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Children 'can start school at four', parents told

All children will be encouraged to start school at four under Government plans, despite fears thousands are being pushed into education too early.

By [Graeme Paton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/graeme-paton/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/graeme-paton/>), Education Editor

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Ministers say every child in England will be able to enrol in primary school in the September after their fourth birthday. Summer-born pupils will be allowed to start part-time or later in the reception year amid concerns they may struggle to keep up with older classmates.

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But Ed Balls, the Schools Secretary, said the sooner children start school “the sooner they close the gap on their peers”.

The proposals will reignite the debate over the school starting age just days after a major report recommended delaying formal education until six.

The Cambridge Primary Review said all children should be given a play-based curriculum at a young age to allow pupils to develop emotional and social skills.

But critics suggest the existing “nappy curriculum” taught in nursery and pre-schools is still too formal and risks undermining their long-term development.

The Early Years Foundation Stage – which must be followed by all childminders, nurseries and pre-schools – sets out a series of targets for under-fives covering literacy, numeracy, problem-solving and social development.

Some private schools have already been given the right to opt of the curriculum amid claims it is inappropriate.

Sue Palmer, an author and former headteacher, said Government early years policy appeared to “fly in the face of all

the available evidence”.

“Children need to be in some form of kindergarten at a young age to learn how to get on with other children and adapt to more formal surroundings,” she said. “The problem is that the current approach subjects children to an unduly academic approach that a large proportion are not ready for. Children, especially boys, don’t want to be told to sit down and write. Most don’t even have the motor skills to hold a pencil properly. They need supervised play not targets.”

Children in the UK already start school earlier than most other European countries, where formal education is delayed until six. Children in Scandinavian countries do not start lessons until seven but often outperform those in UK schools.

At the moment, children in England must start school at five, although most are enrolled aged four during the reception year.

Entry to reception classes is often staggered depending when children are born, with entry points in September, January or April.

Under new Government plans, all local authorities will be forced to give parents the option of starting from the September after they turn four. It will be laid out in proposed changes to the mandatory School Admissions Code, which are open to consultation from today.

It follows an official review of primary education earlier this year which recommended earlier starting dates, particularly for summer-born children, who are more likely to delay entry to primary school.

The study - by Sir Jim Rose, former head of inspections at Ofsted – said starting summer-born children in the September after their fourth birthday gave them more opportunity to improve their communication, language and literacy.

It came amid fears they fare worst in national curriculum tests at 11 and a late start to schooling can hamper their A-level performance and chances of going to university.

But in a key softening their approach, the Government will say today that parents should be able to able to retain the right to delay entry to reception classes to ensure “children are mature enough”.

New rules – which will apply in September 2011 – say parents can choose to enter children full or part-time in the September, January or April after their fourth birthday.

They will also be able to choose a free full-time place in a nursery if they believe children are not ready for school.

But Mr Balls suggested September should be the preferred starting date.

“It is really important that children hit the ground running when they start primary school,” he said. “There is clear evidence the sooner summer-born children start good-quality pre-schooling, the sooner they close the gap on their peers.

“I want all standards for all children. We have put unprecedented investment to expand and strengthen the nursery and early-years sector.”

He added: “We know that not every four-year-old is going to be ready for reception at the same time – so it is important families have the choice when to start full-time or part-time classes or have free early years’ provision if they want it.”

Last week the Cambridge Primary Review found that introducing children to a formal curriculum before they were ready for it could “damage their development”.

Rather than delaying the school starting age, the way children were taught until the age of six should be reformed, the report said.

Dame Gillian Pugh, chairwoman of the review, said: “If you introduce a child to too formal a curriculum before they are ready for it then you are not taking into account where children are in terms of their learning and their capacity to develop.

“If they are already failing by the age of four-and-a-half or five it's going to be quite difficult to get them back into the system again.”

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