SHOULD THEY STAY OR SHOULD THEY GO?
HOW PARENTS DECIDE TO ENROLL OR
WITHHOLD THEIR LATE-BIRTHDAY
CHILD FROM KINDERGARTEN

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ABSTRACT

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Every year, parents of children with late birthdays are faced with the decision to send or withhold their late birthday child from kindergarten when he or she is technically eligible to enroll. This decision can have long-term effects on a child’s academic development, and is one that can weigh heavily on parents. However, to date there is no conclusive agreement regarding the efficacy of either enrolling or withholding an eligible but young child. Further, there is little research examining why some parents choose to enroll their child, while others choose to withhold their child. The present study examined the factors parents consider in their decision to enroll or withhold their child, using a qualitative design. Nine parents were interviewed to gain insight into their experiences regarding the decision-making process about kindergarten enrollment. The
factors considered by parents, and how these are weighted, are discussed. The results provide a better understanding of what influences parents in choosing to enroll or withhold their late birthday child from kindergarten. Suggestions are made for school psychologists, teachers, and other professionals to better guide parents faced with this decision.
To Mickey, Johnny, Tommy, and Calleigh,

For being my inspiration and my four little Muses,

Thank you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

One hundred and fifty years ago, in 1863, an American proponent of early learning opportunities for young children named Elizabeth Peabody wrote that in kindergarten, children would be “gently led over the threshold of learning by the seductive charm of music, flowers, games, pictures, and curious objects,” (de Cos, 2001). Indeed, kindergarten was originally considered to be a “garden for children,” in which youngsters were encouraged to grow, learn and develop in a relaxed manner at their own pace. It was a place for children to develop necessary social skills, and it provided them an opportunity to learn through play and physical interaction with their environment (de Cos, 1997). Over time, the purpose of kindergarten changed from focusing on play and exploration to focusing on preparation for elementary school. Children made the transition from staying at home with their mothers to attending school on a regular basis and becoming young students. It was viewed as a logical transition from home to school, from early play to academia, from children to students. Kindergarten students learned basic educational concepts such as letters, numbers, colors, and shapes, they were encouraged to explore pre-literacy skills, and they learned basic classroom behaviors such as standing in line, sitting still, listening, raising their hands to speak, and
cooperating with others (de Cos, 1997). Now, due to increased demand on schools to
perform according to state and federal guidelines such as the No Child Left Behind Act
(NCLB, 2001), kindergarten is a more structured and less play-oriented preparation for
the rigors of formalized study (de Cos, 1997). Kindergarten teachers focus more
classroom time and attention on academic versus developmental skills than in the past in
part due to pressure to teach specific academic training rather than on more universal
domains of cognitive, social, and emotional development (Russell, 2011). That is,
instead of the traditional, general ABCs and 123s, kindergarten teachers now spend more
time instructing students to read and solve mathematics problems. Russell goes on to
describe two competing models of kindergarten education, one academic and specific, the
other developmental and generalized. She suggests that the academic model has become
increasingly popular. Indeed, upon entry to formalized education, children are now
expected to possess pre-literacy and arithmetic skills, as well as to be able to conduct
themselves appropriately in a school setting. Accountability standards have created
pressure for lower grades, including kindergarten, to meet increased academic standards
and produce higher-testing students (Meisels, 1992). As a result, kindergartens place less
emphasis on just being a child and learning through play and exploration, and more on
becoming ready for entry into elementary school (Lincove & Painter, 2006).
Kindergarten is the entrance to the academic world for most children, and it may indeed
set the stage for their future scholastic successes or difficulties (Mehaffie & Fraser,
2006).

If kindergarten is the beginning of a student’s academic career, and research
supports that early successes tend to lead to future successes (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006),
then it follows that parents would want to provide their child with the best chances and opportunities to excel. Most states use a child’s chronological age as the recommendation of when he or she can begin school, but leave the decision for when the child should begin to parents (Vecchioti, 2003). For some children, especially those born in winter and spring months, the appropriate time to enter kindergarten is clearly delineated by date of birth. For others, such as those children whose birthdates fall shortly before the locally- or state-defined cutoff date, the prescribed time to enroll is not as evident. In the state of Ohio, for example, at the discretion of the local school district board of education, a child must be five years of age by either August 1st or September 30th to be eligible for enrollment into kindergarten (Ohio Department of Education, 2012). This means that a child with a birthdate of August 15th may be eligible to enroll in kindergarten in one district, but not in another, depending upon the date chosen by the local board. Children are only considered to be of compulsory school age when they reach the age of six years (in Ohio) by the local school board eligibility date, which is sometimes at least a year later than when the child is initially eligible for enrollment (Buten, 2010).

Further, according to the Ohio Department of Education website, all children enrolling in kindergarten are screened with the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment-Literacy (KRA-L), to assist teachers and other staff in identifying those students who may require and/or benefit from additional instruction. However, the results of this screening cannot be solely used in determining whether a child is eligible to enter kindergarten. The only criterion to be used in determining eligibility is age (Ohio Department of Education, 2012).
The parents of late birthday children face a decision—whether to enroll their child when he or she is initially eligible for kindergarten entry as a five year old, thus creating a young-for-class student, or to voluntarily withhold or “redshirt” their child until age six, thus creating an old-for-class student. While there has been research into the effects of early- or late-starting kindergarten students, there has been little to no attention paid to what influences a parent’s decision regarding when their child is ready to enroll in kindergarten. At the same time, while there has been little empirical research into how or why parents continue this practice, there is much interest—a recent Google search for the term “Kindergarten Redshirting,” elicited over thirty one thousand websites. A search for “Kindergarten Readiness” yielded 2.5 million results. This lack of peer-reviewed research has left not only parents, but also educators, school psychologists, administrators, and policy makers without a clear understanding of how these decisions are made. The purpose of this research was to examine the themes that parents consider in deciding to either send their late birthday child to school at an earlier age or to withhold him/her for an extra year. The goal of this study was to provide additional understanding regarding what motivates a parent in making this decision to provide them with better direction, resources, and support rather than merely thoughts, opinions, conjecture, and good intention.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review will begin with a discussion of what it means to be ready for kindergarten and the difficulty that has emerged in defining the concept of readiness. It will then discuss how school systems use a child’s birthdate to determine when a child is eligible to enroll in kindergarten and the range of ages that this practice produces in a typical classroom. It will review the role of the parents of late birthday children in deciding when their particular child is ready to begin formalized schooling, and what factors might affect this decision. It will summarize the existing evidence for and against withholding young-for-class students. Finally, this literature review will discuss the current research project and some of the basic tenets of qualitative research designs.

Kindergarten Readiness

It is typically assumed that an older child will be more prepared and therefore more able to succeed in kindergarten and elementary school (Crone & Whitehurst, 1999). This idea may be based on an assumption rather than on factual or statistical data. Despite this lack of empirical evidence, a considerable number of late birthday but otherwise eligible children are voluntarily withheld (Lincove & Painter, 2006) to allow them to be one of the older children in the classroom. This practice of deciding to hold
back a child whose birthday falls shortly before the local school district’s cutoff date for
beginning kindergarten for a year has been termed “academic redshirting.” The term is
derived from the collegiate sports practice of placing a first-year, or young-for-team
player on the bench with the assumption that an extra year of practice will make him
better able to compete at that level (Frey, 2005). However, as Lincove and Painter (2006)
point out, a redshirted college athlete continues to practice with the team in order to build
strength and skill, while a redshirted kindergarten student may or may not continue to
practice scholastic skills concurrent with his cohort and as such risks falling behind.

A child’s readiness assessment can weigh heavily on parents as they decide
whether or not to send their summer- or fall-birthday child to kindergarten; it is indeed
difficult to ascertain whether a child is ready for kindergarten now or would benefit from
one more year, to grow and mature, thus entering the following year at age six. Typical
reasons that parents cite when deciding to voluntarily withhold a child are a concern that
he or she would one of the youngest, smallest, or least developed in the class, or that the
child displays more immature social, academic, or behavioral indices than other children
in the cohort (Frey, 2005).

There is consensus (Snow, 2006) that in order to be successful in school, a child
must be adequately ready, both academically and developmentally. However, there is
little agreement among researchers as to what exactly constitutes this preparedness,
whether it be a certain degree of reading or math ability, the ability to write one’s name,
recognize colors, stand on one foot, or just to be able sit still and pay attention (de Cos,
1997). Graue (2006) suggests that even defining the concept of readiness is not easy—it
may be what a child already knows, or a state of being able to be physically, mentally,
emotionally, and socially in a classroom, or some combination of these factors. Put another way, the definition of school readiness depends largely upon the definer (Brent, May, & Kundert, 1996). There is growing question among administrators and policy-makers regarding just what is expected for a child to be considered ready for school (Scott-Little, Kagan, & Frelow, 2006). Stipek (2002) stated that children at every age are ready to learn, and that the relevant question to educators should therefore be not whether a child is ready for school, but rather what a child is ready to learn. In other words, children of all ages are ready to learn, and indeed do so with regularity and of their own volition. A child’s age and developmental level may have more effect on what and how he or she is able to learn most effectively, and this should be the focus of educators and policy makers (Stipek, 2002).

To further complicate the task of defining readiness for kindergarten, Dhuey and Lipscomb (2008) suggest that there exists an inherent difficulty in differentiating which factors of readiness are a function of maturity and which are a function of ability. Kern and Friedman (2009) state that the idea of determining the appropriate age to enter school is a complicated one, with many variables to consider. According to these researchers, it remains unclear whether a child’s achievement is due to his or her chronological age and maturational development (absolute age) or to his or her age relative to the other classmates (relative age).

