

## Starting age for school in Northern Ireland is far too young says new survey

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Concerns over the age at which children start school in Northern Ireland — the youngest in Europe — were raised today after a major study warned the current system could cause lasting damage.

There were calls for the official starting age to be raised from four to at least five on the back of a controversial new report published by Queen's University today.

Northern Ireland has the youngest statutory school starting age than anywhere in Europe. In the rest of the UK parents can delay entry into primary education until their children are five while in the Republic children do not go to school before they are six.

In the Nordic countries such as Sweden and Finland, children do not start academic activities until they are seven.

Sue Palmer, a school principal turned author and broadcaster, is due to present her concerns during a seminar at Queen's this afternoon.

Ms Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood* and *21st Century Boys*, argues that formal education at four does more harm than good and "damages children".

"Many children just aren't ready developmentally to start formal learning so young.

"Starting too early damages the chances of success for those children.

"If they come from disadvantaged homes, early failure can easily lock them into a pathway of academic under achievement at school, which has long-term repercussions for their self confidence and for their eventual job prospects," she said.

A survey by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) carried out earlier this year found that 76% of the 740 respondents wanted children to start school aged at least five years, while 30% opted for a starting age of at least six.

Mark Langhammer, Northern Ireland Director of the ATL, said: "Many of our members have personal experience of the problems associated with requiring children to start school at four.

"At a minimum, there should be greater flexibility in the school starting age."

He added: "It's the 'one size fits all' I object to — if a four-year-old is ready then allow them to attend, then fine, but it obliges all children of a certain chronological age to attend formal schooling.

"Many years ago, I was of the opinion that the younger a child was when they entered school the better for everybody but from experience I came to realise that it may suit parents or schools, but for the children who are too immature for a school environment — for example, the summer births — some can quickly become disengaged with the learning process and never recover."

Today's event at Queen's comes after the Cambridge Primary Review challenged the idea that an early start has long-term advantages.

Dame Gillian Pugh recommended that children in England should start school aged six years and called for the play-based learning seen in nurseries to be extended for another year.

Professor Joanne Hughes from the School of Education at Queen's University Belfast said: "There has been a great deal of focus on what happens when children transfer from primary to post primary school. While this is important, we also know the early years of a child's schooling are crucial and the issue of the most appropriate starting age deserves greater attention than it has received to date."

Pip Jaffa from the Parents' Advice Centre in Belfast believes improvements must be made to early years education if the current system was to change.

"I think many parents recognise that there is a difference in readiness between children and even siblings. The research seems to show differences between girls and boys.

"I think the issue should be widely debated. All of us should take notice of what other countries do.

"We need to think long and

hard before going changing the system that we have.

"Parents would want to have evidence."

"If that was to come about we would have to make effective provision for the pre-school years to ensure that

children do not become bored. There has to be quality pre-school provision."

She added: "That's what parents want. That's what children need and that's what we want to see."

Critics of Sue Palmer's thinking claim the new revised curriculum, which was implemented on September 1, caters for children of all capabilities smoothing the transition from pre-school to primary education.

Under the new system the focus is on thinking skills and personal capabilities rather than simply learning an answer with much more play-based learning at the foundation stage (P1). Some people believe that for the brighter children who are ready for basic numeracy and literacy the new system can be frustrating.

