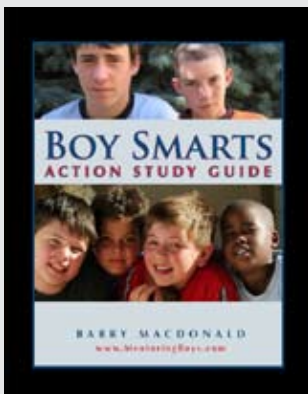
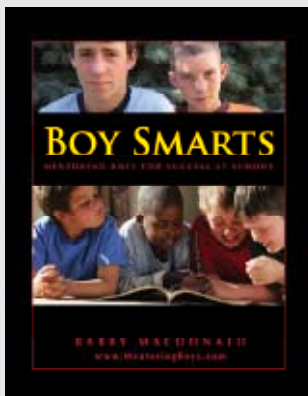


Should we delay *Kindergarten* entry for boys?



Dear Barry,

SHOULD boys start Kindergarten later than girls? My son's birthday is in December and I am struggling over whether to start him this upcoming September or delay his entry another year to when he is 6 years old. He is bright, energetic, and mildly interested in reading, but when I watch him play with other kids his age, he seems much more immature. I worry that if he is not ready for Kindergarten that he will struggle needlessly.

WHEN I check with my friends, I get mixed reviews. My co-worker started her son at age 5 and he is doing fine. He didn't know how to read at first, but slowly warmed up to the idea in his own time. My next door neighbour, who had the opposite experience with her November birthday son, is urging me to hold my son back. She believes that Kindergarten is now what 1st Grade used to be and that her son's active imagination got stuck behind a desk.

I'D appreciate your insight.

Colette, parent from metro Vancouver

Dear Colette,

AT this time of year some parents are starting to worry about whether or not to delay Kindergarten for active sons who have so far shown little interest in sitting still and reading. The differing viewpoints expressed by your friends are echoed in parenting blogs, research, and also in the media. The proclamation in the **National Post** in March, 2001 that “**Boys should start kindergarten a year later than girls to compensate for their slower development rate,**” caused many parents to take a second look at their son’s school-readiness. It’s not surprising that parents who read American statistics that 17% of boys are held back at some point in their school career, as compared to only 10% of girls, are concerned that their sons who like to move around and make noise may not be prepared to sit down and focus on classroom learning tasks. When they have sons whose birthday is in the autumn or early winter, parents may worry that most of their son’s classmates will be older and more developed. Above all, parents worry that a negative Kindergarten experience will turn their son off schooling from the get-go. Naturally, parents want to make the best decision, one that will start their boys on the road to achievement, success, and lifelong learning.

The Nature/Nurture Debate:

Are the gender differences we often notice innate or learned?

THERE are, of course, boys who prefer to colour quietly while their sisters play with action hero toys. It is more common, however, for gender differences in styles of play and socializing to show up early in life. Some conscientious parents who ban toy guns, and encourage their sons to play cooperative games of *House*, find that the boys are constructing play guns from Lego blocks or sticks in the yard. Parents who avoid buying their daughters Barbies and pink, frilly clothes may still find their daughters gravitating toward girly-girl toys. Many parents also notice that their 5 year old girls have more impulse control, more verbal fluency, and greater ability to sit still than boys at a similar age, while boys are often more rough and tumble and more aware of spatial relationships. Some researchers assert that gender differences are related to brain differences between boys and girls, while others argue that these gender differences are learned.



Some researchers assert that gender differences are related to brain differences between boys and girls, while others argue that these gender differences are learned.

ARE these differences innate, or are they learned from subtle and not-so-subtle social and environmental cues?

WHILE there is no definitive answer here, some evidence suggests that differing developmental tendencies between boys and girls appear early on and appear to be inborn:

- baby boys are more likely to be irritable than baby girls
- infant girls tend to hold eye contact for a longer period of time
- baby boys are less able to distinguish another baby's cry from background noise
- the typical boy develops clear speech by age 4.5 while girls are more likely to articulate clearly at age 3

WE can't ignore the possibility that these tendencies could make parents less likely to keep interacting with a fussy or distracted son, or to spend less time reading to him because he appears to be less attentive and responsive. The interface between biology and culture may lead to different developmental pathways for boys and girls.

AS you consider the following scenario, ask yourself whether you are likely to respond differently to your son and daughter:

ON a Friday evening after dinner, you are tired, but recharging your batteries as you chat with neighbours in your kitchen. Imagine that your pre-school daughter is sitting at the kitchen table nearby playing quietly while taking in your adult conversation. If your pre-school son is also at the kitchen table, but is making loud clanking noises with Tonka trucks, how do you respond to him? If you realize that he is in another room quietly playing with his Lego, do you invite him into the room and continue to play in this language-rich social gathering? Or is it just easier to leave him playing alone in the other room—losing out on opportunities to absorb language and social skills by osmosis?