**Relative Age and Kindergarten Readiness**

Because there is no recognized, validated, or accepted standard of gauging kindergarten readiness, most school systems simply use a prescribed cutoff to determine when a child is eligible for kindergarten enrollment (Datar, 2006). The result is the
creation of a cohort of children who fall into a certain age range for inclusion in homogeneously-aged classrooms of children with similar developmental levels (Verachtert, De Fraine, Onghena, & Ghesquiere, 2010). This assumes that chronological age and membership in this age range is an adequate predictor of a child’s current skill set, mastery of necessary concepts, and basic developmental readiness. It also assumes that the children in this group will be able to learn the material to be taught in the curriculum. However, using date of birth or chronological age alone as an entrance requirement ignores the variation that exists in each age group. Some children may possess rudimentary or even beginning reading skills at five years of age, while some have not yet learned to sit and listen to a story appropriately. Some may have attended preschool and are aware of basic classroom expectations, while for others kindergarten may be their first time in a classroom setting. Some children have been exposed to a wide array of early reading and writing activities while others lack even the most basic of these experiences (March, 2005). Cantin, Mann, and Hund (2012) suggest that there are three major components to school readiness: attention, memory, and inhibition, which are coincidently also the three major parts of executive functioning. They go on to explain that executive functioning emerges during the first few years of life and follows a developmental model throughout adolescence and adulthood. If this is true, then younger children would be expected to have lesser-developed executive functioning than older children. According to Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox (2000), as many as 16% of students entering kindergarten display a marked lack of behavioral readiness, lacking the ability to effectively participate in a classroom setting without difficulty or disruption (Bierman, Torres, Domitrovich, Welsh, & Gest, 2008).
The age at which a child is considered ready for kindergarten is generally assumed to be five years, but even defining age five can be difficult, as children do not enter school directly on their birthday. There are unobservable factors, such as a child’s emotional, intellectual, or behavioral maturity, which may affect a child’s readiness for school (Datar, 2006). Most states set the cutoff date for entry age, though some states allow local districts discretion in determining the date by which a child must be a certain age in order to enroll in kindergarten (Stipek, 2002). This practice inevitably leads to some children being in the older age range of the cohort and others being in the younger range. For example, if a school district’s cutoff date for entry is set at September 1, a child born on August 31 five years previous would be allowed to enroll, while a child born two days later, on September 2, would have to wait until the next year to enroll. So these children, despite being only three days different in age, could enter kindergarten a full year apart from each other. The child whose birthday is shortly before the cutoff date would be young-for-class, while the child whose birthdate falls shortly after would be old-for-class. Crone and Whitehurst (1999) note that a birthdate-based cutoff system such as this has resulted in classrooms in which some children may be a full year (20% of their lifespan) older than their peers (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). Zill and West (2001) examined national data and found that the ages at which children enter kindergarten ranges from approximately 4 ½ years to 6 ½ years old. The average is around 5 ½ years of age. Evans, Morrill, and Parente (2010) assert that the age differences due to enrollment cutoff dates can be large in the early grades—as much as 20% in kindergarten, 14% in second grade, and 10% in the fifth grade.
**Age Range in Kindergarten Classrooms**

The magnitude of age ranges that exist in a kindergarten classroom may mean that an older child is considerably more prepared and developmentally mature than his or her relatively younger classmate (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006). The oldest child in a kindergarten classroom may have lived for a full 20% longer than the youngest, which would suggest that the chronologically older student would present with that much more maturity and experience. It also follows that the developmental changes that occur between a child’s fifth and sixth birthday are marked. One year of additional learning or development can have a substantial impact at this young age (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). When a child is this young, months of age are often as significant as years are later in life.

The age range of a full year in a kindergarten classroom may place the older student at a considerable advantage over the younger student as he or she has had an additional full year to develop, learn the expected material, and master the appropriate skills. Should this be the case, it is fair to assume that there will be maturational and developmental differences between the younger and older students, with the latter being assumed to be more prepared and therefore ultimately more successful (DeMeis & Stearns, 1992). To illustrate this point, an older child in the class may have been walking on the day a younger child was just born. Further, there is growing research suggesting that when a younger child exhibits difficulties in the classroom, he or she tends to be compared to classroom peers who may be as much as a year older, rather than to same-age peers (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). Dhuey and Lipscomb (2008) also found that older children in a class are less likely to be referred for special needs assistance and are also less likely to be diagnosed with a disability at all when compared to their relatively
younger classmates. This may lead to younger children being over-diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Specific Learning Disability (SLD) and overrepresented in special education, in addition to increased academic and behavioral referrals among young-for-class students.

**Parents’ Role in Deciding to Enroll or Withhold**

Graue and DiPerna (2000) note that while there is the expectation that a school system will admit any child who fits within its prescribed cutoff dates, there are no such provisions made to parents. That is, the decision of whether to enroll a late birthday child in school at a young age five or to withhold him and enroll him at age six lies almost entirely with the parents, and there are few resources available to these parents upon which to base their decision. To compound this arduous and stressful predicament, there is little definitive data to support either choice—in fact what data does exist seems to only further the ambivalence. Oshima and Domaleski (2006) note that while there is much research and literature regarding the effects of voluntarily withholding a child from kindergarten, and that while researchers do tend to agree that that there are short-term benefits to such a practice, there is little agreement as to whether this practice has positive, null, or negative long term effects. Noel and Newman (2008) add that parents tend to make their decision to hold their child back or to enroll him based on their desire to provide him additional time to mature and develop the skills that his older cohorts presumably already have mastered, with the best interests of the child in mind. However, this is assuming that the extra year provided by voluntarily withholding a child will be beneficial in all circumstances. They may actually be doing the child a disservice.
Other Relevant Factors Considered when Deciding to Enroll or Withhold

de Cos (1997) suggested that age is not an accurate or absolute predictor of a child’s ability to succeed in kindergarten, but is rather only one of many possible indicators to be considered. Other considerations might include the child’s emotional and social maturity, physical size and coordination, mastery of school-related concepts (remaining quiet in a seat, standing in line, not speaking until called upon), knowledge of expected material (letters, numbers, colors, ability to write his name), or simply his or her ability to concentrate and sit still in a classroom. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Childcare Research Network (2007) concurs, suggesting that while a child’s age at the start of kindergarten should not be used as a primary deciding factor, it may be considered and weighed in the context of other variables intrinsic to the child, such as the child’s maturity, level of emotional control, behavioral issues, etc. Parents may fear that enrolling their child in kindergarten at a younger age will lead to academic, emotional, or behavioral comparisons with older, more developmentally mature peers, which may cause undue stress and anxiety. This choice is a major one, which may well have a lasting effect on the child throughout his academic career if not the rest of his or her life. Additionally, this decision, once made, cannot be easily unmade.

Evidence for Withholding Young-for-Class Students

Bedard and Dhuey (2006) examined the 1995 and 1999 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), and the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS) data for fourth- and eighth grade students in the United States, and compared their test scores and ages at
which the students entered school as kindergartners. The authors’ hypothesis was that early successes in school would support later successes, and that children who were more mature (chronologically and developmentally) based upon the age at which they entered school would be more likely to have higher earlier successes. They found that young-for-class students scored 4-12% lower on standardized measures than their old-for-class peers in the fourth grade and 2-9% lower in the eighth grade. They further noted that old-for-class students were more likely to take college-preparatory classes in high school as well as to attend college. This suggests that the effects of relative age may carry through a child’s entire educatory experience and perhaps throughout their lives.

Graue, Kroeger, and Brown (2003) examined how educators’ assumptions about age, developmental issues and kindergarten typically affect how children of different ages and maturity are viewed in a classroom. They followed a small group of children who were delayed in their entry to kindergarten, a group who were young but entered when they were eligible, and a group who were retained in kindergarten. The authors found that parents, teachers, and administrators seemed to hold fairly rigid assumptions as to what a child must possess to be successful in kindergarten. They described what they termed a de facto “kindergarten prototype” that was used as a standard by which to compare all children to determine readiness for school.

In this study, Graue, et al. (2003) found that the prototypical kindergarten student possesses several specific qualities. The student was viewed as more able if chronologically older or more developmentally mature. The child was expected to have appropriate stamina and not need a rest or nap time throughout the day. He or she was expected to be mature, to not cry or become frustrated easily, to be socially appropriate as
well as socialized in a classroom, to not be overly dependent on adults and to be flexible and yet focused in his or her work habits. Children who were young-for-class were frequently viewed as suspect since they did not fit these expectations. The authors suggest that a better approach for educators and parents alike is to incorporate developmentally responsive practices that view and approach each child as an individual, into their assumptions, prototypes, and practices.

Martin, Foels, Clanton, and Moon (2004) studied specific learning disabilities (SLDs) and season of birth effects, or the idea that the season in which a child is born, in combination with school cutoff dates, determines how a child ranks by age in a classroom or cohort. They point to a fair amount of research literature suggesting that young-for-class children tend to be diagnosed more frequently with SLDs, and they describe two main theories as to why this may be the case. The maturity hypothesis suggests that the youngest children in a classroom may be as much as 9 to 12 months chronologically younger, and would then also be that much younger neurologically and developmentally than their peers. These younger children might be less able to self-regulate attention, concentration, emotion, and behavior. The second theory put forth by Martin et al. (2004) is the self-concept theory, which suggests that young-for-class children may be at a relative disadvantage to their classmates due to smaller physical stature, strength, and coordination. Additionally, they may be relatively delayed socially and emotionally, and may be less cognitively mature as well. This may lead to decreased self-esteem and self-concept, and eventually to lower achievement.

Martin, et al. (2004) studied children who received special education intervention in several Georgia school systems and compared their seasons of birth and achievement
scores. They found that among children born between June and August, who would be considered young-for-class, 25% had been retained and another 5-10% were referred to classes for children with SLDs. They point out that this suggests that a full third of children with late-season birthdates were separated from the educatory experiences of their peers in the classroom by being placed in out-of-classroom special education classes. They further found that children born between September and November, who would be considered old-for-class, were retained less often, referred for assessment less often, and were diagnosed with an SLD less frequently.

According to Martin et al. (2004), this supports the maturity theory, that the most biologically or chronologically immature students appeared to have more difficulty working independently, directing their own behavior, focusing and sustaining their attention and concentration, and being able to inhibit their responses in a classroom. They further suggest that their results support the self-concept hypothesis, stating that young-for-class students tend to have a higher degree of social difficulty interacting with teachers and peers, which becomes internalized as feelings of social inadequacy. This may then manifest in poorer academic adjustment and achievement.

Thompson, Barnsley, and Battle (2004) suggested that older students are assumed to be more able academically, socially, emotionally, and behaviorally adept than their young-for-class peers. They go on to suggest that teachers, parents, classmates, and the students themselves mistake maturation for ability, or assume that older children are more able to perform. By contrast, according to this standard, younger or less mature children are assumed to be less able to perform adequately. The authors’ position is that this may lead to lowered feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy in those children who
entered school at a younger age rather than having waited a year and entered as older compared to their peers.

Janvier and Testu (2007) reported that a child’s ability to physically pay attention in school may well be a function of their age and developmental level. They demonstrated that, in general, a student’s attention span and intellectual efficiency tend to improve from the beginning to the end of the morning. It then decreases during the middle of the day (lunch and recess times, usually), and then rises again until the end of the day. Early morning and early afternoon are times during which children tend to have the most difficulty attending to their environment.

