

From The Times

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Too much too soon or a crucial chance to interact?

For: it's time we recognised too much too soon isn't working for youngsters

Parents want three things when their children start school: for their offspring to learn the 3Rs; to settle happily into school; and to enjoy learning.

Despite starting school earlier than most children in Europe, British pupils lag behind in international surveys of literacy and numeracy.

They were also bottom of the league in a Unicef survey of childhood wellbeing — scoring particularly badly when asked whether they trusted their classmates.

And only about half our increasingly jaded teenagers gain five good A*-C grades including English and maths at GCSE.

Most British children now start school well before they're 5, some just after their fourth birthday, and are expected to crack on with the 3Rs straightaway. In England they are expected to read, write and use punctuation by the tender age of 5. Elsewhere the starting age is at least 6.

In Finland, where literacy standards are the best in the world, it's 7.

In these countries, children follow a "kindergarten curriculum" from the age of 3, based on play (especially outdoors), stories, music, art and drama.

The idea is to develop their language, attention and social skills, creating firm foundations for successful formal education.

It's time we recognised that too much too soon isn't working.

To give our under-6s the best chance of growing up bright, balanced and literate we must stop trying to fast-forward their education. They need time to grow, talk, sing, listen to stories and enjoy that most vital ingredient of a good childhood — play.

Sue Palmer is a literacy specialist and author of Toxic Childhood

Against: the early years class provides fun with learning opportunities

Children starting reception class at 4 or 5 are not made to sit in serried ranks and chant times tables.

They play, run around outside and often barely notice the transition from pre-school — except that they stay all day instead of just for the morning.

While they are gardening, cooking and role-playing they learn about sounds and how to recognise letters.

But it is not a rigid curriculum, it's learning through experience.

For some pupils — who would otherwise not get these opportunities — the chance to interact is crucial to their development.

They thrive and grow by being around adults who are trained in how to engage them and by playing alongside other children.

Their speech improves and they are supported in a community rather than being taken to towns and clinics where their background and family are unknown.

If the environment is right, with learning experiences and good role models in the classroom, then it is best for some children to start school as soon as possible.

Their breadth of knowledge increases and their basic skills improve.

They are initially quite tired but we don't see children falling asleep in corners and they soon become used to it and are quite lively.

For parents, their child starting school also brings them into a new community and gives them a chance to mix with other adults.

In a rural environment it can stop young mothers feeling isolated.

Every child develops at a different rate and some are ready to go to school sooner than others. Parents, teachers and others work together to find the right time for each child.

Liz Steele is headmistress of Glemsford Community Primary School in Suffolk

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