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## CAMBRIDGE PRIMARY REVIEW

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**School Starting Age-the debate sharpens and polarizes**

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The Cambridge Primary Review, independent and with a broad remit, headed by Professor Alexander, recently concluded that the formal style of education currently taught at English primaries should start a year later than usual, yielding to an extra year of education based on play.

Conventional education would therefore begin at six rather than five, bringing it into line with most other European countries.

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. So, existing lessons in English, maths, science and humanities should be pushed back by 12 months to give children more time to develop. The proposals run counter to those in the previous Government commissioned primary review headed by Professor Rose.

There has been an on-going and rather polarized debate on this issue for some time.

Our children start at five, and with plans for some to start at 4. Swedish children on the other hand, and Sweden is regarded as a model system particularly by many in the Labour party, doesn't start school proper until the age of 7. Finnish children don't start until 7 either, and they are, according to international league tables, some of the highest performers in the world by 11. The Danes, the French and the Norwegians all start at 6, and they all manage a better performance by 11 than we do.

Indeed according to a previous report from the NFER (School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research (2002)) in most of Europe, children begin compulsory schooling when they are six years old. The NFER study found too that there is a lack of conclusive evidence concerning the benefits of starting school at different ages. The best available evidence suggests that teaching more formal skills early (in school) gives children an initial academic advantage, but that this advantage is not sustained in the longer term. There are even some suggestions that an early introduction to a formal curriculum may increase anxiety and have a negative impact on children's self esteem and motivation to learn. Dame Gillian Pugh, head of the Primary review's advisory committee, justified the proposal for a later start by arguing that when it came to long-term development, “they're not going to learn to read or write and add up if you've alienated children by the age of four or five”. Criticising early formal education, she said: “There is quite a lot of evidence to show that it can actually do some harm.” This debate continues but the Reviews conclusions will carry some weight particularly within Tory ranks, although the Tories have some reservations about key recommendations in the report.

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