These researchers studied school-aged children in France split into four groups—preschool (aged 4-5 years), kindergarten (aged 5-8 years), first grade (aged 6-7 years), and fifth grade (aged 10-11 years). They found that students tended to follow the general pattern of attentional focus as described above except for the preschool group, who demonstrated a pattern opposite to the older children. The preschool students’ attention patterns tended to wane as the morning progressed, then increase over the mid-day break, and decline again during the afternoon hours. This suggests that younger children, especially young-for-class students, may have different attentional rhythms than their older classmates, which may again make them more likely to be identified as in need of intervention when maturational and developmental differences are more likely the cause.

Crosser (1991) compared the fifth- and sixth-grade reading and math scores of students who entered kindergarten at either age five years or six years, and found that when the children’s intellectual functioning was controlled, those who entered school at an older age generally outperformed their younger peers. She cautioned that academic
skills are only one of the variables that need to be considered in determining a child’s scholastic success, and that other indicators of well-being such as social skills and emotional stability need to be considered when making any decisions as to whether a child is ready for kindergarten. She asserted that if a group of children, in this case those born near to the district cutoff date, could be given an academic advantage by simply waiting one year for school entrance, it would be beneficial to provide this information to parents and school systems.

Datar (2006) found that children with disabilities, those from a lower socioeconomic background, and males generally appeared to benefit, especially displayed by improved reading scores, more than other children when entry to kindergarten is delayed. She cautions that while these benefits do appear to be significant for a child’s first two years of school, there is no evidence that these will continue further into a student’s academic career. Her research has also led her to believe that the positive or negative effects of kindergarten delay can be attributed to the amount and quality of instruction or amount of time and exposure that a child receives during the year of delay. For example, attending a quality preschool may lead to beneficial returns from delayed entry, while children who do not have access to such a program might do better if they enter kindergarten earlier. Datar did note that her study may or may not generalize to older students or to late-entry students as they pass beyond the first two years of school.

Again, early scholastic successes have been shown to be predictive of later successes, and this difference between early and delayed start kindergartners may be a concern to parents wishing to provide their children with maximum educatory advantage.
Evidence Against Withholding Young-for-Class Students

While a few studies have found a positive effect to withholding a young child from kindergarten for a year, a majority of the existing research has found that there is little to no difference between old-for-class students and young-for-class students in terms of long term academic success. DeMeis and Stearns (1992) examined the association between a student’s chronological age and his or her social or academic successes. Their assumption was that if students who entered kindergarten at an earlier age did in fact experience increased academic or social stressors, then their representation in referrals for psycho-educational interventions would also be elevated compared to their older classmates. Their findings, in contrast to previously described research, showed that students who are young for their cohort displayed no more difficulties than their older peers, and old-for-class and young-for-class students were referred for school-based assessment and/or intervention at similar rates.

Stipek (2002), in an interesting study, focused on what age children should enter kindergarten. She also examined whether there were any benefits to voluntarily delaying a child’s entry into kindergarten. Specifically, she compared children whose kindergarten entrance was delayed to those who entered as soon as they were eligible, but found that since the sample of students with voluntarily-delayed entry was not random due to extraneous variables, such as families’ socioeconomic status and parental assessment of child’s developmental factors, the data were unreliable. She also compared children who were in the same grade but had earlier or later birthdates, and finally she compared children of the same age in different grades and children who are a year apart in age but still in the same grade. Her findings were consistent with other studies, that
while old-for-class students tend to demonstrate modestly advanced academic abilities in comparison to their young-for-class peers in early school, the differences dissipate quickly. Since the young-for-class students do tend to catch up to their older peers, this suggests that they may actually learn more, or at a faster rate, by virtue of being enrolled in school. Stipek suggests that in light of these data, schools would do well to adapt to meet the needs all students in the classroom, including those who are young-for-class. She states that the push should be for schools’ readiness for children rather than children’s readiness for school.

Oshima and Domaleski (2006) found that while students who enroll in school at a younger age exhibited significantly lower reading and mathematical skills from kindergarten through fifth grade, the difference weakened steadily as the subjects progressed through school. Interestingly, this significant difference in performance scores persisted for the same amount of time as did the differences in physical stature or height for the same amount of time. In other words, older children were taller and exhibited increased skills early in their school career, but as the class aged, the differences in both height and ability flattened, as would be expected in a developmental model. After the fifth grade the differences between reading and mathematical skills as well as height between younger-at-entry and older-at-entry students became insignificant. The authors explained this difference as a function of developmental and maturational changes that occur in children throughout this period, with the younger and older students progressing or regressing to the mean, respectively as they aged.

Oshima and Domaleski further found that while boys do tend to lag behind girls in their academic development, especially on reading measures, age effects appeared to
be stronger than were gender effects. In other words, according to their study, being young-for-class may have a larger effect on a child’s ability to perform than does his or her gender.

The NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2007) followed children from 10 different localities from birth to third grade. They examined children’s homes, family environments, and cognitive and social skills. They found that children who were older at the start of school tended to perform better at the beginning of kindergarten and displayed greater academic improvement over their first few years than did their peers who began school at a younger age. There was no effect of age at the start of school on a student’s social-emotional functioning. The authors caution that the academic effects, though significant, were modest at best, and of limited use in predicting further academic achievement. They further suggest that a child’s age at the start of school should not play a significant role in deciding to enroll a child when he or she is first able to begin. While their results do not necessarily support delaying kindergarten entry for late-birthdate children, consideration of the child’s age relative to his or her peers, especially in terms of its effects on other factors such as intellectual, social, and emotional functioning may have merit when deciding whether to enroll or to delay.

Lincove and Painter (2006) explained that there are two basic schools of thought regarding early entrance to kindergarten. The first is that children follow a normal, regular developmental progression. Younger children are generally less developed than their older peers and as such may be disadvantaged academically. It follows, according to this view, that allowing a younger child an extra year of growth and development prior to entering kindergarten would allow him or her to catch up with peers and thus negate
any developmental lag. They also point out that negative experiences in kindergarten, presumably due to lack of readiness for school, may predispose children to increased levels of unease and anxiety throughout the remainder of their academic careers. Noel and Newman (2008) agree with this maturational view and suggest that placing external pressure on a child by enrolling him or her in school before appropriately ready may lead to negative effects such as stress-related illnesses, motivational issues, etc. As such, providing younger children with the gift of time, by withholding them for a year, would appear to be, at least on the surface, a beneficial practice.

However, the second idea proffered by Lincove and Painter (2006) is that although younger children may be developmentally behind their older peers, immersion into the kindergarten environment will serve to facilitate their ability to catch up with the older students. It follows then, from this orientation that withholding a child from school for a year may in fact have a deleterious effect in that s/he is not exposed to the richness of the academic environment and the stimulation provided by such.

Lincove and Painter (2006) further examined whether a child who enters kindergarten as an older or younger member of the cohort or is held back for a year has any difference on his or her academic success throughout high school and into their adult, post-academic, work-world lives. Similar to previous research cited, they found that while older children do show an academic advantage in their early years of school, the magnitude of the effect quickly begins to taper off and is nonexistent by high school age. If there is no significant difference between younger or older students, these authors point out that deciding to purposefully withhold a child from school for a year, in order to allow the child to be older in his or her cohort, is an ineffective means to provide
academic support. In addition, these authors contend that children who are voluntarily withheld may actually miss academic opportunities during the year in which they stay home. Further, and perhaps more importantly, a withheld child may miss early interventions at a time when s/he could most benefit from these.

Lincove and Painter (2006) do make a few suggestions in light of the evidence that withholding a child, either by parental choice or school suggestion, appears to have no effect on overall achievement over time. They suggest that if a school seems to have a high propensity to retain children in early grades, the idea of voluntary retention may be more attractive. Additionally, parents of young-for-grade students are recommended to remain active in their child’s academic career and be prepared to advocate should retention be considered by the school.

Crone and Whitehurst (1999) studied whether younger children would demonstrate lower reading skill levels than their older peers if family demographics and socioeconomic status, preschool experience, and baseline pre-literacy skills were controlled. They found that the younger group of children did perform significantly lower than their older counterparts after a year of preschool preparatory program attendance. However, at the end of the first grade year, the researchers found that this effect had disappeared, or that the younger children had developed the necessary skills to catch up with the older students. They posited that although developmental and age differences may account for the discrepancy initially, when the children were exposed to the first grade reading programs, which involved a more formal approach, they learned similar skills at similar rates. In other words, while age at school entry may lead to early differences between the abilities of older and younger children in the classroom, by the
time the students receive formalized reading instruction both sets of children can benefit equally.

**Early Enrollment and Disability Identification**

Relatively new to the literature are studies that examine whether a child’s age at enrollment in kindergarten may affect his or her chances of being identified and diagnosed with either Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Evans, et al., 2010; Elder, 2010; Schneider & Eisenberg, 2006) or a Specific Learning Disability (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009). These studies suggest that children who enter kindergarten at a younger age tend to be compared to their old-for-class peers in terms of their abilities to attend and concentrate in class, to regulate their own behavior and impulses, and to learn the presented curricula effectively. This comparison of students across a classroom may leave young-for-class students at a disadvantage as they simply present differently in these areas due to their chronological age and developmental level. Parents, teachers, coaches, and administrators may mistake immaturity for disability, and thereby unwittingly over-refer younger children in a classroom for intervention assessment. These students may be misdiagnosed with ADHD or as having a disability simply due to natural developmental lag behind their chronologically older classmates, which may have long-reaching effects in their academic careers. Additionally, this over-representation of young-for-class students may take much needed attention and resources away from identifying older children with perhaps less noticeable behavioral presentations of actual educational or social-emotional difficulties.
Summary

There is increasing attention paid to the idea of kindergarten redshirting, and it seems that most people have strong opinions about the advisability or even acceptability of the practice. The existing research in the area is decidedly split. Those who support withholding a child report that there are advantages, such as allowing the child the “gift of time” to mature and be more likely to perform on par with their peers (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Those who recommend against withholding report that there is no real advantage to providing a younger child with additional time, that the practice may even lead to disadvantages missed opportunities for early learning experiences or intervention.

Finally, while much of the existing research suggests that any positive effects of withholding a child are short-term, tending to disappear within a few years, many parents continue to withhold their children at a considerable rate (Lincove & Painter, 2006; Bassok & Reardon, 2013). Examining what motivates parents in their decision making process, exploring what they consider important and meaningful, and being able to more appropriately and effectively assist them in their conclusions is a valuable endeavor to both parents and educators alike.

