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Primary review: 'start formal lessons at six'

Children should start formal education at the age of six, according to the biggest review of primary schools for 40 years.

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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Existing lessons in English, maths, science and humanities should be pushed back by 12 months to give children more time to develop, it is claimed.

In a major report, academics said children responded better to a “play-based” curriculum at a young age and insisted it would not hold them back in later life.



Labour's own review of primary education published earlier this year suggested all children should start school in the September after their fourth birthday Photo: GETTY

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The comments come amid fears that children are being pushed too fast at a young age – undermining their social and emotional development.

The recommendation – in the 608-page Cambridge Primary Review – runs directly counter to existing Government

policy.

Labour's own review of primary education published earlier this year suggested all children should start school in the September after their fourth birthday.

But Dame Gillian Pugh, the review's chairman, 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."

She added that forcing four-year-olds to "sit quietly" often backfired as it turned them off reading at a young age.

"There is no research evidence that shows that early access to formal learning does children any good and quite a lot of good evidence to show that it actually can do some harm," she said. "Countries where children start more formal learning at six or seven actually overtake us as the children get older."

The review – carried out over six years – recommended a series of sweeping reforms to the "Victorian" system of education in England.

The existing school starting age was set 140 years ago "to service the demands of industry" and was now outdated, it said.

At the moment, most children start school in nursery or reception classes and are given a play-based education. They then move into formal Key Stage One classes at the age of five.

But the report suggested that the "foundation stage" learning seen in nurseries should be extended into the first full year of school – pushing formal education back by 12 months.

Academics said that if this approach failed to work then ministers should examine the feasibility of raising the school starting age altogether to six.

In many European countries, including Finland, children start school at six or seven and achieve better results.

Almost all children in Britain get at least 12.5 hours of education per week by the age of three or four, even though the "quality is too variable, and too many staff are under-qualified or poorly paid".

The Cambridge Review also called for the existing distinction between Key Stage One, for children aged five to seven, and Key Stage Two, for seven to 11-year-olds, should be scrapped in favour of a more seamless "primary phase".

Vernon Coaker, the Schools Minister, said: "It's disappointing that a review which purports to be so comprehensive is simply not up to speed on many major changes in primaries. The world has moved on since this review was started. If every child making progress and reaching their potential is what matters then Professor Alexander's proposals are a backward step.

"We're already putting in place the most fundamental reforms for decades following Sir Jim Rose's primary review – to make the curriculum less prescriptive and free it up for teachers.

"He suggests a school starting age of six but this would be completely counterproductive - 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."

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