

## **Shining with ADHD by The Childhood Collective**

### **Episode #192: Should My Child Repeat a Grade? What Parents Need to Know About Grade Retention**

Katie: If it didn't work the first time, we're not going to do the exact same thing and expect a different result, right? We have to change it in some way. There's a reason why our kids were struggling with reading or writing or math at grade level and so we want to make sure that we're getting to the root cause of it. I feel like we talk about this so much on here, but the root cause, why did they struggle all year?

Hi there. We are The Childhood Collective, and we have helped thousands of overwhelmed parents find joy and confidence in raising their child with ADHD. I'm Katie, a speech language pathologist.

Lori: And I'm Lori.

Mallory: And I'm Mallory. And we're both child psychologists.

Lori: As busy mamas ourselves, we are on a mission to support ADHD parents on this beautiful and chaotic parenting journey.

Mallory: If you are looking for honest ADHD parenting stories, a dose of empathy with a side of humor and practical tools, you are in the right place.

Katie: Let's help your family shine with ADHD.

Lori: Today on the podcast, I am here with Katie and Mallory to talk about a topic that can be a little bit controversial, and that is great retention.

Mallory: Every spring we get a lot of messages from families who are either considering holding their child back a grade or the school has recommended that their child be held back.

Katie: Yes. And in either case, families are usually pretty confused about what decision they should make for their child looking ahead to the following school year.

Lori: So one of the things that I've noticed is that most parents who contact us are concerned because they believe their child with ADHD might also have a learning disorder, but a lot of

times in those cases, maybe the school hasn't done an evaluation yet to look at that, or maybe they're saying they don't need an evaluation for that.

Mallory: So many times, parents are just wanting to understand their child's needs better to know how to best help them at school and move forward.

Katie: So, before we get into the very exciting topic of great retention, which we're going to try our best to keep this really interesting for you guys, but I want to just take a quick second to explain exactly what we're talking about. Okay, so grade retention is when a student is not meeting expectations. Whether that's social, emotional or academic areas, they're not meeting grade level expectations. Sometimes the school or the parents can request that the child repeat a grade in order to catch up and the theory behind this is that it would give them more time to learn the material.

Lori: Yep. And at first glance it seems logical, right. So, if a student isn't making progress, then if we give them another year, that should give him them the time to maybe catch up. But what we know, looking at a vast amount of research on this particular topic, is that grade retention doesn't actually benefit students in most cases. So if the research is really clear in this area, why is it still being recommended all the time? And again, I hear from families, I've sat in IEP meetings where the teachers are recommending that a student be retained. So why is that still happening?

Mallory: That's a great question, Lori.

Lori: I know, right?

Katie: It sounds very interesting, right.

Mallory: So, in today's episode, we're going to be covering five myths and facts related to grade retention and what you can do to support your child if they're not meeting those grade level expectations. But before we get into our topic, there's just a couple things we want you to remember. First is that grade retention is not the same thing as choosing to wait and have your child start kindergarten later. Sometimes that's called, like, red shirting. Delaying entry to kindergarten is not the same as grade retention.

Lori: Well, I was going to say the research that we're talking about is not related to that.

Mallory: Yep. There is separate research that's showing some benefits and some costs, but for very specific populations when it comes to kindergarten red shirting, but we're not talking about that today. Today we're only referring to kids who are repeating a grade and this applies from kindergarten all the way up through high school. We've had messages from people saying they thought this research only didn't apply to kindergarten. No, this is true for kindergarten as well. Kindergarten through high school repeating a grade.

Katie: Yeah. And we also want to give all of our listeners a reminder that you know your child better than anyone. Okay. And there are very specific situations that come up, and we hear from you that grade retention was actually very successful in very specific cases. So, what we're talking about today is giving you broad information based on the research that we have available to help you make the best decision that you can about your child's needs. But you might still decide that retaining your child does make sense, given your specific situation, and you may have already held your child back if that's the case. We really want you to know there's no judgment here. We're just trying to help you have all the information so that you can make the best decision for your family.

Lori: Absolutely. So, let's dive into our first myth. So, the first myth is if students are held back a grade, then they will catch up with their peers. Okay. So, again, this is why a lot of teachers or schools will recommend it. But the truth is, when we look at the vast majority of research in this area, what we see is that kids will often make small academic gains in that first year that they repeat a grade. but that improvement is really temporary. So, it's really just for that period of time. And those benefits don't continue beyond, you know, two, three years after your child is retained, which makes some sense. For children with ADHD, we know that they're going to be again, 30% delayed, in their executive functioning compared to other kids. And that includes like, regulating emotions, social skills with other kids. And so, if you retain a child at seven-years-old, they might fit in a little bit better that next year that they were retained, but that gap doesn't, that gap still exists for kids with ADHD. So what we're trying to look at is how do we support those skills and develop those skills, not just give them another year of the same thing. So they really do need the appropriate accommodations or interventions that we talk about. Just doing another year of the exact same thing isn't how we teach skills.