The Current Research Study

The purpose of this study was to examine what factors or issues parents consider when deciding to enroll their late birthday child in kindergarten when he or she is initially eligible or to withhold the child for an additional year. In addition, the components or elements parents consider when faced with this decision, and how much weight they ascribe to each facet was examined. Furthermore, whether they generate their own assumptions, consider their own history, look to the popular media, seek professional
advice or advice from friends and/or family, or decide based on a gut feeling were specifically investigated with regard to deciding to enroll their late birthday child in kindergarten.

This study sought to replicate and expand upon results found by Bennett-Armistead (2008), in which factors considered by families deciding whether to enroll their age-eligible children in kindergarten, and whether these factors differed by child characteristics was examined qualitatively using a semi-structured interview design. Bennett-Armistead (2008) reviewed and analyzed the data collected and coded it according to repeated themes. Some examples of the coding categories reported by parents as factors they considered when deciding whether to enroll or withhold their young-for-class child in kindergarten included: physical size/stature of the child; gender; age of the child, both now and how he/she will compare to peers later in school; social, social-emotional, and academic skills; general advice from others, including friends, family, and professionals; advice from teachers specific to the child in question; knowledge of or familiarity with the local school or kindergarten program; and previous experiences with voluntarily withholding older siblings.

While the research literature has examined the phenomena of kindergarten redshirting for possible positive and negative effects and found little consensus, almost no attention has been focused on why or how parents decide to either enroll or withhold their child when initially eligible. Although there is no clear answer to whether it is better to enroll or withhold a late birthday child, the practice continues to occur at a steady pace (Bassok & Reardon, 2013; Lincove & Painter, 2006). This suggests that
more research is needed into the fundamental question of why and how parents decide to enroll or withhold rather than just studying what happens after this decision is reached.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Questions

This research project was an attempt to provide more insight and understanding into how and why parents of late-birthday children decide to either enroll or withhold their late-birthday child in kindergarten when initially eligible. The results may help to better ascertain what variables or factors parents might consider when making this decision, and begin to develop a theory as to why and when the practice occurs or does not occur. By doing so, it is believed that educational professionals may be better equipped to assist parents when facing this dilemma.

This study explored the following two research questions:

1. What factors do parents consider when deciding whether to enroll their late-birthday child in school when he or she is eligible, or to withhold him/her for another year?

2. From where do parents seek information when deciding whether to enroll their late-birthday child in school when he or she is eligible, or to withhold him/her for a year?
Research Design

The current research project utilized a phenomenological qualitative design as described by Smith (2004), which is well-suited to examine how people think, what they consider, and why they make the decisions that they do in everyday life. Phenomenological analyses seek to gather information and separate it into both the participants’ personal experience of the situation as well any themes that become apparent. Further, phenomenological analyses remain open and flexible enough to allow unanticipated thematic content to emerge as data is gathered and examined (Smith, 2004). Phenomenological research does not attempt to verify or negate specific research hypotheses, but rather it casts a wide net to guide generation of theories. It allows the study of the psychological experience of the world by examining it in vitro (Aanstoos, 1984).

While quantitative research designs seek to show causality, universal laws, predictability, and scientific control, qualitative designs seek to increase understanding of ideas, feelings, motivations for behaviors, and choices (Stainback & Stainback, 1998).

Participants

Nastasi and Schensul (2005) assert that in qualitative research designs, sampling is conducted in a purposeful manner guided by both the research question and an attempt to accurately represent behavior being studied. Following this assertion, the target group of parents or sets of parents (n=9) in this study consisted of a purposive, convenience sample of parents of students with a late birthday (i.e., born between the months of July and October) who had recently made the decision to enroll or withhold their child and who were willing to discuss their thoughts about their enrollment plans. Each participant
was interviewed to obtain detailed information, and because interview data tend to be much more rich and detailed than that collected via other forms (i.e., survey), the sample size may remain relatively small (Weiss, 1994). The total number of participants in this study was determined by the number of participants able to be recruited, rather than by the number necessary to reach theoretical saturation, which occurs when continued interviews and data collection fail to produce new information about the research question (Kalymon, Gettinger, & Hanley-Maxwell, 2010). Given the geographical and logistical limitations of this study and subject pool, as well as an inherent uncertainty as to whether all influences considered by parents when deciding to enroll or withhold could ever be collected, it is unlikely that saturation could ever be reached (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Parents who were considering enrolling or had recently decided whether to enroll their child in kindergarten during the 2012-2013 academic year were recruited for participation in this study. The participants were chosen from a medium-sized Midwestern city and its surrounding suburbs.

**Participant demographics.** The project sample included (n=9) parents (all mothers) who were willing to discuss their individual, subjective experiences in deciding whether to enroll or voluntarily withhold their late birthday child.
Figure 1

*Demographic Descriptors of Participants’ Late Birthday Children (please note that all names reported are pseudonyms).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Participant</th>
<th>Age of Child at Interview Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
<th>Enroll or Withhold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sally R.</td>
<td>5:3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>$20-$40k</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Billy N.</td>
<td>6:1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>$60-$80k</td>
<td>Withheld last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Q.</td>
<td>5:1</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>$80-$100k</td>
<td>Withhold this year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie W.</td>
<td>5:3</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>&gt;$100k</td>
<td>Withhold this year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark F.</td>
<td>6:2</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>$80-$100k</td>
<td>Withheld last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy T.</td>
<td>5:5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>&gt;$100k</td>
<td>Withheld this year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeff P.</td>
<td>6:3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>&gt;$100k</td>
<td>Withheld last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin D.</td>
<td>6:5</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>&gt;$100k</td>
<td>Enrolled/Withheld last year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wade L.</td>
<td>6:3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>&gt;$100k</td>
<td>Withheld last year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sally R. was five years, 3 months old when her mother was interviewed for this research project. Her mother and father are divorced. She is the youngest of three children. Her mother has a college degree and works outside of the home, so Sally and her siblings attend daycare. She attended two years of preschool, and her mother decided to enroll her in kindergarten when she was initially eligible.

Billy N. was six years, one month old at the time of the interview. His parents are married and he is the youngest of three children in the household. His mother and father both attended some college, and work separate shifts to allow one parent to be at home at all times with the children. Billy’s parents decided to withhold him from kindergarten last year to attend a second year of preschool. He is not enrolled in kindergarten as an older child.

Audrey Q. was five years, one month old when her mother was interviewed. Her parents are married and he is the older of two children. Both parents have graduate
degrees and work outside of the home, so Audrey and her sibling are cared for during the
day by an extended family member. Her parents decided to withhold her from
kindergarten this year and she is attending a second year of preschool.

Julie W. was five years, three months old when her mother was interviewed for
this research project. Her parents are married and she is the youngest of four children.
Her mother has a graduate degree and her father has a college degree. Her mother stays
at home during the day with the children. Her parents decided to withhold her for an
additional year and she is attending a second year of preschool.

Mark F. was six years, two months old when his mother was interviewed. His
parents are married and he is the younger of two children. Both parents have college
degrees, and his mother stays at home during the day with the children. His parents
decided to withhold him from kindergarten last year, when he was initially eligible, to
attend a second year of preschool. He is now attending kindergarten.

Tommy T. was five years, five months old when his mother was interviewed. His
parents are married and he is the second of three children to his mother and father. He
has an older stepbrother from his father’s previous marriage who also had a late birthday.
This stepbrother was enrolled in kindergarten when he was initially eligible and was
subsequently retained. His mother has a graduate degree and his father is a high school
graduate. Both parents work outside of the home. Tommy’s parents decided to withhold
him from kindergarten this year so he could attend a third year of preschool.

Jeff P. was six years, three months old when his mother was interviewed. His
parents are married and he is the oldest of three children. His parents both hold college
degrees and his mother stays at home during the day to care for the children. His parents
decided to withhold him last year from kindergarten so he could attend a third year of preschool.

Kevin D. was six years, five months old when his mother was interviewed for this research project. His parents are married and he is the older of two children. Both parents hold graduate degrees and work outside of the home. His parents, on the advice of his preschool teacher, decided to enroll him in kindergarten last year when he was initially eligible, even though his mother admits that she had concerns about his readiness. She stated that Kevin had a very difficult time in kindergarten and was removed less than one week after beginning to return to preschool. He is now attending kindergarten as an older child.

Wade L. was six years, three months old at the time of the interview. His parents are married and he is the second of three children. His mother has a college degree and his father has a graduate degree; both parents work outside of the home. His parents decided to withhold him from kindergarten last year so he could attend a third year of preschool. He is now enrolled in kindergarten as an older child.

**Procedures**

This research design was submitted for review to the University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and received approval (See Appendix A).

**Recruitment and consent.** The researcher sent an email letter to the director of a local preschool requesting to place a flyer (see Appendix D) regarding this study in the lobby of the facility. The director was agreeable and one participant was recruited there. Two others were referred by colleagues of the researcher. A school psychologist in a local school district contacted the researcher and explained that she had received a copy
of the flyer from a substitute teacher in her building, not affiliated with the researcher. The school psychologist expressed interest in this study and requested permission to post the flyer in her building. One participant responded to this flyer and was recruited. Other participants (n=3) were recruited through contacts of one of the research committee members. The remaining two (n=2) participants were recruited via word-of-mouth through previous participants. There were an additional four individuals who expressed interest in participating, but were unable to take part due to scheduling or logistical difficulties or as a result of contact being lost with the researcher.

Contact with prospective participants was established via email, primarily with the participant making contact with the researcher and expressing the desire to participate. A thesis project description email was sent to the interested participants, introducing the researcher and briefly outlining the purpose of the study, to begin to engage the participant in the research project. Logistics and scheduling details were also established via email. Consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection (see Appendix A for a copy of the IRB consent letter). Each of the participants in this study was interested in learning more about the results of this study and was given the opportunity to provide an email address by which the researcher could send a short description of the research results upon completion.

**Data collection.** Parents participated in a semi-structured interview (average length=17.5 minutes) with the researcher (see Appendix B). Demographic information was voluntarily collected from parent participants following the interview (see Appendix C), and included: 1) birthdate/age of child, 2) gender of child, 3) child’s place in sibline
(1/2, 2/4, etc.), 4) socioeconomic status of the family, 5) school district of attendance, 6) age of parents, 7) level of education/employment of parents, etc.