WE need to consider how our attitudes toward boys and girls may subtly influence our expectations and their learning experiences at home and at school.

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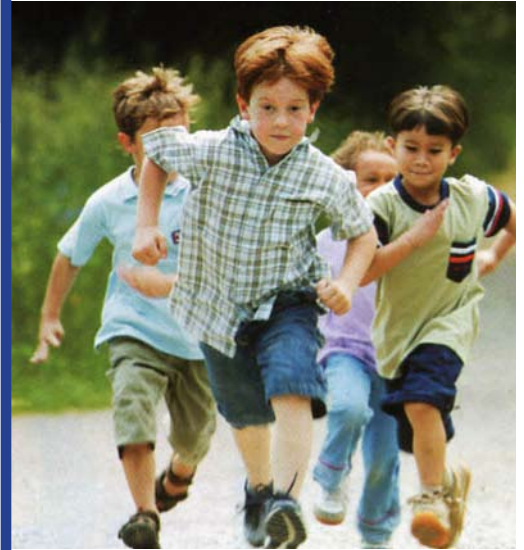
AS I have never had the pleasure of teaching Kindergarten, I have drawn on the wisdom of three experienced Kindergarten teachers to explore the question about school–readiness for boys.

Learning From the Wisdom of Experienced Kindergarten Teachers

LAURIE, a longtime Kindergarten teacher from Langley, runs a play–based classroom, and is careful not to rush children into academic work. She organizes a balanced day to respond to the varied needs of a range of children and believes that all thinking begins with wonder. Laurie has observed that rambunctious boys who were late to speak thrive in her classroom as much as boys who come to school in September already knowing how to read. Laurie doesn't support delaying entry for boys, but emphasizes that classrooms must be balanced, flexible and respect the needs of all children, wherever their readiness. She believes that stressful Kindergarten environments which accentuate deskwork, obedience, and please-the-teacher rote memory activities tend to inhibit a child's growth and development. She is critical of the practice of offering worksheets, flashcards, or what she candidly refers to as *assembly–line learning* at any age. Understanding that brains grow on their own timetable, Laurie advocates different instruction for different children. She even suggests that we should, generally speaking, make Grades 1–12 more like Kindergarten—that is, more hands-on, more socially engaging, and more inquiry-based. Children in Laurie's classroom playfully create stories, castles, and paintings with one another, developing and refining their abilities to think creatively and work collaboratively, work/play which leads them, in turn, to imagine new ideas and new projects. Laurie argues that inquiry–based learning prepares children for today's fast-changing society, where people must continually develop innovative solutions to unexpected problems and situations that crop up.

WHEN parents are trying to determine whether it is the right time to send their son to Kindergarten, Laurie acknowledges that the child's readiness is a factor. Most important, however, is what attitude the school staff hold toward boys, especially boys who are rambunctious.

- Is a child's natural curiosity encouraged without pressure on the child to perform?
- Are students expected to sit still and be quiet most of the time?



Laurie doesn't support delaying entry for boys, but emphasizes that classrooms must be **balanced**, flexible and respect the needs of all children, wherever their readiness.

- *Is the classroom organized so that there is ample opportunity for movement and hands-on exploration that engage all of a child's senses?*
- *Is there ample opportunity for high-interest repetition and practice that holds children's attention?*
- *Do boisterous boys rattle the teacher or others in the school?*
- *When a young boy hits another child or behaves inappropriately, is he exiled to the time-out area or even suspended, or is he supported and guided so that he can maintain self-respect while he learns how to get along respectfully with others?*

ANOTHER experienced Kindergarten teacher from Vancouver, Catherine, offered a different perspective: *"Pushing a boy into a learning environment that he isn't sufficiently equipped for can ultimately result in poor academic performance and unnecessary emotional stress."* She points to an American study of Kindergarten teachers who reported that 48 percent of incoming children have difficulty handling the demands of school.