Mallory: Yeah. So, our second myth is that if a student is held back a grade, they will have another year to learn and they'll make progress in reading, writing and math. So that's our second myth. But the fact is that based on the research, students who experience grade retention do not improve their learning long term. So, studies have actually shown that long term, these kids that are retained perform more poorly in reading, writing and math compared to other students who are also struggling academically but did not get retained. If a student doesn't learn the concepts the first time that they were taught, then just simply repeating that information again presented in the same way is not likely to result in academic gains. We need to change the way they're being taught to and provide accommodations in order for them to make that progress.

Katie: Yeah, this is a real mindset shift for me. When I would, when I was first starting out as a speech therapist and families would ask me, you know, the school is recommending that we hold them back. And I remember sitting in meetings with psychologists who would explain this and really the kind of simplified version, like you said, Mal, is if it didn't work the first time, we're not going to do the exact same thing and expect a different result, right. We have to change it in some way. There's a reason why our kids were struggling with reading or writing or math at grade level and so we want to make sure that we're getting to the root cause of it. I feel like we talk about this so much on here, but the root cause, like, why did they struggle all year? And again, just trying it again one more time with feeling is not a strategy. It's really not getting to the root cause of why was this happening? And we're going to talk at the end about what you can do as a parent, but just as a spoiler alert, there needs to be an assessment, an evaluation to figure this out and what's going on more beneath the surface, not just slap a band aid on it.

So, our third myth is that for students who are socially or emotionally immature, I'm thinking of a lot of our kids with ADHD who do present a lot younger than they are, then another year might just give them enough time to make social gains and maybe even boost their confidence, right. This is kind of the myth or the theory, but the research doesn't really show that this is the case. So, what the research actually shows is that kids who are, you have grade retention are more at risk for emotional distress. And this makes sense, right. So, if we think about a child who is held back a year, all of their friends, especially if they're staying at the same school, all of their friends have now moved on to the next grade and they're having to go back and do the same grade again. They're starting over with a new class of kids. People

obviously know that they have, you know, aren't moving up with the rest of the kids and they might feel kind of ostracized. So, what we tend to see is actually lower self-esteem, lower confidence, and the what we again need to look at is what kind of benefits does this child need? Like what would help them the most? They probably need support in social skills and emotional regulation and those types of things. Those are going to be specialized support for them, not just saying, oh, do it again, we'll just try one more time. And I actually have kind of a funny story about this. So, my son is 8 years old and he is very tall. Like, I'm not joking, he is almost five feet tall. And it's awesome for things like sports because he just is like the king of the hill right now, we'll see. I don't know if he'll continue to be so tall, in the future. I think you will, but we'll see. But I was at his school a few weeks ago, so he's a second grader. And we've been at the same school since kindergarten. And a bunch of the kids came running up to me and they were like, we figured out why he's so much taller than us. And of course, you know, I'm kind of laughing with them. I like, what did you guys figure out? And they said, we think he did kindergarten three times, which would officially make him a 10-year-old second grader. Which kind of, honestly, he fits that bill a little bit. But I just laughed and I was like, no, you know, he was in your kindergarten class. Do you guys not remember?

Lori: And I love that they don't remember that.

Katie: I know. And I was the homeroom parent, so I'm like, no, you were there. I was there. We were all there. But what's funny is, then another little girl goes, well, maybe it's just because he eats all of his veggies. And I am just cracking up. I'm like, you guys really are the rumor mill right now, because he did not repeat kindergarten three times. He is not a veggie eater. So, no, it's none of those things. Although I do love when people ask me, like, what's my secret? And I just laugh and I'm like, no this kid loves peanut butter sandwiches more than life. So, anyway, luckily, I was there to correct that little rumor.

Lori: Yeah. And I think, you know, when we talk about some of the research on this, there's not really research to show that, like, it's beneficial. This is kind of the one area, the social, emotional area is where we have seen kind of negative effects of it. So, it is something that, you know, because of that, we tend to be more resistant to recommending that. So, our fourth myth is that students who are held back will be more successful as they progress to high school. So, I know a lot of parents are thinking, gosh, I want them to be able to be, you know, more successful, have another year of maturing as they go into high school. But again, when

we look at the research, it shows that children who experience grade retention in elementary school are actually five to ten times more likely to drop out of high school than students who were not held back a grade, which is, you know, a crazy amount.

Katie: Yes. That's such a heavy statistic.

