

Call to start formal lessons at six

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Formal school learning should begin at the age of six, according to the authors of the most comprehensive review of primary education in England for 40 years.

The Cambridge Primary Review found children respond better to play-based learning at a young age, and that there was no evidence to suggest it would hold them back in later life.

Rather than changing the school starting age, the way children are taught up until the age of six should be reformed, it said.

Chairwoman of the review Dame Gillian Pugh 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."

The report found that in the current system of early years education, "quality is too variable, and too many staff are under-qualified or poorly paid".

It said: "Many practitioners believe, again backed by considerable research evidence and the positive examples of many other countries, that the principles that shape effective pre-school education should govern children's experiences in primary school at least until age six, and possibly until age seven."

In many European countries, children start school later, but in Britain almost all three to four-year-olds are already getting at least 12.5 hours of education per week.

The review, six years in the planning and writing, also called for tests at the end of primary school - SATs - to be scrapped, and criticised the testing system for making the entire curriculum too narrow.

Professor Robin Alexander insisted that the review was for "the longer term, not just for pre-election point-scoring" and that the timing of its release was a "coincidence".

There have been 31 interim reports over the past three years and the final version was released. Regional conferences will now be held on the study, and a document drawn up to be sent to the leaders of all three main political parties, he said.

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