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Is five too soon to start school?

By Sean Coughlan
BBC News education reporter

Do children start school at too young an age in England? Is childhood freedom being curtailed too soon?



Children start school in England up to three years earlier than Sweden

Compared to most other western European countries, English pupils are extremely early starters in the classroom.

While compulsory education begins in England at the age of five (with many children actually starting at four), in countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Finland, school doesn't begin until the age of seven.

English children are ploughing through a fixed curriculum while their continental counterparts are still ploughing up the kindergarten sandpit or playing at home.

But which system delivers the best results?

The young ones

This far-reaching question has been raised by the Cambridge-based Primary Review which is scrutinising how primary education is organised. And its conclusion challenges the idea that an early start has long-term advantages.

"The assumption that an early starting age is beneficial for children's later attainment is not well supported in the research and therefore remains open to question," says the report.

So why do English schoolchildren start at five, when almost everyone else in Europe starts later?

Apart from the Netherlands and Malta, the only other education systems beginning at five are Scotland and Wales (with Northern Ireland even earlier at four).

The origin of such an early start, introduced in 1870, had little to do with education, says the Primary

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COMPULSORY SCHOOL AGE

Five years old: England, Scotland, Wales, Malta, the Netherlands

Six years old: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Spain

Seven years old: Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia,

Review report.

Lithuania, Sweden, Poland

Entering full-time education at such a tender age meant reducing the malign influence of Victorian feckless parents - it was about child protection and social conditioning rather than learning.

Source: NFER/ Eurydice

And it was an attempt to appease suspicious employers, who were worried that starting any later would remove their supply of juvenile workers. An early start meant an early school leaving age.

Long hours culture

The result remains with us - and as a consequence one of the most distinctive characteristics of English schoolchildren is how little time they spend with their family.

Children are full time in school up to three years earlier than in Scandinavia - and the summer holidays in England and Wales are shorter than anywhere else in the European Union.



Long hours in the classroom are not an advantage, says report

And the pressure on schools is now to become "extended schools" which would create an even longer day, with optional activities before and after school hours.

But this is far from straightforward territory. If children were not in school, what would be the impact on working parents? Long hours in childcare are already a reality for many pre-school children.

Last year's teachers' conferences heard concerns that children were spending so little time with their own families that they were showing signs of aggression and de-socialisation, taking their behaviour from their peer group rather than absent adult role models.

Less is more?

But what does it mean for education standards?

One of the most intriguing statistics from international comparisons is the lack of relationship between hours in the classroom and educational achievement.



Children in Finland start at seven but soon overtake English pupils

Finland, a global superstar in education terms, is consistently among the top performers. But it is also at the very bottom of the league in terms of the hours spent in the classroom.

Finnish pupils start formal education at seven and then enjoy 11-week summer holidays - and they end up with the highest educational standards in Europe.

Poland, a rapid-climber in international education league

tables and overtaking England at reading skills, is also another country where pupils do not start until the age of seven.

There is another egalitarian argument for starting school early. Pupils from poorer homes, with parents who are less able to help their learning, might be held behind if they didn't start lessons until six or seven.

Level playing field

But a rather sobering set of statistics published by the government earlier this year showed that the length of time spent in school does little to level the playing field.

When pupils start school at five, the children of more affluent families are already ahead. But this "attainment gap", instead of closing gets wider at each stage up to the age of 16. As every year passes in school, the results of the richest and poorest grow further apart.

There have been some other cross-winds of concern about children starting school before they are ready. The government has highlighted summer-born children, whose parents could now be given the right to delay entry by a year.

It followed research showing that the disadvantage of being the youngest in a year group persisted right through primary and secondary school. While 60.7% of September-born girls achieved five good GCSEs, only 55.2% of August-born girls achieved the same.

The Primary Review, taking an overview of the evidence, suggests that there is no clear link between quantity and quality in education.

Or put another way, the early bird doesn't necessarily become the bookworm.

Here is a selection of your many comments.

Starting school in a child's fifth year is far too young. Children who are unable to even sit and listen to a story at age four are going to have a lot of problems with any structured learning activities. The UK should take a good look at other European systems, such as Finland's, learn from them and devise some changes. Unfortunately, sending children to school as early as we do is merely providing a creche for overworked parents at best, and giving the children a poor start in education at worst. We seem to treat school as a childminding service, not an education.

