

# Haste Makes Waste

*Children should not start grade 1 until they're developmentally ready.*

By Rose C. Jenkins

Think back to the days of your grandparents, back to how they used to potty-train their children. Often, it was like a competition and a feather in the cap for the moms who accomplished this feat first — albeit rather grueling for the child in question.

These days, we are better informed. We encourage, true, but we also allow time for the child's nervous system to develop control over his body functions. We acknowledge that children differ. They don't all walk and talk at the same age — and we calmly accept the variation.

Yet at the age of five, something changes. In lockstep, we trot our tots off to the local school and expect them all to proceed to grade 1 the following year. It is then that some of our children, the very ones who had thrilled us as they learned the many complicated tasks of daily living, appear to have learning problems. Why?

Decades ago, the research of Dr. Arnold Gesell, noted child specialist, stressed that schoolchildren continue to develop according to their own time clocks, as they did in the preschool years. By the chronological age of five, the normal child may differ developmentally from his peers by one to two years.

He may just reach the physical, emotional, and social maturity expected of a five-year-old, a four-year-old, or even a three-year-old. Up to 40% of normal youngsters (more boys than girls in a ratio of 4:1, especially males with summer birthdays) are travelling young along the developmental scale and cannot cope with the five-year-old curriculum.

These children may have difficulty with peers, their classmates having little patience with the class 'babies' who seem to be inattentive, disruptive, uninterested in class work, even stupid.

Trouble has started for these youngsters, and it will be compounded

when they are socially promoted to the next grade, regardless of achievement level.

When the inevitable academic problems occur, most schools offer remediation. For developmentally-young children, however, this assistance amounts to a Band-Aid treatment. Several hours a week of remedial work cannot be expected to compensate for immaturity, overplacement, and social isolation.

Promoted yearly to higher grades, these students may say that they are not as smart as the other kids, and their teachers may say that they would do better if they'd just try harder. They may be called lazy or learning-disabled.

Tim (not his real name) was a grade 7 boy who was unable to cope with his schoolwork and appeared very strained. When his teacher tried to discuss this with him, he would joke, laugh, and avoid the issue.

I was able to confirm that his IQ was above average, but he tested near the beginning of grade five on academics. His academic history reported the signs of young readiness all the way along: short attention span, speaking out in class, inattention, difficulty reading, messy work, slow, could do better.

His grade 2 teacher had recommended that he not be promoted to grade 3; however, his mother would not allow this.

As his counsellor, I asked Tim what he thought was the problem. At first, he assumed a casual manner and joked. Eventually, as the conversation continued, he put his head down on the desk and cried. Then he said sadly: "I just can't do the work."

Despite extensive remediation and a second year in grade 7, Tim is unlikely to ever realize his potential. At best, he may become a mediocre high school graduate.

As a developmental examiner who was dismayed by the carnage, I carried out a pilot project in one of my elementary schools. With the school's cooperation, I administered the Gesell Developmental Readiness Test to all incoming five-year-olds.

Children assessed at four years and younger were assigned to a kindergarten designed for their developmental level, proceeding to the regular five-year-old primary class the following year, and reaching grade 1 at the chronological age of seven.

The children who were developmentally ready were assigned to regular primary, while those who tested as borderline joined an intermediate class where they were paced cautiously, observed, and given the extra pre-grade 1 year if necessary.

Essential to this entire process was the cooperation of the parents and relatives who were instructed to treat the whole affair casually. The children naturally followed suit.

What were the results? The parents reported contented children. The teachers saw an improved teaching-learning situation. Referrals for children experiencing young developmental problems ceased. The reading specialist requested reassignment as she didn't have enough to do.

The key to children's academic success, as well as their emotional and social well-being, is a proper school start and subsequent pacing. If they are to delight in schoolwork, become independent learners, and enjoy interaction with other students, kids must not be rushed into and along the academic stream in defiance of readiness.

In academics, as in other areas, haste makes waste.

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