All of the interviews were conducted by the researcher, at a time and location chosen by the participant. Five interviews were conducted in local restaurants; two were conducted in participants’ homes; one was conducted in a participant’s child’s gymnastic practice facility, and one was conducted over the telephone due to geographical distance.

As in Bennett-Armistead’s (2008) research, interviews were completed in the late summer to early winter of the 2012-2013 school year, as the participants had made their decision whether or not to enroll their child and had not yet forgotten the thoughts or ideas that they considered. Furthermore, waiting until after the participants had made their decisions regarding their children ensured that they were not unduly influenced in their choice by having taken part in this current project. Finally, by obtaining information from participants before their children become fully involved in the academic curriculum, the opinions expressed would not be influenced by their child’s performance. In other words, a participant would not have yet had the opportunity to second-guess their decision based on the child’s performance in the classroom or feedback from the child’s teacher.

**Instrument.** Following a research-as-instrument model as described by Morrow (2005), I feel that it is only appropriate to describe my own interest in studying how parents reach the decision to enroll or withhold their children in kindergarten at the age of initial eligibility. I was a late birthday child, and my parents decided to send me to kindergarten when I was initially eligible. I experienced considerable stress and anxiety in the first grade, possibly due to social and emotional immaturity, and came to think of
school as a place to be avoided. By the time another year or two had passed, I acclimated to the expectations of school, but kept with me the notion that it was not an enjoyable place. Additionally, as three of my four children have late birthdays, my wife and I have and continue to struggle with deciding what is best for them. It is from this experience that my interest in this subject developed, and through this lens that I interpret the data collected.

In this research project, parents were interviewed using a semi-structured interview adapted from the interview developed by Bennett-Armistead (2008), with built-in allowances for further querying as appropriate. Nastasi and Schensul (2005) suggest that in qualitative research designs, the researcher is considered the primary instrument of data collection. The researcher’s ability to create an appropriate interview schedule and to effectively interact with participants while at the same time collecting and analyzing data is important to ensuring the quality of the data collected.

As discussed by Weiss (1994), a fixed-question—open-response interview design allows for an acceptable compromise between necessary rigors of scientific exploration in that all participants are asked the same series of questions, yet also remains flexible enough to allow participants the opportunity to respond in their own words rather than being restricted in their responses to a set of predetermined responses. This allows for the systematic collection of information and data, and because all participants are asked the same questions, their responses can be thematically coded and compared. It also allows the responses of individual participants to be as detailed as possible and to further elucidate what factors they considered when deciding whether or not to enroll their child (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005).
The current interview protocol is based on the design by Bennett-Armistead (2008), though with a narrower scope. It required approximately 20 minutes to administer, and was audio-recorded for transcription by the researcher at a later date. The general areas covered in the interview included information about the child (including his/her birthdate, household composition, preschool experiences, socialization, emotional presentation, academic- or school-related skills, physical development) and about the parent’s choice to enroll/withhold the child (what decision was made, what influences were considered, what was helpful/not helpful, etc.). The interview protocol was pilot tested on three subjects who had faced the decision to enroll or withhold a late birthday child earlier prior to gathering of actual data to allow proper breadth of questioning as well as to address any unforeseen problems with administration. Following pilot testing, several items were removed due to redundancy issues, while others were modified for clarity.

The veracity or validity of qualitative research designs, data, and results is referred to as trustworthiness (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Qualitative data is considered to be trustworthy if it portrays an accurate depiction of the experience(s) of the participant. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that data must be collected in such a way to ensure credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability), and confirmability (objectivity). They further outline several techniques that a researcher should implement and follow to ensure the trustworthiness of data. These include, but are not limited to: spending enough time with, and interviewing deeply enough, the participant to understand the scope/breadth of his/her experience; using multiple sources of data and methods of collection, as well as utilizing multiple
investigators to triangulate data; checking with the participant periodically throughout the interview to ensure that his/her response is comprehended accurately; the use of systematic and well-organized documentation and keeping of records to permit later review/replication of the research process; and taking detailed notes to describe the participants, context of data collection, and procedures to allow future reviewers to come to their own conclusion about the transferability of the data across other contexts, locations, and subjects. All of these techniques were employed in the current study to maximize the accuracy of the data collected.

**Data analysis.** Participants were allowed to choose their own pseudonym, though many simply chose a random alphabetic letter. Other than consent forms, which were not connected to demographic or interview data, no identifying information was collected or retained to preserve participants’ confidentiality. Interviews were transcribed by the researcher using dictation software. Both the interviewer’s and participant’s verbalizations were included in the transcriptions, however non-lexical conversation sounds (i.e., “uh,” “umm,” etc.) were omitted. Specific names of children or other family members, or other data that might in some way identify the participant were redacted. The transcribed interviews were then reread while listening to the taped interview to ensure accuracy.

Interview transcriptions were then reviewed by the researcher and coded according to Saldana (2013). The data were initially coded by the researcher rereading the transcriptions and noting comments and interesting data on the draft of the interview itself. This precoded data was then organized into individual thematic units to allow the researcher to identify common patterns and responses to questions, as well as to begin to
generate an effective and logical system of response coding. Next, these units were analyzed and recoded into broader, more general content descriptors. A colleague with working knowledge of qualitative design reviewed two interview transcripts chosen at random and coded these independently to allow for a review of intercoder reliability or agreement. This was determined to be .93. Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken (2002) state that a criterion of .70 is generally acceptable for research of an exploratory nature.

As the transcribed interviews were reviewed, certain ideas and notions became evident (i.e., the child was enrolled in school because the parent thought he was academically strong, the child was voluntarily withheld because the parent thought she was emotionally immature, etc.). The purpose of this coding method was to organize the topics that emerged from the transcribed interviews into logical, understandable, and relatable themes by which to better understand, comprehend, and accurately describe or retell the experiences of the participants.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

This research project examined what influence parents report when deciding to enroll or withhold their late-birthday child in kindergarten. A late birthday child was defined as born between July and October, which would make him or her initially eligible to enroll in kindergarten shortly after their fifth birthday or their sixth birthday, thereby making the child one of the youngest or one of the oldest children in the class, respectively.

Two questions were explored in this study:

1. What factors do parents consider when deciding whether to enroll their late-birthday child in school when he or she is eligible, or to withhold him/her for another year?

2. From where do parents seek information when deciding whether to enroll their late-birthday child in school when he or she is eligible, or to withhold him/her for a year?
Research Question One: Factors Considered by Parents

Upon reviewing and coding the transcribed interview protocols for responses to research question one, regarding what factors parents considered when deciding to enroll or withhold their late birthday child, four general themes emerged—1) allowing the child to have an extra year to grow and develop, 2) social concerns, 3) emotional concerns, 4) thoughts about the possible long term effects of being the oldest or youngest in the class, and 5) academic concerns.

Give the child an extra year. One theme that emerged is referred to in the literature as the “gift of time” (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). These parents reported thinking that providing their child an additional year to mature would provide the opportunity to develop the skills to be successful in school.

Mrs. P. explained that she and her husband decided that continuing their child in a quality preschool program seemed like the best choice for him.

Our alternative was to put [Jeff] in a pre-kindergarten program and really let him kind of develop emotionally and socially, get a little bit maturity, or I guess a little bit more mature before he started it.

Mrs. D. described her belief that allowing her child another year to grow and develop really helped him to be ready for kindergarten.

That gift of time just made a huge difference, a world of difference, and [Kevin] is able to do it now, to be successful.

Social concerns/shyness. Another theme reported by parents in this study was concern about their child’s socialization or social skills. These parents specifically reported that this was a major theme that they considered when making their decision.

Mrs. L. explained how she learned the extent of her son’s shyness from the preschool teacher, and how this added to her understanding of his social difficulties.
I remember the one time in preschool they wanted [Wade] to maybe go for speech therapy, I was like I don’t know, does everybody go for speech therapy? And the teacher was like you know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard him talk. I’m like, that sort of would’ve been good to know a little earlier, don’t you think? That the teacher never even heard my son talk? So, yeah, I always thought he was so timid and shy he flew under the radar.

Mrs. Q. described how she understood her daughter’s difficulties with socialization with other children her age, and how another year of preschool made sense as a way to allow her child to develop more effective social skills.

I would really have to say socially immature would be the best way to describe [Audrey], at least at the beginning of the year. I think that now though she has gotten a little better socially maybe just because of the year passing, or maybe it’s because she’s been in the preschool program, I don’t know, but either way it’s good. For a long time she wasn’t really interested in her peers, or other kids her age, she was really more interested in being around adults.

Mrs. F. described her son’s social and emotional immaturity and how she thought this might negatively affect his ability to be successful in kindergarten.

. . . We were concerned about how young [Mark] was, especially like socially and emotionally, and we just didn’t want to put him into a program that was new and might be difficult for him when we already knew that he could be in one that he was used to and he learned in and that he liked.

Mrs. D. described her son’s discomfort with being in social situations and with relating to other people in general. She further explained how his diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) made understanding basic social skills difficult for him.

Oh boy, [Kevin] is not comfortable socially right now, he was diagnosed with ADHD about a year ago about this because of that or what, but he has a hard time with that. He is better than he was, but he had just social problems before, he didn’t get along with other kids, he had a hard time relating. . . he just had a hard time being able to understand and follow what most of us just understand as social rules. He does a lot better now, he can play games, he is in sports, he can just identify with other boys now. When he was 5, last year, he was still struggling a lot.
Mrs. F. explained that she and her husband were concerned about their son’s basic immaturity.

So we were never concerned about whether or not [Mark] could do the work, but we were concerned about how young he was, especially like socially and emotionally. (Mrs. F., personal communication, October 15, 2012).

Specifically, several participants noted that they considered their child’s lack of significant social contacts or friends as a theme in their decision. Mrs. T. explained that one of the factors that she considered was her son’s basic introversion and difficulty making and keeping friends.

Well he’s not very social, like [Tommy’s] not one to make friends easily, or have, I would not say he was shy necessarily, I don’t know, he is just really shy, he reminds me of myself when I was his age. Like he’s not going to be outgoing most times.

Other participants specifically reported that they thought about their child’s shyness and general discomfort in novel social situations. Mrs. N. reported that her son’s shyness and emotional reactivity were a factor that she and her husband considered.

Also, because of [Billy’s] shyness, and his sort of quickness to get emotional, we thought it would be a good idea to let him have another year.

**Emotional concerns.** The third theme that emerged from the interview data was participants’ concern about their child’s emotional maturity and ability to self-regulate. Mrs. Q. explained her concerns about her daughter’s level of anxiety and worry about routine or everyday occurrences.

