grade? Know Your Rights

Teachers may talk euphemistically of students being “held back,” but for parents and kids, it takes more than words to soften the blow of grade retention. The idea that their child may not advance into the next grade can be overwhelming for parents. So what do you do when your child is faced with the possibility of repeating a year?



First, identify the reasons. Circumstances sometimes dictate that a student *should* repeat a grade: frequent relocation, excessive absences or long-term illness, for example, may have kept your kindergartener out of the instructional loop for a year. In cases like these, retention might be a reasonable solution—after all, your child probably didn’t get sufficient content instruction the first time around. Young children might also find it easier to adapt when the repeated grade comes early in their schooling, considering that the difference between them and their peers will be most negligible at this stage.

However, if an older child is held back because he “just isn’t getting” the material, or because she missed a high-stakes benchmark, it may be time to consider your options and rights.

Retention: Red Flags and Alternatives

Grade retention is hardly a universal practice—in fact, countries like Japan and Korea, known for their academic rigor, do not hold back students. But it is a practice with a long history in the United States, and one that has been steadily gaining ground since the 1980s.

That’s despite research questioning its value. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) calls retention ineffective, citing “no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment” and asserting that it is too liberally misapplied as an intervention amongst poor urban minorities and students with behavior or maturity problems.

And, the NASP reports that repeating a grade is associated with behavioral problems, decreased achievement and even an increased drop-out rate. If your child *truly* needs retention, the NASP says, it should be coupled with specific remediation instead of just “doing it over.”

If your instinct tells you that the disadvantages will outweigh the benefits when it comes to holding your child back, the NASP offers several alternatives to retention that you may want to discuss with your child’s teacher or school counselor:

- increased parent-teacher communication
- more active behavior management in the classroom
- extended programs (summer or after school) designed to bring students to grade level
- mentoring and tutoring programs

Other interventions worth consideration are more frequent, informal benchmark screening and assessment and tiered teaching, which matches instruction to students’ individual needs.

Your Rights as a Parent

If you are uncomfortable with your school’s decision to hold back your child, do you have the right to appeal that decision? Possibly—guidelines vary widely from state to state and even district to district. Many districts have an appeal process in place. Do your best to educate yourself on local policies: grounds for retention, intervention and notification processes, the possibility of alternative assessment criteria (particularly if high-stakes testing is involved), and appeals procedures. Gathering evidence in the form of report cards, tests, quizzes and homework assignment, and conference notes is vital—remember that you are better off building a logical case to support your son or daughter, not an emotional one.

If a learning disability is suspected, you may want to talk to your child’s doctor or a qualified psychologist. For children with diagnosed disabilities, parental rights under IDEA, or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, may be a little different. This law mandates special education and services. If your child already has an IEP (individualized education program) or a 504 plan, which prohibits discrimination against children with disabilities, it may be worth looking into whether or not your district is offering appropriate services under those programs. Retention should be an option only when all other avenues have been exhausted—and federal law dictates that for a child with disabilities, there should be a variety of avenues.

How to Talk to Your Child When Retention is Inevitable

Grade retention is far from being simply an academic issue. Especially for your older child, it’s a social and emotional issue that needs careful addressing. Repeating a grade is often stigmatizing for children, many of whom tend to brand themselves as failures; in fact, studies show being held back can be the stress equivalent of losing a parent. How parents frame unavoidable retention can make all the difference in a child’s acceptance of it:

DO	DON'T
Help your child identify allies: counselors, teachers, peers and mentors who will help him make the transition	Place blame on a teacher or administrator
Portray retention as an opportunity for achievement and increased learning	Use retention as an ultimatum or threat for poor performance and/or behavior
Cast your child (who will probably be older than her classmates) as a potential leader in the classroom	Cast your child as a victim in the classroom

The decision to hold your child back a year is a difficult one—but trust your gut. You know your child better than anyone, and he or she depends upon you as an advocate and a champion. Remember that retention is only one of many options in promoting your child’s future academic and social success.

