



The December disadvantage

Boys born late in the year can be at a distinct academic and social disadvantage compared to their older classmates. If you think your son may be struggling, learn how to build support at home and in the classroom

By Leah Macpherson

When it comes to school, we all acknowledge that each child is unique and learns at an individual pace. However, parents and educators also recognize that children who have birthdays late in the calendar year, particularly boys, can face extra academic, social and physical challenges. And while there will always be exceptions to the rule – the December boy who's at the top of his class – most boys with birthdays in November and December struggle to meet the same benchmarks as their older classroom cohorts.

For many parents, particularly those who do not have older children, it may be difficult to gauge how a child is adjusting to kindergarten

Trudie BonBernard, who was a learning resource teacher in British Columbia for 35 years, says that a significant percentage of the children she worked with over the past three decades were boys born in November or December. She notes how the age gap between kids born early and late in the year can make a dramatic difference in developmental preparedness for kindergarten. Students enrolling in September must be five years old (or four years old in provinces with junior kindergarten) by December 31st of that year. That means that youngsters with January birthdays will start school in September at the age of five years and eight months alongside children who won't have a birthday until December and are only four years and nine months old. "As any mother or teacher will tell you, there are big differences between those two ages," says BonBernard.

Those differences are even more apparent in boys than girls. Bill Waldman, principal of Toronto's Forest Hill Public School and the father of a December-born boy, acknowledges that while some girls born late in the year have similar struggles, it is more common for younger boys to have difficulties. "I'm not sure whether it's nature or nurture – or a combination of both – but girls seem to be more cognitively ready for school and have more of the required skills: an ability to sit, listen, understand and participate."

BonBernard agrees: "Developmentally, girls meet many of the physical, emotional and language acquisition milestones at a slightly earlier age than boys. Generally, the average late-birthday girl does not face as many difficulties as a late-birthday boy."

Born late

Judy Wilson* discovered the difference a year can make when her third child, November-born Andrew, started school. The parent of two older sons, Wilson had a pretty good idea of what to expect in terms of boys' social, academic and physical development. Unlike his boisterous, confident older brothers, Andrew was timid and shy. By the time he finished senior kindergarten, the difference between Andrew's abilities and confidence and those of his peers was obvious to Wilson.

"I felt like Andrew was getting it from all sides," says Wilson. "He was always the smallest and slowest at home and at school. I was also concerned about his lack of self-confidence. I felt that there was a greater risk in letting him go forward, always at the back of the pack, than any social repercussions there may be from having him repeat a year."

Eventually the family decided to hold him back, and Andrew repeated senior kindergarten. Today, Wilson describes her now nine-year-old son as a socially confident and gregarious boy who is academically strong and engaged in the classroom. Is it because he was held back a year? Wilson isn't sure, but she feels that the intervention had a positive impact on him. "Part of it is social maturity, part of it is that he developed a confidence in his abilities. I think that you know your child best, and it's important to trust your instincts. I did what I thought was necessary for Andrew's well-being," she says. "I'd make the same decision again."

Kristin Muntaner faced a similar dilemma with her November-born son. Sensing that three-year-old Jaeden might not have been ready to begin junior kin-

dergarten, she didn't enroll him in school until the following year, when he entered senior kindergarten with his peers – some of whom were almost a year older.

It was a tough transition for Jaeden, who had a hard time being apart from his mother. He was also easily distracted and had trouble focusing on some activities. In Grade 1, academic issues began to surface. Jaeden was having major difficulties with reading. As a result, he became discouraged and frustrated. "When your child comes home saying that he's stupid, that he can't learn to read, it's pretty alarming," says Muntaner, who immediately contacted Jaeden's teacher and began spending more time in the classroom.