Can I be honest? Emotionally [Audrey] is a basket case. She just kind of frets over things a lot, she is a worrier, she frets on or even fixates on things. . . She just gets worried about things that are either small or large so far away and just kind of gets stuck worried about that I guess. If I had to describe her in one word, it would be a worrier, and we didn’t think that would be ok for her in school, especially if she wasn’t ready yet.
Mrs. L. explained that one of the factors that she and her husband considered was the fact that their son tends to become emotional easily.

I think that if there is a way for you describe [Wade] really would simply be to just say he’s a nice sweet little boy. He is just a nice little boy. But then again, when I think about it, he can get a little over emotional sometimes, like if he feels like he’s in trouble, or somebody’s mad at him, it will really upset and bother him a lot. And he has a hard time with things being not fair.

Mrs. D. described her son as emotionally immature, and that he becomes upset and cries easily.

Oh, [Kevin] is immature emotionally. He has. . . to expand on that, sometimes he really has a hard time navigating things that are hard for him. It’s like, if he gets told he can’t do something, or if he gets in trouble, or is he gets any kind of criticism, he still cries pretty easily. If he is told to stop doing something before he feels like he is done, he gets upset. Still a lot of tears. He has trouble dealing with things like that in general.

Mrs. F. explained that she and her husband decided to withhold their son for a year in part to allow him to grow and mature emotionally. She said that their thought was that another year might allow him to be more successful in kindergarten.

We decided it would be better that [Mark] be a little bit more emotionally mature than less emotionally mature and less bored. Besides, it doesn’t seem like it would be very traumatic for a kid who gets to school and does really well and gets advanced, but I thought it would be pretty traumatic to have to retain a child.

Several parents specifically reported that they considered their individual child’s level of anxiety and ability to manage this when reaching their decision. Mrs. L. explained that she just knew that her son was not yet able to manage his anxiety due to his lack of maturity.

But no, I didn’t really put that much thought into it, I just thought there is no way [Wade’s] ready for this now, I just knew he was too young and too immature I guess. There was just no way, he just has such anxiety.
Other participants also reported that they had concerns about their late birthday child’s ability to act independently, or to be away from his or her parents or other familiar caregivers. Mrs. N. described her son as being comfortable in familiar situations, but having particular difficulty dealing with novel situations.

I guess that really depends, sometimes it seems like [Billy] is really dependent on me, and then other times it seems like he can do things pretty okay by himself, it really depends on the situation. Like if he is comfortable with what’s going on or the crowd is not too big, he is a very independent kid, but if it’s a new situation or there are new people or there are just a lot of people, I think he gets overwhelmed and kind of looks to me for support or, you know, things like that. But I don’t think at his age that is too much of the weird thing, I just think he’s pretty shy . . . so he gets unsure in situations.

Mrs. Q. explained that she and her husband were concerned about their daughter’s ability to act independently of them, especially when one of her parents is in close proximity.

Very dependent, [Audrey] is very dependent on us still. She doesn’t like to do very much by herself, I mean she can do things for herself when we are around. But she really would rather be close to one of us at least when she is doing pretty much anything.

**Long-term effects.** Another theme that emerged was parents’ consideration of possible long-term effects of their decision to withhold or enroll their child, including considering whether their child was at greater risk for school difficulty if he or she entered kindergarten when initially eligible was voluntarily withheld. Mrs. Q. explained that she thought about what effect deciding to enroll or withhold her daughter would have on her life in years to follow.

I really wanted to try to look at like the bigger picture of [Audrey’s] life down the road a little I guess, and what would like develop her, in the sense of herself. I think that was helpful for us.
Mrs. W. further explained how she considered the possible long-term consequences, including the possibility of retention, of enrolling her son before he was ready for the stressors and structure of kindergarten.

Was it really going to truly hurt, when you did the pluses and minuses, somebody said to me, if you have any worries or regrets, no one’s ever been hurt by being held back, or deferred from entering kindergarten when they were younger. But you can’t go back once you started, I mean like if you put your child in kindergarten before they are ready, they’re kind of stuck there, and sort of have to face the consequences of what might happen if they’re not ready. So if you have any doubts, it’s never going to be held against them.

Mrs. Q. explained that she was happy with what her daughter was learning in preschool, and was satisfied to leave her there. She also reported that she saw little risk in allowing her daughter to have another year to prepare for kindergarten.

Plus [Audrey’s] learning a lot of the stuff she needs to know for her age at her preschool anyway, so it’s like, can it really hurt if she waits?

Participants specifically reported considering whether they wanted their child to be the youngest in the class when deciding to enroll or withhold, along with whatever social or developmental ramifications to which this might lead. Mrs. Q. reported specific factors that she and her husband considered when deciding whether to enroll or withhold their daughter.

I think for me, looking at the social implications like what was going ahead when [Audrey] was older, like you know where kids in her class can be driving faster than her, I mean earlier than her, how old will she be when she graduates, where there’s things that other kids will be doing that were year older, that she might not be ready for?

Mrs. W. explained that she specifically did not want her daughter to be the youngest member of her class or peer group.

I didn’t want [Julie] to be the youngest, you know, in the class, I’ve seen the struggles that my other kids have had, I didn’t want that for her, and to me, not even having a question.
Participants also reported that they either had an older child in the family who also had a late birthday, and as such understood more about the effects of their decision with the child currently being considered, or that they had an older child and as such knew what was expected of kindergarten students. The parent reported that understanding what would be expected of her currently kindergarten-eligible child was helpful when deciding to enroll or withhold. Mrs. N. reported that the experiences of her older stepson and other acquaintances were helpful to her when deciding what to do with her own child.

We know people who have had kids with late birthdays and have kept them or sent them, and obviously having my stepson go early by mistake and then be retained, that made a big difference.

Mrs. R. spoke of how having had older children in school helped her to decide what was right for her daughter. She stated that she already knew what to expect from kindergarten, what would be expected of her daughter, which helped her to decide to withhold.

And you know, [Sally] being my third child really helped too, you know if she was my first child, I probably would have questioned a lot more is she ready? Should she go? But you know, my third time going to kindergarten, so I was like you know she’s ready.

Another consideration reported was the fact that other school districts in the area and state have earlier kindergarten eligibility cutoff dates, and that had she lived in another geographic location she might not be faced with this decision at all. Mrs. T. explained that she realized that her son’s eligibility for kindergarten depended on where he lived. She reported that when she understood that the decision could be made by simple geographic location, the stakes did not seem as dire.
I also looked at what other states do because I know some of them have like early June cutoff dates, you know, other dates other than the end of September and I thought, you know maybe if [Tommy] was in another state it wouldn’t even be an option.

**Academic concerns.** Finally, none of the participants in the study reported concerns about their child’s academic ability. Conversely, most respondents stated that their concerns about their late birthday child’s ability to succeed in kindergarten as a younger or an older student was specifically not based on his or her academic ability. Most participants stated that they knew that their child was academically ready for school and as such did not weigh this in their decision making process.

Mrs. N. explained that she understood that her son was already prepared academically for kindergarten, even though he was still attending preschool.

Oh yes, [Billy] can do all that stuff, no problem, he knows how to act in a classroom, but also, he has had really good teachers who really have done a good job helping him to learn sort of how to go from preschool to regular school, even though he’s not there yet. This preschool teacher now, the one in the afternoon, was a teacher in this same system, the system where the kids go, and she knows a lot about what is expected of them, and seems to really sort of teach to that.

Mrs. Q. specifically explained that she was not concerned about her daughter’s academic ability, and that only her social difficulties were relevant in her decision.

I would say [Audrey] is an average student academically; I’m mostly just worried about her on the social aspect. She is a sponge, and she loves going to school, and she picks things up really fast, but socially she is still very very immature.

Mrs. F. explained that she knew her son was academically prepared for kindergarten, and that this was not a factor in her decision to withhold him for another year.

Oh, [Mark] is fine with things like that, he’s been in this preschool program for a while and kind of really got them prepared for you know regular school things like that, he can do most things that you expect him to be able to. And he is
smart, he picks up on things really fast and is already starting to read. (Mrs. F., personal communication, October 11, 2012).

Mrs. R. explained that her daughter was very ready for the academics of kindergarten, and because of this she felt comfortable in her decision to enroll her daughter when she was initially eligible.

But, academically, [Sally] was over-the-top prepared, probably at the end of her first year of preschool, really, probably didn’t need the second year of preschool. So she was homeschooled, and we did a lot of the kindergarten work that she might have done if she was in school. I wasn’t worried about her needing anything, I mean she is already starting to learn to read, so I am pretty sure she can handle whatever they throw at her in kindergarten.

Research Question Two: Sources of Information

Following the review of interview transcripts for research question two, regarding from where parents sought information when deciding to enroll or withhold their late birthday child, five themes emerged across the participant responses. These themes included: 1) know your child/trust your gut feeling, 2) preschool success, 3) advice from family/ friends, 4) online resources, and 5) advice from school.

Know your child/trust your gut feeling. The majority of the participants in this research study stressed that the most important influence or source of information in their decision-making process was their own understanding of their child. Many noted that they considered input from numerous places and sources (for examples of such other sources, see below), but in the end believed it was best to consider the child’s individual characteristics rather than input or advice from other sources. Mrs. R. reported that the most salient source of information when deciding to enroll her daughter in kindergarten at her initial eligibility was her knowledge and understanding of her daughter.

. . . I think that just knowing my child was the most important thing, you know when it came right down to it, just kind of knowing what was best for [Sally].
And you know, her being my third child really helped too, you know if she was my first child, I probably would have questioned a lot more is she ready? Should she go?

Mrs. L. suggested that if she were to give advice to another parent faced with this decision, she would stress the importance of knowing your own child’s intrapersonal strengths and weaknesses.

I guess the biggest thing that I would say to somebody who was looking at the same situation right now would be to just, I guess, of course listen to what other people tell you, but always take it with a grain of salt, and know that your kid is different from their kid or whatever kids they are talking about, and that in the end you have to decide based on your own kids sort of strengths and weaknesses.

Mrs. N. explained that when it came time to actually decide to enroll or withhold her child, she wanted to do what was best for her child. She stressed that this was an individual decision for an individual child.

But in the end, you have to just do what you think is right for your own kid, and assume you’re making the right decision now for whatever happens later.

Mrs. D. reported that in hindsight, she and her husband were mistaken to accept the advice of the preschool teacher rather than trusting their own instincts and understanding of their son.

