

## THE TROUBLE WITH

# BOYS

BY STEFANIE WEISS

EDUCATORS INCREASINGLY SUGGEST THAT PARENTS DELAY THE ENTRY OF BOYS INTO KINDERGARTEN. BUT IS TIMING REALLY EVERYTHING? ILLUSTRATION BY LEIGH WELLS

KATE KIGGINS AGONIZED OVER WHEN TO SEND her son Eli to kindergarten. A November baby, Eli was tall, bright and athletic and on all those fronts fit in neatly with his peer group. But he was also, Kiggins says, “very sensitive.” Because Maryland’s cutoff for public school kindergarten is December 31—meaning any child who has turned 5 by that date can go—Eli was eligible, but would be only 4 for the first few months of the school year. That would make him one of the youngest kids in his class. Would that be too difficult? If he waited another year to start, making him one of the oldest, would he be bored?

Had Eli been Ellen, Kiggins might not have been so concerned. Girls, she discovered in doing research to figure out what was right for her son, are typically six months more mature than boys at age 5. “I worried about Eli in a classroom with kids who were a full year older,” Kiggins says, “and girls who could be developmentally a year and a half ahead.” Like a growing number of boys nationwide, Eli spent another year in nursery school.

Known as “academic redshirting” and even “the gray-ing of kindergarten,” the decision to delay the start of a

child’s formal schooling for a year has grown steadily in popularity. A 1995 federal government survey found that 11 percent of boys and 6 percent of girls in first and second grade started kindergarten later than the earliest age their districts permitted.

In addition to being boys, those most likely to wait the extra year tend to be white, affluent, and have birthdays between July and December. The additional year in nursery school, the theory goes, gives boys extra time to mature that increases their likelihood of school success down the road. There’s just one problem: No one really knows if that theory is true.

In fact, there’s no consensus among school professionals, academic researchers and even pediatricians about the ideal age to start kindergarten. In Indiana, for instance, children must be 5 on or before July 1—the earliest cutoff date in the country. In Virginia, the cutoff date is September 30. Very few jurisdictions enroll kindergarteners who turn 5 after December 1, but the District of Columbia, like Maryland, is among them, with a December 31 cutoff.

Michael Gordon, a member of the Maryland House of

Delegates from Rockville, thinks that's too late. For the past two years, Gordon has introduced legislation that would require all Maryland children to be at least 5 years old on the first day of kindergarten. The bill has yet to make it out of committee, but Gordon says he plans to introduce it a third time. "Every year we're screwing up more kids" by starting them too early, he says.

Mary Gill, chief academic officer for the D.C. public school system and a former principal at Murch Elementary in Northwest, isn't convinced. "I see it as a fad," she says. It's wrong for parents to believe that if their child "stays another year in pre-K or kindergarten, it's going to make them smarter than everyone else in class, spark their genius and guarantee school success." Instead, she says, schools and parents should look at each child's academic, social and emotional development, "regardless of any cutoff date," and then decide whether to start school or wait a year.

At some private schools in the area, older starters are expressly preferred. Wes Gibson, in charge of admissions at Georgetown Day School, says the vast majority of the school's kindergarteners are 5½ in September, with birthdays sometime before April. Would the school admit someone younger than that? It would be "unusual" if the child were a girl, he says, but "very unlikely" if a boy. "We encourage applicants with boys to give it a little more time because it usually works out better in the end."

Irene Shere, a former preschool educator who counsels parents and teachers in the Washington area, also makes a distinction between boys and girls: "Every girl should be a solid 5 and every boy should be a solid 5½ when they start school in September."

Why the distinction? The answer can be found in a blend of nature, nurture and the culture of schools, educators say.

Biologically, scientists and educators agree, girls develop language skills and small motor skills—required to hold a pencil, for instance—earlier than boys. "At age 5, boys are, on average, six to nine months behind girls in reading and writing," says William Pollack, a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School and author of the book *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood*.

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Generally speaking, girls often are harder physically than boys, who appear to be more susceptible to ear infections, which can delay language development, and to asthma, according to studies. More boys than girls are diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, learning disabilities and speech impediments. "Boys are also more rambunctious," Pollack says. "They tend to roam in larger areas, and they like to learn through movement, action and tactile activity."

Overall, Pollack finds, "boys have a different style, rate, rhythm and tempo of learning and early behavior and so-called maturity" until sometime in middle school, when things tend to even out. Combine that with the national trends toward more reading and writing in kindergarten, more seat time preparing for tests, and less physical education—and you can end up with a potential mismatch between boys and school.

"If it's sit-still, paper-pencil, workbook ad infinitum, boys are much more likely to have troubles," says James Uphoff, an education professor at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and the author of *Summer Children: Ready or Not for School*. "And the younger boys are most at risk."

Still, the research is far from definitive. While some studies show that older kindergarteners do better than those who enter kindergarten at the prescribed age, other studies show the younger ones tend to catch up within a few years. And a national survey of more than 7,000 kids published in 1997 showed that for young boys, "neither delayed kindergarten entry nor kindergarten retention were found to have significant relationships with first- and second-grade school performance or adjustment."

"The knowledge base that we have doesn't say definitively that it's an advantage to hold boys back in school," says

Sandra Crosser, an education professor at Ohio Northern University. Her research shows a "really slight advantage in some [academic] areas for older boys by the time they are in fifth grade," but "there are so many variables, you can't sort it out. Is it worth a year of lost wages [for the child who will enter the workforce a year later]? A wasted year?"

Public school kindergarten teachers are as divided on the subject as researchers. According to a 1993 report published by the National Center for Education Statistics, a survey of more than 1,300 public school kindergarten teachers found that about half strongly agreed that "children with readiness problems should enter school as soon as they are eligible so that they can be exposed to the things they need," while about half agreed with the opposite advice: "If a child appears to be unready for kindergarten, I would suggest he or she wait a year before enrolling."

What should a parent do as his or her child approaches kindergarten age? On this question there's no disagreement—assess your child's developmental, not chronological, age and then check out the school and see what your child will be expected to do. And once your child is in school, be willing to watch and make changes if necessary.

Robin Gerber followed the Maryland cutoff guidelines when she started her son, Sam, in a Montgomery County first grade shortly after he turned 6. But soon, it was clear "he was stressed out and felt like he couldn't keep up. It was obvious he was anxious. He wasn't smiling. There was no happiness." After meeting with school officials she decided to take Sam out of first grade and put him back in kindergarten, which she felt was more academic than the kindergarten he had attended elsewhere the year before.

It quickly made a difference and Gerber is convinced that the decision has contributed to his happiness in school since. Sam is in sixth grade now and "he's been consistently happy when he comes home from school. In retrospect, giving Sam that extra year was probably the best thing I'll ever do for him."

Kate Kiggins feels the same way. Her son Eli is now in seventh grade, getting straight A's, and playing basketball and cello. As a result, she says, "I won't agonize with my younger son." Gideon, who turned 5 this past September, "won't be starting kindergarten until he's 6." □