HER 20 plus years of experience have taught her that some boys are just not ready for Kindergarten, and readily acknowledges that today's Kindergarten is much more advanced and complex than the Kindergarten which parents may have once attended. She believes that when children are old enough to go to Kindergarten but are not developmentally ready to succeed, parents ought to exercise their option to delay entry. *"Giving some boys an extra year to engage in productive pre-school learning activities just makes sense in view of the research suggesting that the late-bloomers tend to lag behind their classmates."*

CATHERINE is critical of research findings that most differences related to age and gender seem to disappear by the third grade. She argues that the stories of immature boys are lost in the research data, overlooked in studies of broad achievement statistics that do not consider specific subgroups of children, especially those slower-to-develop boys. She is concerned that in British Columbia, government education documents such as the **BC Early Learning Framework** or the **BC Full Day Kindergarten Program Guide** ignore the issue of Kindergarten-readiness for slower-to-develop boys by not even addressing them as a subgroup in their discussion; she points to her school district achievement data indicating boys are more likely to be identified with a learning disability or a behaviour problem than girls. Pointing out that there is relatively little research that looks at academic

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achievement by gender or by delayed entry to Kindergarten, Catherine speculates that the high rates of ADHD–diagnosis in boys may be related to the different patterns of maturation for boys and girls.

CATHERINE also remarks, by the way, that school economic markers are more significant than gender in children’s school success, and that children living in poverty are more likely to benefit from earlier entry to Kindergarten where they may find increased learning opportunities. She also stresses that while studies indicate socio–economic status to be the strongest predictor of academic success, this need not be the case, adding, *“Poverty should not automatically mean academic trouble. What counts is what poverty means to a particular family in a particular circumstance. A family may be poor economically, but live in a home abundantly rich with literature, creativity, and loving exploration.”*

CATHERINE does offer concerned parents some food for thought: *“If a boy’s first exposure to a formal school setting results in a steady struggle for him to keep up, that impression may stay with him and negatively impact his confidence and future performance throughout his school career.”* She encourages parents to look beyond achievement data and government documents to consider their son’s readiness and unique needs. She concludes that parents should not shy away from delaying entry to Kindergarten if this decision seems warranted.

GARY, a Kindergarten teacher from Toronto, suggests that parents set up a time to meet with their child’s prospective teacher to gather information about the Kindergarten environment in their neighbourhood. While many parents begin this process early in the year, Gary suggests that June is not too late to speak with the teacher, to observe the classroom atmosphere, and to consider whether the teacher’s teaching style and the overall classroom atmosphere will be a good fit for their son.

GARY says that parents should not assume that boys born later in the year should automatically be considered for delayed entry. Instead parents should draw on the input of pre-school teachers and others who are familiar with their son and understand his needs. *“Some boys born later in the school year really benefit from a delayed entry, but only when they spend that year engaging in wide–ranging learning experiences,”* says Gary. *“Staying home and watching television is not wide–ranging enough.”*

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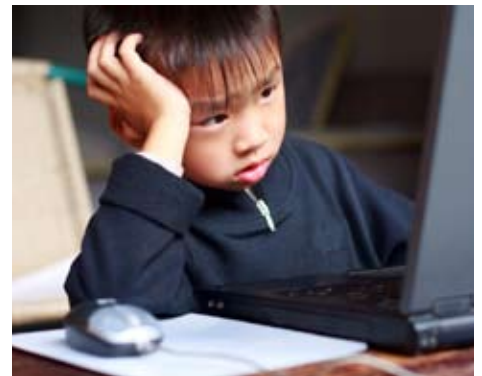
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GARY also points out that while the average child can learn to decode words at about age six, it is normal for children to learn this skill as early as age four and as late as age seven, and that the same kind of age range applies to learning to draw, write letters and numbers, count, speak articulately, and follow multiple directions. Parents who learn that some children entering their son's Kindergarten already know how to read need not get alarmed. He advises parents to resist the urge to get a head start with *flash card bootcamp* or early reading lessons. Any time spent drilling and pushing academic learning could be more productively spent sharing the silly antics of a character in a read-aloud story, building, digging, creating a project, or visiting the local library. Gary suggests that when parents instill a love of literacy and numeracy (numbers and math concepts) in a relaxed and loving atmosphere, in time all children become eager for new language experiences. He acknowledges that excessive stress releases stress chemicals in the brain that stop learning. *"Children will learn to read when they are developmentally ready,"* asserts Gary. *"I'd prefer that children have staggered entry to Kindergarten and enter on their 5th birthday, whenever it falls in the year, and that they move along to Grade 1 when they are ready, allowing for those who are developmentally ready to begin earlier and those who are not to have more time without any attached stigma."*

HAVING observed parents—especially fathers—to be more uncomfortable with a shy and reluctant boy at the classroom door than a shy and reluctant girl, Gary also encourages parents to be more accepting of boys who are shy and hang back at their parent's side. He says that shyness ought not be equated with readiness, and that we may be harming boys when we push them to discount their feelings and experiences. While some more sensitive boys may be more reluctant to begin Kindergarten, Gary believes that teachers who are familiar with differing needs of children will work with parents and their sensitive sons to create a respectful and smooth transition. He confirms the guidance I have written about in *Boy Smarts*: Schools can be a safe haven where classroom strategies and academic practices can provide emotional comfort while they also foster joyful experimentation. When fun and spontaneity are scrubbed from the classroom and replaced with conformity and rigidity, students of all ages disengage—their inquiring minds doze off.