You know, looking back, we really should have just listened to our gut feeling about [Kevin], and not so much to the other people who we thought knew more about him. You know, we thought, the preschool teacher is used to seeing this, and the kindergarten teachers are used to seeing this, and if they think he can do it, then we should probably defer to their judgment. But they were so wrong! Looking back on it, I really feel terrible about not having listened, or trusted, in ourselves to just go ahead and do what we thought or I guess we really knew was right. I just remember that it felt like there was really very little support for parents trying to figure out what to do with their late-born child.

**Preschool success.** The next theme that emerged was participants’ reports that they considered their child’s preschool success when deciding to enroll or withhold the child from kindergarten. Mrs. T. stated that they felt that their child was successful in
preschool, and wanted this success to continue for a year, rather than chance that he might begin kindergarten and not be as successful.

Yes, we decided to hold [Tommy] back and let him spend another year at the preschool. And we did the right thing, because when he started this year, he was really ready, really well-prepared.

Advice from friends, family. Participants reported that they considered advice from friends and family when making their decision. Mrs. R. related that she had a friend who made the wrong decision when enrolling her son when he was initially eligible, and that she thought about that when she decided to enroll her daughter.

... I do keep that one friend in the back of my mind, who pushed her son in early, and he just wasn’t ready, and it was really hard for him. So I did think about that, and I would never consider pushing one of my kids in early. But [Sally] was ready, and I was ok with that.

Online resources. Using the internet to search for information or advice was another theme that emerged from the data. Interestingly, most reported that this was not particularly helpful. Mrs. D. explained that she and her husband looked online for advice or direction but found that most available information was based on opinion.

And if you look online, there’s really no help, you get sites that are just informational about what is kindergarten and what should your child be able to do academically, or else you find advice websites to tell you this is right to do or that is the right thing to do.

Mrs. Q. explained that she and her husband looked for available information for parents trying to make the best decision for their child, but found that there was not much out there was useful. She spoke specifically about not finding information that would help a parent concerned about the social or emotional aspects of kindergarten readiness.

... We were just trying to look and see general information about what’s good or bad, like pros or cons, or try to put that kind of thing together from what we were reading, but also it always seemed like the everyone talking had an agenda. And there is a lot of stuff out there that talks about what a kid needs to know or be able
to do to be ready for kindergarten, but it is mostly about academic stuff, and that didn’t help much because that was not something we were worried about. There wasn’t anything, at least that we could find, that talked about your child being emotionally ready for it.

Mrs. D. described that she and her husband looked at online sites, asked friends and family, and tried to get advice or information from the school, but felt that there was nothing that was helpful.

. . . We tried to look at places online, and to ask around and talk to other people, and just try to see what else the options were. I was really surprised, being part of this profession, and how little information that is out there about this. And the people that you talk to, everybody feels really strongly one way or the other, and nobody really just says okay, here are the pros and cons, it’s really more like oh you have to do this, oh you have to do that. And if you look online, there’s really no help, you get sites that are just informational about what is kindergarten and what should your child be able to do academically, or else you find advice websites to tell you this is right to do or that is the right thing to do.

**Advice from school.** The final theme that emerged was most participants felt that there was a marked lack of information and support available for them as they struggled with whether to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. Mrs. T. spoke of how little useful information is available to parents of late birthday children in general, and that she and her husband felt that the local school was not particularly helpful.

It was really unhelpful that there’s just nothing out there to help parents, and there’s no guides or anything. In my experience I have found there are plenty of people with advice and lots of guides available for deciding whether to move your child’s forward like when to advance him, but there was just nothing that we could really look at reliably to decide what to do about whether to send him to school in the first place. It almost seems to go like the opposite way, like they leave you on your own to decide whether to send him, and then if you wait and he’s smart enough to be advanced, then they want to come out with lots of advice and help and lots of people who say yes it’s good or know it’s not good. I remember I was like, where were you last year?
Factors Not Reported by Parents

As a researcher, I found myself surprised by the fact that none of the parents interviewed in this research study reported that they considered sports or physical size to be a factor considered when deciding to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. There have been numerous stories in the popular media about parents deciding to withhold their child from school in order to provide him or her with a physical advantage in sports and physical activities, but this was not evident in the results of the current project. Most participants simply reported that they considered their child to have average physical stature and coordination when compared to their peers and did not weight this in their decision.

Also, none of the parent participants in this research project reported that they discussed the decision to enroll or withhold with their child. In other words, parents did not take into consideration their child’s thoughts about whether he or she wanted to go to kindergarten or another year of preschool, or whether they believed that they were ready for kindergarten.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Interpretation of Findings

Regardless of what birthdate is chosen by a state or local educational system as the age cutoff for kindergarten entry, there will always be children whose birthdays fall near this date, thus there will always be parents who must struggle with the decision of whether to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. Indeed, 4-9% of eligible children continue to be voluntarily withheld (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000; Lincove & Painter, 2006; Bassok & Reardon, 2013). While there is extant research literature about this practice, it is unclear whether it is helpful or harmful to a child in the long term. There is no clear answer as to whether a parent of a late birthday child should enroll a child when he or she is initially eligible or voluntarily withhold the child for another year. Also largely missing from current literature is any real exploration of what parents consider when deciding whether to send their late birthday child to school or to voluntarily withhold the child. There are no examinations of what concerns parents of late birthday children have, what factors they consider, or from where they seek information, guidance, or advice.

A better understanding of how parents arrive at their decision will assist educational professionals in guiding more logical, less intuitive, decisions about those
children who are ready for school and those who are not. The age at which late birthday students enter school affects the student and parents, as well as the other students in the classroom, the teachers, and the administrators (Buten, 2010). The current project may guide policy toward an understanding of which children are likely to enter kindergarten early and which are likely to be voluntarily withheld, leading to improved curriculum development and provision. The purpose of this research study was to examine the factors that parents consider in deciding to either send their late birthday child to school at an earlier age or to withhold him/her for an extra year. The purpose was further to provide additional understanding about what motivates a parent in making this decision. By gaining insight into how parents decide to enroll or withhold, educators and administrators will be able to provide them with better direction, resources, and support.

Results of this study indicated that there is a gap between what the research literature has heretofore examined and what parents report that they consider when deciding to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. Specifically, while the research has studied whether there is an academic effect secondary to withholding a late birthday child, parents in this study indicated that this was not one of the factors they considered when deciding what to do with their child. Rather, their focus was more on interpersonal and other factors unique to their child, such as whether he or she was socially and emotionally prepared for kindergarten. Further, while the media has reported on numerous occasions about parents withholding their children to make them more competitive in sports later in their academic careers, this was not supported in this research study. This suggests that perhaps in addition to studying whether enrolling or withholding a late birthday child has positive or negative consequences, researchers
should also begin to examine why and how parents decide what to do with their particular child. It also suggests that researchers may do well to explore for what reasons parents are concerned about their children’s social and/or emotional readiness for kindergarten.

Educators and administrators should be aware that parents may feel unsupported when faced with deciding whether to enroll or voluntarily withhold their late birthday child. They seek this guidance, but are frustrated by the lack of its availability. Parents faced with this decision reported dissatisfaction with the availability of assistance or even information available for their consideration when making a difficult decision that could have long-reaching consequences for their child.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this research project, beginning with the smaller breadth and scope of the design. Due to the small sample size and small geographic catchment area, the generalizability of this research is limited. Also, there was no input from fathers of the children in this study. It is assumed that the participating mothers reported the situational variables as truthfully as they understood, there may well have been factors and informational sources considered by the fathers of which the mothers were unaware. Further, the descriptive nature of some data gathered may lead to some degree of cultural bias, again due to limited sample size. The sample consisted primarily of middle class, suburban, college educated parent with the financial means to be able to provide or locate appropriate child care should they decide to withhold their child for a year from kindergarten. There are certainly families for whom this luxury is not available, and may be an important factor in making this decision among economically diverse families. The sample was also made up of parents who had predominantly
decided to withhold their late birthday child for another year. This likely skewed the results in that the factors considered by parents who chose to enroll their late birthday children may have been misrepresented or underreported.

Additionally, the limited sample size could not capture all of the different concerns or themes that parents consider when making this decision. The goal in qualitative interview research is to reach a point of response saturation, in which the addition of new participants no longer produces novel responses. Moreover, saturation occurs when every response possible is provided by the participant pool and is therefore represented in the data set. While the subject pool of the current research project did produce many of the same responses, it is questionable whether this would be possible even with a much larger sample.

The nature of the semi-structured interview format may also have led to some skewing of data, as there is necessarily a degree of human interaction involved in the data-gathering process. The quality of rapport between the interviewer and interviewee may have led to bias in that participants may have answered in terms they assumed the researcher wanted or expected to hear. Further, there are subtle nuances in verbal responses that may hinder the successful transmission of meaning from speaker to listener. For example, a participant may have reported that he or she “just knew” that his or her child was ready for kindergarten, but may not go on to explain the litany of resources he or she reviewed in the months prior to gaining the reported knowledge. The interviewer would have had to infer that there was more information to be had and successfully query the participant lest this additional information be missed.
Implications for Future Research

While there is still no clear data about whether it is advisable or not to withhold a late birthday child from kindergarten, the research that does exist has only examined this question based on academic performance and test scores. This makes sense, given the focus on accountability that exists now in the educational system (Bassok & Reardon, 2011). What has been ignored in the literature is how the nonacademic aspects of school success are affected by either entering as a younger or older child. These untested, perhaps less topically-evident, yet still important factors might include a student’s ability to self-control and self-soothe, his or her approach to learning, internalizing and/or externalizing behaviors, parental involvement, and early literacy and numeracy skills (Li, Kirby, Barney, Setodji, & Gershwin, 2006). It would also be interesting to see a comparison of students who were enrolled when initially eligible and students who were voluntarily delayed in terms of emotional stability, approach to school, satisfaction with life in general, plans for further education, etc. when such factors as emotionality, anxiety, and social immaturity are controlled. Finally, it would be interesting to examine how the decision to enroll or withhold is made from a family systems perspective, to have a better understanding and comprehension of just how mothers, fathers, and families reach their decisions to enroll or withhold a late birthday child.

