

BACK TO SCHOOL

ADHD

Should late-birthday kids sit out a year?



Elisabeth Napolano has decided to leave her son Justin Lemieux, age 3 1/2, out of junior kindergarten. Fernando Morales/The Globe and Mail

With studies showing the highest ADHD diagnosis rates for the youngest pupils in a class, many parents of children born later in the year are faced with a tough decision

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Justin Lemieux will be sitting out junior kindergarten this fall. And maybe senior kindergarten next year.

Why? His December birthday would make him the youngest kid in the half-day class, says his mom, Elisabeth Napolano, and he's already behind older kids born the same year.

"My son is not at the same maturity level as our neighbours' kids who are born in January," says the Mississauga mother. "He's a foot shorter. Also emotionally, he doesn't have the same attention span."

There's new evidence out this week that suggests she's making the right decision.

Two new studies in the United States, which combed through large sets of health and education data, show that children born just before kindergarten age cut-off dates – which range from September to December – were statistically much more likely to be diagnosed with attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder than their older class peers.

Researcher Melinda Morrill found it striking that children with birthdays just two days apart could have vastly different risks for ADHD. For example, if the cut-off was Oct. 31, a child who started school at age 4 and turned 5 on Oct. 30 was 25 per cent more likely to be diagnosed or receiving treatment for ADHD than one who turned 5 on Nov. 1 – and had to wait till the following September to start kindergarten.

"Grouping children in 12-month age groups is almost arbitrary the way it's set up," says Dr. Morrill, an economist at North Carolina State University. "In kindergarten, a one-year age difference is 20 per cent of a child's life."

And it may lead to teachers unnecessarily flagging children with behavioural issues.

Ms. Napolano had already heard about the long-term challenges that younger children can face, from academic setbacks to behavioural issues. "Those new studies confirm my fears," she says. "I can see how kids can get diagnosed with ADHD when it really is just a maturity issue."

In some school districts and at private schools, a child can attend kindergarten a year after they're eligible. But in her area, Ms. Napolano will have no choice but to enroll Justin in Grade 1 when he's legally bound to be in school at age 5. He'll still be the youngest in a class of six-year-olds and she worries about his risk of failing a grade later on and the stigma that comes with it.

"If you push them through the system and they fail, it becomes that much harder," she says, adding that she's keeping Justin in his mixed-age Montessori class.

As a school director, Michelle Gradish of Toronto's private Gradale Academy fields these kinds of queries regularly. "I think the child should stay in the age group that they are supposed to be in," she says. "Because the child will change drastically developmentally between the ages of 3 1/2 to 6. It will be a completely different child. I always say wait it out."

She argues that her school helps mitigate developmental differences by tailoring small classes to each child's needs. "I think a lot of the ADHD symptoms have to do with children not feeling that they fit in," she says. "So the way they show that is through behaviours. Even a child who is really bright can show a lot of behaviours if they're not being challenged the right way."

And even Dr. Morrill cautions against the trend toward barely-kindergarten-age children "red-shirting" (or sitting out) a year. "It would be terrible to see children who are developmentally mature and eager to go a whole year behind in school, not being stimulated cognitively."

Instead, she and other experts hope that education systems can become more flexible, with parents and teachers informed about what developmental differences look like.

"To me the issue is always how well educators adapt to the individual difference of kids," says Charles Pascal, a professor of human development and applied psychology at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. "Age is just a starting point. How educators go beyond age and find out more about who each child really is, is the real deal-maker in the development of children."

Dr. Pascal developed Ontario's pilot all-day kindergarten program for 4- and 5-year-olds, which is rolling out in a number of boards this September. He says having children in class earlier and for longer periods could be crucial because many of the behaviours common to ADHD are early indicators of whether a child flourishes in the long run.

Until parents feel confident that their child's individual needs will be met, though, they will likely fret about the school-age issue. Ottawa mother Cheryl Monette says she'll continue to dole out advice based on her experience with a November-born child. Her daughter seemed so social, eager, and bright that Ms. Monette and her husband decided to squeak her into a Montreal JK where the cut-off was October.

Reality hit during the first parent-teacher meeting, in which the teacher showed Ms. Monette their daughter's artwork next to that of the older children. Her daughter's poor scissor-skills meant her cut-and-paste work was full of jagged edges and odd shapes, unlike the others. The teacher said it was distressing for the child.

"The teacher looked at me, and my face probably looked sad, and she said 'Your daughter will get there. It's just her age.' "

The next year, the family switched schools and Ms. Monette's daughter repeated JK. "It was night and day. She was at the top of the class," she says.

Now 13, she has been level with her peers ever since. Ms. Monette shudders to think what might have happened if she hadn't been held back. Today, if she has a problem in school, she has the confidence to keep trying, says Ms. Monette.

"If she didn't repeat ... I think she would have convinced herself that she wasn't smart."