

Parent's Question: Is Retention a Good Idea?

- PARENT: I've just received a note from my little boy's teacher. She thinks he should be retained. She thinks David needs another year to grow up and then he'll do better as a first grader. I'm not sure what to tell her.
- PACER: First of all, do you have the right to agree or disagree, or will the school retain him regardless of what you feel?
- PARENT: I found out that in our district the school may recommend that kids be retained, but they won't go ahead if the parents really object. They want my answer in two weeks.
- PACER: Did the teacher mention any other reasons why she was recommending retention for David?
- PARENT: Not in the note, but she's told me before that he didn't seem to have picked up from his reading readiness work what he should have. He's just not learning to read at all. And I guess he wanders around the room quite a bit and bothers other children when they're trying to work.
- PACER: It seems as though it would be wise for you to request a meeting with both David's teacher and the school principal. Before you make any decision as important as this, you'll want quite a bit more information.
- PARENT: Like what?
- PACER: Well, first of all, though schools do often feel that an extra year of maturity might be the answer for a child who's not doing well, this doesn't always prove true. Is David relatively old or young for first grade?
- PARENT: Oh, he's one of the oldest children.
- PACER: That might suggest that just being another year older is not going to get at the heart of the problem. You'll want to find out if the teacher has any other ideas about what might be wrong besides needing more time.
- PARENT: What should we be looking for?
- PACER: Well, two things that are so obvious that sometimes they're unfortunately overlooked are vision or hearing problems. You'll want to be sure David has eye and ear examinations done if he hasn't had them recently. Also, when the teacher describes in more detail what bothers her about David's learning processes, try to recall if you've seen the same things at home. If you haven't (for instance, if he's able to concentrate and stay on task for age-appropriate time periods when he's home) perhaps his teacher could make changes within the classroom to see if he couldn't accomplish the same behavior at school.
- PARENT: If I do decide to let David be retained, I'm worried about what will be done differently next year so he wouldn't fall again.

PACER: That's a very legitimate and important concern. Especially because David's age does cast some doubt on the theory that just being another year older will solve the problem, you would want to establish very carefully what would be done differently next year if he's retained. Would he get more individualized help? Would teaching methods be changed according to how he seems to learn best? Without plans for these kinds of changes kids who've struggled without success at one grade level may simply continue to struggle without success the second time through.

PARENT: What if that still didn't solve things?

PACER: That's something else you need to discuss with his teacher and principal. Are there any indications that David might have some special needs?

PARENT: What do you mean?

PACER: Some special problems with learning that indicate he may need extra help from specialized teachers. For instance, you

might want to think about the following: Is David learning motor tasks like cutting and coloring as quickly as, or more slowly than, other children? Can he follow simple two-step directions in sequence? Are the ways he expresses himself similar to the other youngsters? Or does he appear to have more difficulty with speech or communication?

PARENT: Well, I guess I haven't talked all those things over with the teacher. We really do need a meeting. But what happens if it turns out he's way behind in the things you just mentioned?

PACER: You could request at the meeting that David be assessed. That's an evaluation to find out if he does have special needs and should be receiving special education services. Don't jump to any conclusions about this, but do explore the possibility at your meeting. Why don't you get back to me when you've found out the additional information you need, and we can talk again about your decision.