Lori: I know. It is heavy. And again, it's like, it really is contrary to what we would kind of reason in our minds, right. We wouldn't necessarily think that. But again, we try and look at the general research and see that is not necessarily benefiting our students. Recent research shows that these kind of adverse effects are more significant, too, for black and hispanic girls who are held back a grade. So that's also something to kind of think about, in those particular populations, too, if you're considering it.

Mallory: So, our final myth is that if you hold your child back when they're young, they won't notice or experience the adverse effects. So as long as it's when they're young, they won't experience the effects. And again, just like the research that we've been citing the research just shows that grade retention in general is not effective whether the child is younger or older. At no point is the research showing that grade retention is an effective intervention. So that's important to keep in mind. Like I said, we do get messages from people saying, well, we've heard that kindergarten is an exception or the early grades are an exception. No, it's not an exception based on the research, younger or older, again, grade retention is not showing to be an effective intervention for these kids.

Katie: Yeah, that's tricky. And obviously, as I mentioned before, you know, there are very specific situations. People have sent us emails and messages about where their child did benefit and so there are situations where that may be the case. The bottom line is that the problem is that we don't have research to date that can help us predict which students would benefit from grade retention and which would not. And so, when we think about this more big picture and we consider all of the adverse effects that grade retention could potentially have on children, generally we would say it's not a research supported intervention if your child is struggling.

Lori: Yeah. And if your child again has already experienced grade retention, we really don't, we don't want you to worry. And I know that like some of the things that we're talking about, it can be like, oh, you know, you might be panicking. We're trying to show that great

retention in and of itself is not going to be a solution. So even if your child was retained, we're going to talk about things that we would still want you to consider and think about to support your child in the future, but that alone as an intervention isn't probably going to be enough to help your child moving forward in school.

Katie: Yeah. So even if your child has already been retained or if the team is considering it, what we really want you to take away from this is that you can better understand your child's diagnoses, strengths and needs when you have a comprehensive evaluation. So, what we're looking at there is what are the underlying areas that your child could use support? So, if child has ADHD, they would benefit from specific interventions, things around executive functioning, helping them with organizational strategies, helping them with areas that are challenging for them throughout their day. On the other hand, we have kids and this can overlap with ADHD too where they actually have a true learning disorder, for example dyslexia. So, if they have dyslexia, they need a very specific type of reading instruction which is a multi-sensory approach that's evidence based to help them with their dyslexia. So, the evaluation, the purpose of that is to get to the root of it. So, if your child has already been retained, you can still request that evaluation. And if you're considering it, this is a great time to push for that eval to figure out why did they struggle.

Lori: Right. And I think that's really the issue that I see from many of the families that I talk to in the spring and private practices, the school has maybe recommended grade retention without having done that full evaluation. So, I know many of you maybe got an evaluation from your pediatrician, or maybe you didn't get a comprehensive evaluation. So, you know your child has ADHD, but maybe we don't know what, where their learning is. So again, if your child has something like dyslexia, more of the same instruction isn't going to work for them to learn to read. They need a different type of instruction and we're not going to know that until we kind of dig a little deeper and figure out why reading is a challenge, or if reading is a challenge. And again, if it's just ADHD and they don't have learning concerns, we still want to know, like, what types of interventions are going to support them as opposed to just doing a grade all over again, if that makes sense.

Mallory: Right. And just crossing your fingers that child matures.

Lori: Yes.

Mallory: Yeah. So, what should you do if your child's school is recommending grade retention? And if this is the case for you or you're considering it for your child, we are going to link in the show notes this really wonderful handout that was created by the National Association for School Psychologists all about grade retention and all of the research that we've been referencing in this episode you can find these references located in this handout. So, we highly recommend heading to the show notes, checking out this handout. Great information for you, but also helpful information for you to print out and bring to the school when you're having these conversations. So, the most important thing to understand is, again, is why your child is struggling so we can provide them with specific interventions and support that they need to succeed. So, if your child's school is recommending that your child be held back a grade, instead of evaluating your child, we'll say this again, that's the problem. When we really advise strongly against grade retention if there has not been an evaluation looking at the root cause of what's going on for your child.

Lori: Yep. So, today's key takeaway is that much of the research does not show that grade retention is a beneficial intervention to help kids catch up when they are behind and not meeting those grade level expectations. But it's important to make sure your child has also had a comprehensive evaluation to understand their learning, their strengths, and their needs so that interventions are individualized for your child's learning. And again, we're here to support.

Katie: Thanks for listening to Shining with ADHD by your hosts, Lori, Katie, and Mallory of The Childhood Collective.

Mallory: If you enjoyed this episode, please leave us a review and hit subscribe so you can be the first to know when a new episode airs.

Lori: If you are looking for links and resources mentioned in this episode, you can always find those in the show notes. See you next time!