Retention

After days, weeks or months of missed school due to treatment, or difficulties making academic progress, many families are faced with the question of whether their child should repeat a grade (retention). A child may have missed a significant amount (or all) of a year in school and academic difficulties may also persist long beyond the completion of treatment due to the impact of disease or neurocognitive late effects. These risk factors present a unique vulnerability to retention as schools and families work to best support patients in the academic domain. Although few studies have examined retention within the pediatric oncology population, the limited data suggests cancer survivors are retained at higher rates than their peers. In the short-term, students may benefit from repeated academic opportunities, but long-term data suggests retained students are at increased risk for negative academic and emotional sequelae.

Although there is no one-size-fits-all answer of whether or not to retain a child, there are important questions for both clinicians and parents to think about when faced with this question.

Questions for Clinicians to Ask When There is Consideration of Retention

Key Questions:

- How does the parent feel about retention?
- How does the child feel about repeating a grade?

Developmental/Educational Progress

- Is this child on track developmentally?
- Where does the child’s age fall relative to grade level peers?
- What are the areas in which this child is struggling? According to parent? According to school?
- How would an additional year in this grade potentially improve these struggles?
Supports/Services
- Has this child been receiving tutoring during treatment related absences?
- Has this child been evaluated by a neuropsychologist and/or the school district?
- Is the child receiving special education services or does the child require special education services?

Risk Factors
- How might repeating a year negatively impact this child?
- What would it mean for this child socially and/or emotionally to be retained?
- Is the child at risk for neurocognitive late effects due to diagnosis or treatment?
- Does the medical team anticipate that this child will return to school full-time next fall?

Questions for Parents to Ask when there is Consideration of Retention

Key Question:
- What are the specific reasons you are recommending retaining my child?

Progress
- Is my child struggling with academic content?
- How will another year of the same curriculum change my child’s challenges?

Support/Services
- If he/she is being tutored: How is my child responding to the instruction? What is the tutor reporting?
- What interventions have you provided to address academic and/or psychosocial concerns?
- Have you maximized available supports?
- Has my child been formally evaluated or assessed for learning challenges?
- Does my child have to earn additional school credits in order to move up with his/her peers? If so, can summer programming or online classes be provided?
Risk

- Do anticipated improvements outweigh potentially long-term negative consequences of retention documented in literature?
- What if my child is retained and you have the same concerns next spring?

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