Suggestions for Supporting Families Faced with this Decision

While it may not be possible, ethical, or even legal to provide specific advice to parents who are trying to decide to enroll or withhold their child, it does seem that educators and schools could play a more active and assistive role in helping parents to feel more confident in their decision. Educators and schools should give parents an
opportunity to discuss their concerns. They should point out to parents that the research is decidedly split, and that what research is available seems to suggest that there are neither large positive or negative effects to either enrolling a child upon initial eligibility or deciding to withhold a child for a year. Parents will not likely cause marked damage to their child by making either choice. Bennett-Armistead (2008) suggests that parents should be informed of the likelihood that the high stakes with which they are contending may not be as high as they assume them to be. In other words, the decision to enroll or withhold their child may carry less risk than they think, and that whatever their decision, their child will be most likely turn out just fine. They should also be informed that if there is concern about the child in the future, the parent will always have the opportunity to bring these to the attention of the school.

School personnel and educators should be willing to have discussions with parents about what is expected of children in kindergarten. Considerations such as whether a child is able to remain in a classroom for three or six hours per day, whether he or she needs a nap, is able to stand in a line, is able to count to ten, is able to handle and manage anxiety or frustration, etc., should all be reviewed in a candid fashion. Katz (2000) made several suggestions for parents to consider when deciding to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. They should be encouraged to clearly identify for what reason(s) they think waiting for another year might be advisable. If there is a specific reason, this may merit more thought. Parents should be encouraged not to withhold a child simply because he or she was born shortly before the local cutoff date.

Parents should be invited to ask about readiness assessments used in the district, and to be able to meet with the prospective kindergarten teachers to assess for their
child’s goodness of fit with the classroom and its expectations. Parents should also be encouraged to learn more about the kindergarten program in the school and think about how well the schedule and rigors fit with their child. Other considerations might include typical class size, full or half day schedule, and formality or informality of instructive techniques. Parents should also consider closely what their child will do if not enrolled in kindergarten. A child might benefit more from another year of a quality preschool program rather than being at home and playing or watching television. Finally, parents should talk to their child realistically about kindergarten and inquire about his or her thoughts and feelings about readiness.

Parents should be able and encouraged to meet with kindergarten teachers and to see classrooms. If possible, it might be helpful for a parent of a late birthday child to come to the school during the school year prior to the one in which their child would be initially eligible, and be allowed to observe how the classroom, teacher, and students operate.

Finally, parents should be reminded that the decision about whether to enroll or withhold a late birthday child is a personal one, and should be made in consideration of both the child’s individual characteristics as well as the expectations and requirements of the school. Schools and educators may do well to provide as much information as possible to parents of prospective students, and demonstrate the willingness to be a part of the decision making process. They could possibly help a parent who is trying to decide whether to enroll or withhold to connect with a parent who made the decision previously, to allow for an exchange of information, a discussion of the experience, and perhaps the opportunity for parents to feel more comfortable with their ultimate decision.
Conclusion

The present study examined what themes parents consider when deciding whether to enroll or voluntarily withhold their late birthday child from kindergarten. Findings suggest that the parents in this study considered numerous interpersonal factors unique to their child, specifically issues of emotional maturity and social skills. Parents also considered whether their child was too dependent upon current caregivers to have the ability to be successful in the classroom. Parents reported that they thought that allowing their child another year to grow, develop, and mature provide the necessary tools with which to be successful. They thought about long-term effects of their decision, such as whether they wanted their child to be the youngest or oldest in the class, and what ramifications that might entail.

The findings of this study also examined from where parents seek information upon which to base their decision to enroll or withhold. Parents reported that they trusted their gut feeling about their child’s readiness, that is was most important to know their own child and to take his or her specific and unique interpersonal factors into account when deciding what to do. The reported further that they looked to friends and family, to online resources, and to preschool staff for advice and support. Finally, parents reported that they looked to the local school system for advice or guidance in reaching a decision, but found that there was little assistance or support from this resource.

This study is important to the current literature because it begins to fill a gap that exists between studying the effects of the phenomenon of kindergarten redshirting and why and how parents decide whether to enroll or withhold their late birthday child. Results of the current research study suggest that parents either do not seek, or do not
consider what the research literature currently says about the practice of enrolling a child when he or she is initially ready. Rather, parents consider a variety of factors, and seek input from several different sources when deciding. If we seek to truly understand kindergarten redshirting as a practice, we should continue to listen to what parents have to say about how and why they decided to enroll or withhold their child. Through a more thorough understanding of the dynamics that influence this decision, we can more appropriately understand the phenomena and provide more appropriate support and guidance.
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CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

• TITLE of STUDY:

Should they stay or should they go? How parents decide to enroll or withhold their late birthday child from kindergarten.

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Jim Ayers, a School Psychology student from the University of Dayton. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research project is designed to investigate what factors parents consider when faced with the decision of whether to enroll or withhold their late birthday child in kindergarten.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked questions about what you considered and where you sought information about whether to enroll or withhold your late-birthday child from kindergarten. You will be asked to give your honest opinions and your specific answers will not be shared with anyone else. Your responses will remain anonymous and no information will be given in the report that would allow anyone to personally identify your responses. The interview will take place at a time and location which it at your convenience, in person. The interview should take approximately 30 minutes to complete.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

During the course of your participation in this study, you will be interviewed about what factors you considered when you decided whether to enroll or voluntarily withhold your late-birthday child in kindergarten. You may experience mild anxiety and/or second-guess the decision that you made based on your interview and discussion with the
researcher.

• **ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS**

There are no direct benefits to you, however, by participating in this research, you will be helping develop understanding of what parents consider when deciding to enroll their young-for-class or late birthday child in kindergarten when initially eligible. Increasing awareness of what parents consider to be important and assistive when making this decision will allow educators, administrators, and policy makers to better assist parents when faced with this decision.

• **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will receive a $5 gift card in appreciation of your participation.

• **IN CASE OF RESEARCH RELATED ADVERSE EFFECTS**

If you experience any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, or if you have questions about the research, contact Jim Ayers (primary investigator) at 513-233-0750 or Elana R. Bernstein, Ph.D. (thesis committee chair) at 937-229-3624.

• **CONFIDENTIALITY**

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity without your permission. The interview process and your responses will be audiotaped for later analysis, and your identity will be protected or disguised. Your name will not be revealed in any document resulting from this research without your permission. Your data will be recorded anonymously. A pseudonym of your choice will be recorded with your data; your name or other identification will not be recorded with the data. When the research thesis is completed, the audio tapes will be destroyed.

• **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, that will not affect your relationship with the University of Dayton or other services to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The investigator may also terminate my participation in this research if she feels this to be in my best interest.

• **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Jim Ayers, primary investigator and graduate student at jcayers@fuse.net or Elana Bernstein, Ph.D., Thesis Chair and Associate Professor with the University of Dayton at 937-229-3624 or at ebernstein1@udayton.edu
• RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Dayton Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Mary Connolly, PhD, (937) 229-3493, Mary.Connolly@notes.udayton.edu, Kettering Laboratories Room 542, 300 College Park Dr., Dayton, OH 45469-0104

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. In signing this form, I certify I am eighteen years of age.

Name of Participant (please print) _________________________________
Address_________________________________________

Signature of Participant_______________________________________ Date___________

SIGNATURE OF WITNESS

My signature as witness certifies that the Participant signed this consent form in my presence.

Name of Witness (please print)_______________________________________

Signature of Witness_________________________________________ Date___________
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed about your thoughts relating to your child’s readiness for kindergarten and whether he/she began when eligible or was voluntarily withheld. Remember, the kindergarten age cutoff date in this district is __________, and as such a child born in the three to four months before this date is considered to be a late birthday child, meaning that he/she is eligible to attend but can also be voluntarily withheld to attend next year. As we discussed earlier, this interview will be taped so that I will be better able to analyze the results at a later date. Do you agree to be audiotaped? Please remember that you do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable, and that you can stop this interview at any time.

Part One: Child Information

- What is your child’s birthdate?

- Who lives in your household, besides you and the child? Where does he/she fit into the sibline?

  Where are parents during the day?

  If older siblings, were they considered to have a late birthday?

  If so, did he/she go to kindergarten early or late?

- Did your child attend any type of preschool or school preparation program?

  How would you describe your child socially?
Does he/she have many friends?

- With whom does he/she play most often?

Is he/she shy or outgoing?

Can he/she separate from you in a group?

- How would you describe your child emotionally?

Can he/she handle frustration?

How dependent is he/she upon you?

- How would you describe your child’s academic or school-related skills?

Can he/she follow rules and demands of a classroom?

Can he/she count to ten? Name colors? Write his name?

Does or did he/she attend preschool?

Does or did he/she go to daycare?

- How would you describe your child physically, compared to other children his/her age?

Stature, coordination, activity level?

Part Two: Enroll or Withhold

As we have discussed, your child is considered to have a late birthday, and as such would be eligible to enroll in kindergarten this year or to wait until next year. What did you decide for your child?

- If the child is being voluntarily withheld, do you have plans for him/her?

- What did you consider when you were deciding whether to send __________ or keep him/her home for another year?

- Describe the process of coming to this decision?
• From where you seek outside input when you were making up your mind?
• From where or whom did you receive input for your decision?
• What was helpful/not helpful?
• What stands out as particularly important or salient advice, information, etc.?
APPENDIX C

Demographic Information

Participant ID __________

1. Birthdate of child _______________.

2. Gender of child  M  F

3. What is the ethnicity of the child? _______________.

4. Child’s place in sibline (1st born, 2nd of 4 children, etc.) _______________.

5. What is your yearly household income?
   Below $20K  $20-40K  $40-60K  $60-80K  $80-100K  Above $100K

6. In what school district do you live? _______________.

7. What is the age(s) of the parent(s)/caregiver(s)? _______________.

8. What is the level of education of the parent(s)/caregiver(s)?
   Mother: High School  Some college  College degree  Graduate degree
   Father: High School  Some college  College degree  Graduate degree

9. What is the employment of the caregiver(s)?
   Caregiver __________________________
   Caregiver __________________________

Please remember that you do not have to answer any question that makes you feel uncomfortable, and that you can stop this interview at any time.
APPENDIX D

Research Flyer

Was your child born between July and October?

Have you recently had to decide whether to send your child to kindergarten, or to keep him or her home for another year?

Would you like a $10 gift card?

If so, I would like to talk to you!

I am studying school psychology at the University of Dayton, and I am conducting a research project to study what influences parents’ decisions to enroll their late-birthday child in kindergarten. I would like to speak to any interested parents who have recently faced this decision to explore what influenced you and what decision you made.
Your participation will help to guide future practice and will earn you a $10 gift card!

If you are interested in participating, please contact me at:

Jim Ayers, MA, MS
jcayers@fuse.net