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Wednesday 23 July 2014

Learning



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Are four-year-olds too young to start school?

New research suggests kids should not start formal lessons until they are six years old

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Statistics from the Department of Education show that around half of Irish children start school at four, with most of the remainder starting at five.

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parents are now choosing to delay sending their children to school.

"There is a definite trend towards sending children to school later," says IPPN spokesman Larry Fleming.

"Parents often know intuitively what is the best age for an individual child."

Concerns that it may be better to delay entry seem to be borne out by a new study carried out by researchers at Cambridge [University](#).

The largest review of primary education in England for 40 years has recommended that children should not start off formal schooling until the age of six.

The 608-page Cambridge University study said introducing children at four or five into the constraints 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," said Gillian Pugh, chairwoman of the Cambridge Primary Review's advisory committee.

"That's the stage at which we are tuning children into learning . . . If they are already failing by the time they are four-and-a-half or five, then it's going to be quite difficult to get them back into the system again," she adds.

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 playschools.

It said England's tradition of starting school early -- shared by Ireland, Wales and



Daily Deals

It said England's tradition of starting school early -- shared by Ireland, Wales and Holland -- dated from the requirements of Victorian factory owners.

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

Age can have a profound influence on schooling. In general, if a child is the youngest in the class when he or she starts school then he or she will remain the youngest of the group until the Leaving Cert and beyond. Maturity can ultimately have an effect on exam results.

Another recent study by the British Institute of Fiscal Studies showed that children born in [summer](#) who go to school early can suffer academically for their entire school life, compared to those born after September.

The reason for the difference is the age gap between pupils. Pupils born in September are often nearly a year older when they enter school.

The Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO) advises parents to treat every child as an individual when it comes to starting school.

"Just because one child was ready for school at four does not mean that another will necessarily be ready at the same age," says INTO spokesman Peter Mullan.

'Among the things parents will need to look at are independence, self-confidence and interaction with other children. Social skills are a key factor.

"Gender may also be a factor. In general, girls seem to mature much earlier and therefore be ready for school before boys.

"There is no hard and fast rule about the right age to start school. In Ireland, children can start at four; most start between the ages of four and five. Children must be at school by age six."

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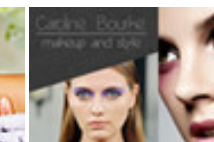
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Sue Palmer, a British school principal turned author and broadcaster, recently presented her concerns about early school entry at a recent seminar at Queen's University Belfast.

Ms Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood* and *21st Century Boys*, argues that formal education at four does more harm than good and she goes so far as to suggest that it "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.

Delaying school entry until six or seven would be a radical departure for Irish education, and it is unlikely to happen any time soon.

Peter Mullan of the INTO says: "You have to remember that many of the countries where children go to school at six or seven have highly- developed state-funded pre-school education."

The entry age to school may not change, but the content of lessons is likely to be different.

Under the new programme for early childhood education, launched last week, there is a much greater emphasis on play in infants classes than on formal classroom.

Irish Independent

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