

Disabled or Young?
Relative Age and Special Education Diagnoses in Schools

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Abstract

This study extends recent findings of a relationship between the relative age of students among their peers and their probability of disability classification. Using three nationally representative surveys spanning 1988-2004 and grades K-10, we find that an additional month of relative age decreases the likelihood of receiving special education services by 2-5 percent. Relative age effects are strong for learning disabilities but not for other disabilities. We measure them for boys starting in kindergarten but not for girls until 3rd grade. We also measure them for white and Hispanic students but not for black students or differentially by socioeconomic quartiles. Results are consistent with the interpretation that disability assessments do not screen for the possibility that relatively young students are over-referred for evaluation. Lastly, we present suggestive evidence that math achievement gains due to disability classification may differentially benefit relatively young students.

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