Concerned that extra attention at school wouldn't provide enough of the support Jaeden needed, Muntaner enrolled him in a literacy group and made a concerted effort to work with her son at home. "We don't have a TV, so Jaeden spends a lot of time drawing and looking at books. I try to do reading and shared reading every day with him, and I've found some good workbooks that have been very helpful," she notes. With extra support in place, Muntaner says things improved for Jaeden in Grade 2; he still struggles a bit with reading, but she feels that the gap between him and his peers is closing. To support Jaeden through Grade 3, Muntaner is considering enrolling him in a tutoring program. When asked if she'd make the same decision – to promote Jaeden with his peers rather than hold him back in Grade 1 – Muntaner responds affirmatively. "Even though it's been a struggle, I'd make the same decision. I'm confident that he's going to catch up," she says.

So, if your late-birthday child is struggling, what's the best choice: retention or promotion? "The solution isn't simply one or the other; it is to do a good job of looking at each child as an individual, assessing his or her abilities and providing the necessary support at school and at home," says Dianne Weddell, a learning resources teacher

from Kamloops, B.C., with 30 years of experience in the classroom. The early identification of boys who may be struggling is critical to putting support in place and helping these children catch up with their same-grade peers.

According to Queen's University's Offord Centre for Child Studies, one in 20 children enters kindergarten without the skills he or she needs to learn and does not have the ability to meet the task demands at school. The Offord Centre's research suggests that the degree to which a child is ready to learn at school predicts how well they will do at school.

Early warning signs

For many parents, particularly those who do not have older children, it may be difficult to gauge how a child is adjusting to kindergarten. Waldman points out these signs that may mean a child is struggling in school:

- Doesn't socialize comfortably with other children.
- Language or articulation difficulties.
- Lack of eye contact with others.
- Engages in parallel rather than joint play.
- Hasn't mastered the sound/symbol correlation (i.e., "B says buh, S says ssss").
- Can't recite the alphabet.
- Print awareness – doesn't know which way to hold a book or turn the pages.
- Unable to sit and participate in group activities.
- Disruptive behaviour in the classroom.
- Unable to get dressed or use the bathroom independently.

What are your choices?

In most school districts across Canada, children must begin school by the age of six. As kindergarten is not mandatory, educational choices before the age of six are at the discretion of the family. If you're concerned that your late-born son may not be up to par with his peers, BonBernard suggests thinking very carefully before enrolling him in school. "All most of these boys need is a little extra time to catch up with their peers, but once you're on that academic

treadmill, it can be very difficult to hold them back," she says. "You may wish to consider a delayed entrance to school to give your son another year to acquire the skills to meet the goals set out by school boards." After that year has passed, some parents enroll their child with his cohorts (yes, he'll still be one of the youngest in the class), and others choose to enroll their son in kindergarten with younger children to give him a long-term advantage.

If your son is already in school, extra support can help him catch up. Waldman, BonBernard and Weddell agree that most boys catch up to their older classmates by Grade 3 or 4.

Help at home

BonBernard suggests these ways in which parents can help young boys develop school-ready skills:

- Social and listening skills: Expose your child to a variety of activities, such as library readings, play groups and drop-in centres.
- Gross motor skills: Consider a sports-oriented program, such as Gymboree, soccer or gymnastics.
- Hand-eye coordination: Encourage activities like puzzles, Lego, crafts and model building.
- Numbers, shapes and patterns: Play sorting activities (toys, clothes, etc.); cook together and practise measuring ingredients.
- Writing: Integrate writing and drawing into your child's daily routine – grocery lists, thank you notes, pictures for Grandma, etc.
- Imaginary play: Encourage creativity through drawing, music and play acting.
- Word play: Help your child recognize and repeat nursery rhymes and songs; play card games that involve matching words.



Help at school

"Good communication and regular contact with the classroom teacher are essential to putting together a comprehensive support plan," says Weddell. Get in touch with your school to see what type of support and services may be available to your child. Most schools offer these types of support:

- Extra support in the classroom from an educational assistant.
- One-on-one time with a learning resource teacher.
- Participation in a learning assistance program.
- Therapy with an occupational therapist, psychologist, social worker and/or speech pathologist.

Love and acceptance

Regardless of what support your child may require, Weddell suggests that acceptance is the most important thing a parent can provide. "Parents need to understand that while these children may be behind their peers in the early school years, the rate at which most of them learn is within a normal range. Unconditional acceptance and support will help determine how these children do and what they can achieve in the future." 