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Call to raise school starting age



The study advocates more pre-school learning

Children in the UK are starting school too young, a leading education research body warns.

Admitting children to mainstream schools at age five or four has no "educational rationale", the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reports.

Most European countries have a compulsory school starting age of six, but in England, Scotland and Wales, children are sent to schools at five and at age four in Northern Ireland.

“
Rather than making sure the child is ready for school, wouldn't it be better to make school ready for children?

Caroline Sharp,
principal researcher

The NFER research says formal study at such a young age has little academic advantage and may lead to increased anxiety and lower self-esteem if children struggle.

They draw attention to research done in the United States which found children who had a teacher-led, academic curriculum from age four experienced more problems as adults than those who had a play-based curriculum with more opportunities to choose their own learning activities.

Evidence lacking

"There is no educational rationale for a compulsory school starting age of five or for

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the practice of admitting four-year olds to infant classes," said principal researcher Caroline Sharp.

"Rather than making sure the child is ready for school, wouldn't it be better to make school ready for children?"

In most European countries there is a strong nursery system where young children can learn in an informal environment through play - such an approach should be considered in the UK, the research says.

Arguments in favour of the UK's early start in school tend to focus on the need to offer "a level playing field" to children from disadvantaged backgrounds, who may be held back by their home environment.

But the NFER study says there is little evidence that an early start in school does compensate.

The report also suggests abandoning Key Stage 1 testing at age seven in England.

It says this is unnecessary and "exerts downward pressure on early years' staff to prepare children for tests".

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