

[guardian.co.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk) | **TheObserver**

Pack children off to school as soon as you can

Put the school starting age up? We would all be driven mad



Barbara Ellen

The Observer, Sunday 18 October 2009

A [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

No one could argue that the Cambridge Primary Review, the biggest report on primary schools for over 40 years, isn't a weighty-looking document. Six years to complete, 600 pages long, one of its main arguments is that British children are starting school far too early, around the four-year mark.

Terrible, cries the report. In the manner of most European countries, children should be starting school at around six years old, in Finland's case, seven. Thereby enabling Britain to catch up in terms of child literacy, numeracy, and well-being. All of which sounds extremely exciting for British education. What a shame they forgot to factor in British parents.

Even today, when there is a report like this, we seem automatically to revert to a template of idealised British family life, circa 1955 (Mummy in her pinny, happily baking jam tarts; Daddy arriving home with his broolly) that has no bearing on modern reality.

Exchange the 1950s fantasy for parents who both have to work, and have other children to sort out. Parents, who already have to pick up, clean up, organise, and juggle, to the point where they feel as though they are trapped within a slow-motion nervous breakdown. And this is the middle class, relatively do-able, version. Into this engorged ready-to-blow scenario they want to introduce the concept of up to two to three years *less* primary schooling? Are they insane?

Is this the guilty secret of British parenting? That most of us would be horrified if our children were to start school later. That there might be other reasons, quite apart from concerns about their personal welfare and development, why its better (for everybody) that young children are safely ensconced at school – reasons to do with money-earning and necessity, but also adult sanity breaks.

Kids after a certain age are simply better off immersed in the social whirl and organised activity of school. All the things that just aren't going to happen for a six- or seven-year-old when it's just mum and CBeebies. Everyone knows this. It's an accepted truth, which is why school holidays are so stressful, usually begun with all the best "finger-painting cum bonding" intentions; ending in frayed nerves, the constant blaring of the "electronic nanny", and the internal loop of: "How much more?" If the Cambridge review had its way, there would be two or three more years of this "school holiday" feeling, or hiring childcare to do it for you. When, quite frankly, by the time they hit four or five, it's a relief to send them on their merry way for a few hours each day, to learn to read, do sums, socially interact, and all the other things the majority of schools do so well.

However, not only we are told this is "selfish and wrong", we are given the same tired reasons. The Finnish-school-model is better? Yes, and so is the Finnish nursery and pre-school system. Similarly, the argument that our school-starting age was fashioned 140 years ago to "service the demands of industry", and is now outdated. Outdated? Don't most families need both parents working? Haven't many women become the main or sole breadwinners in recent years? Seems to me that industry is as "demanding" as ever.

Anyway, what's with the guilt trip? Most British parents deeply love their children, but that doesn't mean we can't be delighted when they're ready for school. Could it be that this is simply the last taboo – parents admitting that, among other important things, they view school as a reliable form of childcare? And, for a lot of us, the earlier it starts the better. Sometimes it matters less what is best for one child, than what's best for the whole family. A case of: listen, kid, go to school and do your job, so that everyone else can do theirs.

Vogue's French polish has lost its sheen now

It's astonishing that in the same week the Equality and Human Rights Commission won its fight to force the BNP to accept non-white members (don't all rush at once), French Vogue managed to feature a Caucasian model, blacked up, in homage.

Hold on, what is that you say? It isn't a homage? French *Vogue* blackened the white model's face for no reason, except presumably because it was "fierce" and it would sell magazines and clothes? They did this even though there are plenty of gorgeous black models for them to use and now they are saying that they are quite taken aback by all the fuss? Oh, I See.

Putting aside for one moment how deeply offensive this all is, the French *Vogue* minstrel show is also done hilariously badly. Blonde Dutch model Lara Stone ends up looking like a Billie Holiday album cover left out in heavy rain.

They haven't even bothered to make her features blend – she just lolls there, looking dark brown and silly, like a blonde girl getting her puff back after a lengthy and bewildering mud-wrestling tournament. The eyes are expressionless, but, for all we know, she may be thinking: "How many carbs are there in black make-up?" You look at all this and think, is this the first-ever case of size zero racism?

Well, yes and no. To my knowledge, it's the first time I've heard of a major magazine being so crass as to black-up a white model for a feature.

However, as far as fashion goes, black and other non-white models have always had a raw deal. Naomi Campbell, arguably the most famous black model of all time, has long complained of racism in the fashion industry, pointing out how many fewer magazine covers, and major contracts, she won, compared with her white supermodel

contemporaries.

But few people ever listened, because it was just Naomi being "tempestuous, spoilt" Naomi. But maybe Naomi wasn't being spoilt or tempestuous after all. Maybe she was using her power to speak up.

Now with the French *Vogue* feature, perhaps it is more obvious – here is an industry where one of the leading international glossy brands would rather black up a white girl than hire a real black girl. Perhaps it's a new area for the Equality and Human Rights Commission to look into.

Forget sharks and skulls – this is Damien at his most daring yet

Damien Hirst, an over-rewarded charlatan – who knew?

Actually I've always had a soft spot for Hirst. He's such a shameless skiver, getting other people to put together his diamond skulls and pickled sharks. He swaggered around the British art scene like the bad boy, who – dazzled – you let copy your homework, but then never rang.

Now, though, the game is up. Hirst has painted some actual paintings, and they, um, aren't actually the best. In fact, with all the dark blue and the skulls, they bear more than a passing resemblance to a nightmare an Eighties Goth might have had after buying a bad kebab outside an Alien Sex Fiend show.

The critics have gone for Hirst, scenting blood like one of his dead sharks come back to life and the British public is thrilled by his comeuppance: "You see, he can't do a proper picture."

In art, the public has always been told that conceptual artists are more than capable of producing a nice landscape or portrait, but they simply choose not to. Well, Hirst has certainly put the kibosh on that. In effect, he's ruined it for modern artists forever.

In future, we'll be saying, very nice, Tracey, Jake, Dinos, but before we hail you as geniuses, let's see how you get on with reproducing these cute kittens in oils. Then again, surely Damien saw this coming. Indeed, arguably the fact that he's exposed himself as such a lousy painter is actually quite daring and provocative, the most "artistic" thing he could have done.