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Five-year-olds not ready for school, says Cambridge

From correspondents in London | *October 16, 2009*

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CHILDREN should delay the start of formal schooling to the age of six, a year later than at present, the largest review of primary education in England for 40 years has recommended.

The 608-page Cambridge University study said introducing children at the age of five into the constraint and discipline of a classroom - a throwback to Victorian days - provided little benefit and could even be harmful.

"They are not going to learn to read, write and add up if you have alienated children by the age of four and five," chairwoman of the Cambridge Primary Review's advisory committee Gillian Pugh said.

"That's the stage at which we are tuning children into learning.

"If they are already failing by the time they are 4½ or five, then it's going to be quite difficult to get them back into the system again."

Although the authors of the report stopped short of recommending a rise in the starting age of compulsory schooling from five, they called for an "open debate" on the issue.

They said children up to the age of six should instead be given the more informal, play-based education typically found in nurseries.

"Extending the early years phase to age six or seven would give schools up to three years to work with children to establish positive attitudes to learning and the necessary language and study skills which are crucial to raising standards in the long term," the review said.

It said England's tradition of starting school at five, shared in Europe only by Wales, Scotland and the Netherlands, dated from the requirements of Victorian factory owners in the 1870 Elementary Education Act.

"Five was picked not for education or child-development reasons, but in an attempt to service the demands of industry," it said.

"Clearly the earlier children started, the sooner they would finish."

Schooling starts at the age of six in 20 out of 34 European countries, with eight nations, including Sweden, waiting until children are seven.