FROM these three insightful and experienced Kindergarten teachers, we learn that readiness is multifaceted. In part, it depends on the child; in



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part it depends on the flexibility of the classroom and sensitivity of the teacher. While the perspectives of these teachers differ, they all agree that children who are exposed early on to a rich variety of interactive experiences will be better prepared for Kindergarten. Laurie, Catherine, and Gary each suggest home-based readiness activities to encourage your son's growth and development.

Here are a dozen of their ideas to encourage a love of learning:

1. Whether it becomes a bedtime or early morning ritual, read to your son every day. Children who have been joyfully read to on a regular basis benefit from parental interactions, as well as the exposure to literature.
2. Join your public library and make weekly trips, appreciating that over time your son will appreciate its offerings.
3. Do jigsaw puzzles. Children learn to look at shapes and see where pieces fit, just as they learn to recognize words and numbers by their shape.
4. Arrange building toys in a specific pattern and then challenge your son to copy your pattern, thus increasing opportunities for math logic and reasoning. Invite your son to create a pattern and challenge you to copy it also.
5. To encourage the love of language, sing songs that follow a pattern...for example: "The cat came back" or "I know an old lady who swallowed a fly."
6. Play memory or detective games with your child. Place items on the kitchen table and allow your son to look for 30 or so seconds, and then get him to turn his back while you remove one item. Can he identify which one?
7. Keep a couple of small books in your car so if you are stuck somewhere you always have the opportunity to enjoy a story.
8. If you want your son to become comfortable with literacy and numeracy, it is important that he observe and believe that reading, writing, and mathematical reasoning are relevant and important to you.
9. Whether you are building something outside or cooking in the kitchen,



Remember that if you are anxious about your son's readiness, then he will pick up on your anxiety.

read the instructions aloud and talk to your son about what you are reading. Take time to estimate then measure together.

10. When driving, point out familiar traffic signs and signs on stores and soon your child will be reading them too. Help him to develop his logic by becoming aware of how the sun helps to determine the direction you are travelling in.

11. If you suspect that your son isn't socially ready for the classroom, provide him with more opportunities to interact with other children in play-based environments.

12. Remember that if you are anxious about your son's readiness, then he will pick up on your anxiety. Consider that most adults you know, whenever they were born and whenever they started school, have in fact learned to read and balance their cheque books.



Appreciating the Big Picture

ALTHOUGH there are many skills and attitudes considered important for early school success, there is no clearly defined set of behaviours required for a child to enter Kindergarten. In fact, the sole entry requirement for Kindergarten in British Columbia is chronological age: children are eligible for Kindergarten in the calendar year they turn 5 years old.

PARENTS know that children all mature at different rates. For parents reading this article, I believe that your deep love, commitment and understanding your own son will allow you to know what's best. If you believe your son is ready, trust and follow your wisdom. If you have nagging doubts, or if you have received feedback from your son's caregiver or pre-school teacher that he may be not ready to begin Kindergarten, carefully consider that advice as well.

TRUST that you are the best person to determine the best path for your son.

WHETHER you decide to delay your son's entry to Kindergarten or get

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him started this September, the most important thing is that he engage in active, enjoyable and stimulating learning activities with other people.

JAMES Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences, said, “*Early learning begets later learning and early success breeds later success.*”

CHILDREN have compelling common sense, intrinsic motivation and a deep desire to discover. They are born ready to learn. The most valuable gift we can give our children is to cultivate and encourage this innate love of learning.

AND remember, as the first Kindergarten teacher noted, real learning at any age is more like play than it is like work. • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com

TAKING ACTION: **Print** this article and share with a parent who has a young boy.

Invite a friend, family member, or colleague to sign up to receive the newsletter on the bottom of any page of the website.

Sign up for a **BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK** Saturday workshop.

Organize a Boy Smarts presentation at your school or in your school district.

EMAIL YOUR STORIES about your son’s recent successes and struggles with school. Your stories will benefit teachers and parents everywhere to better understand how to enhance learning for boys.
Email: info@mentoringboys.com

“Early learning
begets later learning
and early success
breeds later
success.”



BOY SMARTS
Action Talk
S a t u r d a y
WORKSHOPS

Vancouver, October 16, 2010

Victoria, October 30, 2010

Other fall locations to be announced later in June.

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