

National Association for Primary Education

School Starting Age

The statutory age of admission to primary school in England is at the beginning of the school term following the child's fifth birthday. However in practice most children enter school at the beginning of the school year during which they will become five. Hence the age of admission for a substantial majority is four. This is among the lowest of European countries, only Malta and the Netherlands admit five year old children. The most common starting age is six. Eight countries admit children at seven.

This paper examines the advantages and disadvantages associated with such an early admission age. **Why do children start school so early in the UK?**

The current statutory age of five was made law in the 1870 Education Act. The reasons put forward were very largely related to child protection (i.e. protection from exploitation at home and unhealthy conditions in the streets) and to childcare in order to release mothers for work. There was also a need to gain support from employers because setting such a young age would allow an early leaving age so that children could enter the workforce. Analysis of the literature makes it clear that the starting age was not agreed on the basis of any developmental or educational criteria.

Schools have been encouraged towards early entry by government. The most explicit recommendation was included in the report of the DCSF's Rose review in 2008. This proposed that 'entry into reception class in the September immediately following a child's fourth birthday should become the norm'. Schools were quick to respond and were assisted by the 1988 Education Reform Act which gave schools greater control over their budgets. Available finance was linked to the number of children on roll in the January of each school year and this facilitated early entry. Regulations on staffing and qualifications that applied to nursery schools do not apply to reception classes although they are still part of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Nursery and admission outcomes.

Official support for very early entry is prompted by a concern to raise primary attainments. It is argued that an early start will facilitate the grasp of basic

skills, particularly those of language and mathematics. However outcomes at the end of the primary course do not confirm this beyond the ephemeral effects of coaching for national tests. Researchers have compared the experience and outcomes of nursery education with those of children admitted up to a year before the statutory school starting age to reception classes. The latter often reveal an early grasp of skills but it is important to assess outcomes in later years. There is evidence that these gains have disappeared by the ages of eight or nine and furthermore that harm may have been done to wider considerations of educational growth due to inappropriate approaches to learning. Research findings show that reception class teachers tend to take on a more didactic role and children spend proportionately less time on tasks of their own choosing. The curriculum is more subject related and emphasises the acquisition of abstract and symbolic aspects of number, reading and writing. This early focus on abstraction has been accelerated in recent years through the emphasis on phonics in preparation for the national phonics check taken at the end of Year 1. It is argued very strongly by early education specialists that the formal teaching of skills is developmentally inappropriate for many children of four and five. Although coaching has led to rising levels of performance in the phonics check year on year this is not matched by comparable improvements in KS1 reading SATs the following year.

There is risk that play, the handling of materials and learning from experience will be neglected in admission classes. Emphasis in the nursery on a learning environment which is orally rich, exploratory and experiential results in improved language and study skills including the development of self-regulation which are crucial to raising long term attainment standards.

Impact and later effects of pre-school education on attainment.

The long term benefits of pre-school education is confirmed by OECD Pisa and by PIRLS. High ranking countries have well established nursery education. Research on the outcomes of the High Scope programme in the US provides evidence of beneficial outcomes in adult life accruing from high quality nursery experience at the age of four and five. At the age of 23 there was a powerful impact on real-life measures such as lower rates of arrest, less frequent emotional problems and a higher level of employment. High Scope reports that for every tax dollar invested in the early care and education programme \$7 are saved for tax payers by the time the participant is 27 years old, \$13 are saved for tax payers by the time the participant is 40 years old, and that there is a \$16 total return including increased income to the participant. The emphasis on child initiated activities in the nursery developed children's sense of social

responsibility and their interpersonal skills and these had a positive impact in later life.

Long term outcomes stemming from later entry to school.

Solid evidence from international studies indicates that not only does a later start not have an adverse impact on attainment but, even more than this, later entry to school coupled with nursery attendance can result in higher attainment by the age of nine and in later years. A group of researchers explored the influence of school starting age on the relative performance of children in England (entry at four or five) and Slovenia (entry at seven) The study concluded that there was no lasting benefit from early school entry in England in terms of mathematical attainment. An Ofsted study compared reading standards in England, Finland (entry at seven) and Denmark (entry at six). England was ahead at the age of six but was outperformed by Finland and Denmark not only in reading but also in maths and science at the age of 15.

Considerations underpinning policy.

The existing statutory age of entry to school was not decided on the basis of developmental or educational criteria.

Children in the great majority of developed countries start school at the age of 6 or 7. There is widespread availability of three years of nursery education for younger children.

Entry to admission classes at the age of 4 or 5 in the UK is often inappropriate developmentally. This facilitates the formal teaching of basic skills at too early an age which inhibits later learning.

Attendance at a nursery provides an opportunity to learn through play and other direct experience. This results in enhanced motivation to learn as well as the communication and study skills which are the basis for later educational attainment.

The long term benefits of nursery attendance are shown by a substantial body of international research.

Any cognitive gains resulting from early admission to school are often washed out by the age of 8 or 9 and in later years. Learning is not embedded. This is confirmed by comparative studies both in the UK and internationally.

Policy

The statutory age of admission to school should be 6 years.

Fully funded nursery education should be available to all families.

A thorough review of existing routes into nursery education and the early years in order to enhance the status of the workforce in line with the maintained sector, and to further strengthen the quality and professionalism of these routes in the context of the principles articulated in *Birth to 5 Matters* (Early Years Coalition, March 2021).

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