

## Review backs later formal lessons

By Hannah Richardson  
BBC News education reporter

### Children should not start formal learning until they are six, a review of primary education in England says.

Instead the kind of play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should go on for another year, the Cambridge Primary Review says.

There is no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, the review says, but there are suggestions it can do some harm.

Ministers say a starting age of six would be completely counter-productive.

Most children start primary school in England aged four, and a large proportion are taking advantage of free, part-time pre-school places in local schools and privately-run nurseries from the age of three.

### Too much too young?

The kind of learning that goes on there follows the government's "Early Years Foundation Stage", which currently runs to the age of five and is a play-based curriculum which includes some early literacy and numeracy goals.

#### COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE

- **Five years old** : England, Scotland, Wales, N. Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands
- **Six years old** : Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark (6-7), France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Irish Republic, Italy, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden (6-7)
- **Seven years old** : Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania Source: Eurydice

Continuing this informal but structured learning for a year or so would bring children in England in line with many European countries, where school starts at six or even seven, and standards are often higher.

A similar step has already been taken in Wales and Northern Ireland where a play-focussed curriculum has been extended to the end of Key Stage 1, when children are aged seven. But Scotland follows the English model. "This would give sufficient time for children to establish positive attitudes to learning and begin to develop the language and study skills which are essential to their later progress," says the review, which is based on six years of academic work.

It stops short of calling for the age of compulsory schooling to be put back to age six, but does call for an open debate on the subject.

However, it adds, that the issue is less about where children learn than what they learn.

Dame Gillian Pugh, who co-authored the review, said play-based learning was not a "wishy-washy, 'just let them get on with it' thing".

"It's a balance between children-initiated and adult-initiated learning," she said.

### 'Social disadvantage'

She said four and five-year-olds tended to be at a stage where they were just "tuning in" to learning and that they could be "turned off" if they were made to follow too formal a curriculum, too early on.

[HAVE YOUR SAY](#) Sometimes I think people are more interested in the childminding aspects of primary schools and nurseries than whether or not they are having any actual benefit Lee Brown, Thornhill

This would be of particular benefit to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with speech and language delays, she added.

But she argued it would not hold back brighter children who were ready to begin basic numeracy and literacy in reception classes.

The review also notes that there are downward pressures to get children in reception year ready for the early years of school and the tests that follow.

It also calls for free part-time nursery provision to be offered to two-year-olds in areas of social disadvantage and for children with particular needs.

### 'Pillars of stability'

This would help them get the most out of school and hopefully close the achievement gap, it says.

The authors also call for national assessment tests, known as Sats, to be abandoned, saying their high-stakes nature, being linked to league tables, encourages a too-narrow focus on literacy and numeracy.

Instead, children should be assessed on the broad range of subjects throughout primary school and at its end, but these assessments should be used to monitor children's progress rather than hold teachers accountable.

Welsh schoolchildren no longer sit Sats at 7, 11 and 14, nor are school league tables used there any more.

The review team also called for a major review of the way schools are staffed, arguing that there is a case for using more specialist teachers alongside the traditional class teacher.

But they also said primary schools were "pillars of stability" that were highly valued by parents and pivotal to communities.

**" If you are the minister, whether or not you believe in both localism and light-touch regulation, it is you that can be horribly exposed when things go wrong "**

Mark Easton BBC's home editor

### 'Counter-productive'

England's schools minister Vernon Coaker said the government was already reforming primary education to make the curriculum less prescriptive and free it up for teachers.

He added: "A school starting age of six would be completely counter-productive - we want to make sure children are playing and learning from an early age and to give parents the choice for their child to start in the September following their fourth birthday.

"Our expert group on assessment said it would be a backward step to scrap English and maths tests at 11 and we are piloting a School Report Card, which will give parents a far broader picture of how schools are doing."

Christine Blower, general secretary of the NUT, said: "All the evidence shows that proper, in-depth early years education provided by qualified teachers gives the best possible start to children's schooling."

