

## WOMAN UP Should Children Start School at Age 6 Instead of 5?

In the United Kingdom, at least, it's looking like the answer to that question is "yes." This is but one of several controversial findings to emerge from the most comprehensive review of the British educational system in 40 years.

The Cambridge Primary Review — released last Friday — is the biggest independent inquiry into primary education in this country in more than four decades. It is based on 28 research surveys, 1,052 written submissions and 250 focus groups, all led by a prominent Cambridge University-based research team.

In addition to arguing for delaying the age at which children begin formal schooling from 5 to 6, the report also advocates abolishing the nation-wide "SATs" — exams that all children must take at roughly 7 and 11. It also argues that young children should be given more time to "play," and that excessive focus on preparation for the SATs has unduly stressed them out. Finally, in a nod to teachers, the report contends that SAT preparation encourages a rigid focus on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other subjects such as history and geography. The research team therefore recommends giving teachers more freedom in the classroom (rather than doling out "ready made" lessons), as well as hiring more specialists in areas including history and the arts.

In some ways, the Cambridge Review can be read as a paean to decentralization (there is actually a reference to the Stalinist overtones of a State Theory of Learning. Ouch!) It is also a response to the growing play-based education movement, which maintains that play is the foundation for intellectual exploration, and crucial to subsequent academic and professional success.

But the report's policy recommendations seem largely informed by the experience of nearby countries such as Germany, Sweden and Finland, all of which delay formal schooling until 6 or 7, and all of which



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achieve better educational results than Britain. Finland — which consistently ranks at the top of all Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries for educational attainment — doesn't even start mandatory education until age 7. (My roommate in graduate school was Finnish and used to read books such as "The Brothers Karamazov" — in English — for fun. Say no more . . .)

As someone with two school-aged children who've both attended state (public) schools, I must confess that I'm a bit shocked by all this. As an American, I've always been struck by how rapidly children are forced to grow up in the U.K. When I first moved here, I published an essay entitled "Where Have All The Playgrounds

Gone?," which pointed out how differently "childhood" is understood in Britain vs. America. The expectations facing kids seemed quite high — not just academically, but in terms of discipline, play and what kids were supposed to get out of extra-curricular activities.

I guess that's changing.

But what's also noteworthy is that the tenor of this report — with its emphasis on reducing standards, imposing fewer controls on teachers and encouraging more freedom for children — is the exact opposite of where educational policy seems to be headed in the United States.

As Linda pointed out on these pages ear-

lier this summer, state governments in the United States are actually ceding control to the federal government over education, embracing common standards that would make math and English essentially uniform across the country. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan also believes that children's summer vacations are too long, with negative repercussions for productivity and learning.

Me?

In principle, I'm a big fan of play-based learning and hate to think of my children growing up any faster than they need to. At the same time, I'm also a working mother who cherishes every single second that my kids are at school so that I can get things done. Nor do I necessarily think that — much as I love them — having my kids at home with me an extra year would contribute to their education, their well-being, or — let's be honest — their sanity. (Much less my own.)

I think this writer in *The Guardian* put it best when she said: "Could it be that this is simply the last taboo — parents admitting that, among other important things, they view school as a reliable form of childcare? And, for a lot of us, the earlier it starts the better."

I know that's true for me. Ladies?

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