### **We are asking whether children should begin formal lessons at six. To add your opinion and read others**

#### **Here are some of your experiences of education from around the world.**

As a teacher I heartily agree with the findings and hope that various systems both in the UK and here in Australia will raise the enrolment age to six - particularly for boys. However, it is precisely those who cannot afford to stay home to care for children any longer than necessary who need this advice. The children of economically disadvantaged families would benefit most from staying home or being in a childcare environment longer to wait for school readiness. Someone needs to act! **Ghaynes, Sydney, Australia**

I moved to Sweden a few years ago and am now preparing to send my child to school over here. Formal lessons do not start here until six/seven-years-old - the early years are in government-run reception kindergartens. These give the kids a wide choice of activities and start to introduce them to a structured learning method - but without the formal aspects that the UK introduces. All I can say is that I am very impressed and I don't see any areas where the later start counts against the child in the long run. **Mark, Sweden**

Here in Germany, children start school at the age of six and they celebrate day one in style with family and friends coming to wish them well. They get an Einsatztüte (large cone full of goodies for school). It is a real rite of passage. However, many more mothers stay at home to look after the children and give up careers for longer. Children remain "babyish", unable to read, and lack the discipline that they are taught in the UK from age four. Up to five years is said to be the best learning time too!! **Susan Turner, Bremen, Germany**

In Cyprus the children start at age six and they have pre-school kindergarten. They start at 0730 and finish at 1330. Many from our village attend universities around the world, so their education appears to be unaffected. **GJS, Paphos, Cyprus**

I have two children aged 17 and seven. We moved to France four years ago, so I have had two children going through different systems for their early years learning. The oldest had a UK early school education and has constantly struggled with reading, spelling and maths - she started at four. My son did a term in the UK at four and was straight away being made to read and write, and was uninterested. Since moving to France, he participated in their early school system of pen control, learning through play, and at six he started to learn to read. **Claire Lang, Pontivy, France**

I went through the English schooling system but my son has had the Dutch system that begins at six with formal lessons. Between the ages of four and six it was learning through play. The children don't even realise they are learning. Social skills are a lot better for children here, they learn to share and help. His reading and writing skills at eight are the same as his cousin's in England. **G. van der Velden, Heesch, Netherlands**

In Italy, formal schooling begins at six. However, most kids go to 'scuola materna' (pre-school) from the age of three, which teaches them social skills, such as playing and eating together. This is fundamental to classroom behaviour later on. The key issue is how much effort parents put into teaching their kids to read. It's no good plonking them in front of the TV in the forlorn hope that something will "sink in". **Neil Probert, Cernusco Sul Naviglio, Italy**

Here in Finland, the norm is for kids to start school at seven. It is optional to go to kindergarten before that, and to pre-school at six (one day a week at kindergarten where the child gets used to a school environment). The benefits are plainly visible - Finland has one of the lowest illiteracy rates in the world. **Steve, Turku, Finland**

I lived in Albania from 1997 to 2005. There children began school at the age of seven on average. By 15 they were ahead of our children here at that age. They would go school from 0800 until 1300. Then they would have several hours homework. They did not have the books or facilities we have here, often no electricity and no heating in the winter. Their system let them down when they reached later high school years. But I understand it is improving now. So starting at six would not be a problem. **Pete Hodge, Upholland, UK**

My three-year-old daughter has just started full-time school here in Spain and her books for her first year included maths, science, English (yes the Spanish start a second language early) and reading etc. There is nothing wrong with teaching children at an early age. My eldest is 11 and her class learn English and French. Yet another example of trying to save money somewhere at the expense of a child's education while other countries prefer to invest in their future. **James, Spain**

Children in India begin schooling at three! Or even earlier. Convent education starts early. We have pre-nursery, nursery, KG-I and KG-II before the child is admitted to class-1. A British legacy! **Nayan Pani, New Delhi, India**

I have also experienced life from the other side. I now live abroad, my kid started at six, though she went to many playschools. She does ok but levels seem behind where I was at 10. With today's culture I believe it's best not to ram info down kids' throats till they are a bit older. I also think that, starting later, they finish later and once half an ounce of common sense is observed, students will realise they won't get anywhere unless they are educated and will want to continue education. **Jules Fraser, Philippines**

We moved to Canada eight years ago and children here start formal schooling at the age of six. We have to say it makes for a much happier child. They seem to learn better social skills whilst playing in a more relaxed environment and learn to get on better with their peers especially those of the opposite gender - that is what we saw with both of our kids. **Carl Machin, Calgary, Canada**

As a temporary resident of the US my six-year-old has just started kindergarten. I desperately wish we were back home so his formal education could have begun earlier. We paid for pre-school which was "learn by play". We were all frustrated by the lack of progress. Even working with him at home there was no school reinforcement. On the other hand, my soon-to-be eight-year-old who went to nursery school in England was reading and writing by the age of four and is considered a high flier here. **Karen Richards, Tucson, AZ, USA**

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/education/8309153.stm>

Published: 2009/10/16 11:04:11 GMT

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