Sue, Wrexham

It's a cultural thing, this country being very anti-children, and we need to review our entire approach to how we accommodate children in everyday life. Yes, we start school too soon, and should be enjoying our children's early years as much as possible, and reaping the benefits in the years that follow. We should work to live, not live to work.

Rupert, London

My daughter was 4 on 29th August last year and consequently started school when she was 4 years and 1 week! She is also quite small for her age so, apart from the

problem of finding school clothes age 2-3 yrs, she is finding it extremely tiring as she is physically unable to cope with the length and formality of a school day. She was able to attend for 2 hrs less per day in the Autumn term, but is now full-time. It wrenches at our hearts having to give her up to the education system so young and also seeing what it is doing to her. As she is so tired, she is developing a negative attitude towards school, purely on the basis that she doesn't have the physical stamina to cope with it. She is a bright girl and I can't help but feel that she would have "flown" if she attended a year later, and would not have developed any ill feeling towards school.

Richard , Norwich

Having worked in a nursery and reception class, I feel starting school later would be much better for children. It is very sad that the adults working with these children end up spending more time with the children than their own family, and in some cases even know them better. I do not understand how any loving parent would not want to fight to keep their children at home longer, in a loving environment where their personalities can fully grow. I have seen fun, bright, children become the total opposite because they just were not ready for school.

Carrie, Salford, Manchester

My five year old is having a hard time spending so many hours at school and to make her go is a big problem every morning. I think children should start compulsory education later than 5 years old. I also disagree with the amount of hours they have to do a day, it is a big jump to go to nursery school for two and a half hours and then reception is a big jump of 6 and a half. My daughter is always tired and always looks forward to the weekend, She sounds like an adult tired from the week's work. They will be sedentary, not social, maybe depressed or overweight if they are not out there running and discovering and spending time with their families and friends.

Tania, London

I grew up in Sweden and started school at 7. As mentioned in the article, children in Sweden start at 6/7 years old (7 compulsory) but we also have to remember that their childcare/nursery is highly subsidised from the Swedish government with a nursery place costing about £100 pounds per month and child, which makes a significant difference to working parents.

Jo, Cheshire

I think that children do start school at an early age but as a working mother of two, I would then find childcare even more costly than I already do at the moment - on average I spend over £7,500 on childcare a year. If the government was willing to help working mothers a bit more and introduce better childcare schemes, then let them introduce extra school holidays and later school starting age! if not helped with this aspect, they could find themselves with a lot more people out of work because it is just not cost effective to work and have children in this day and age!

Rachel, Caerphilly

I would have no concerns about children starting school older than the current 4 to 5, having shorter classroom

hours and being able to actually enjoy their childhood for longer. However, I have absolutely no idea how I would manage the childcare implications....like many other families both myself and my husband have to work full time, so unless a Scandinavian-style change in the primary education system is accompanied by a similar enlightened change in attitudes to and support for childcare, I remain a working mother balancing work, my children, my marriage and the guilt of not doing as well as I would like for any of them!

Helen, Staffs

I do not come from this country, so when I was told my child had to start school (Devon) at 4.5 years, I was appalled. As we lived so far from the nearest school in Bovey Tracey, he was collected by a bus at 8:00am and returned at 4:00pm. An 8 hour day for most adults is arduous, let alone a baby who should still be at home with his mother and having afternoon naps. I did not start school until I was 6 or 7 and even then we only went a half day. Why can't children be children rather than being shoved out into our regimented society at the age of four? I would happily have kept him home longer.

B Jones, Oxford

Take any group of young animals away from their parents, elephants, chimpanzees whatever, and voila - feral animals causing chaos and mayhem. Society needs to have a good think about things, the choices are materialism with all the ills that go with it, or a better life with nice people to live alongside.

K Lockwood, Bradford

I think our children do start a formal education too early. However, I am in a situation I'm sure like many others where I work and so my 3 year old is in nursery full-time. When he does start school proper, his day will be shorter than he is used to now. What concerns me is that 'formal teaching' is introduced too early i.e. teaching very young children to read and write when they should be learning through play. It would be beneficial I feel, if our children started formal education later as in Finland but I think I'm right in saying that they have more financial provision for parents so it's not necessary to go back to work when the children are so young. If our children started school later, parents like myself would have the financial burden of childcare for longer. It's our whole social set-up that needs to alter.

Karen, Scarborough

I happily sent my daughter to the local school in Poland at the age of seven and a half. She couldn't read and couldn't write in English or Polish. However once they start in Poland, they start. Now nearly 10 she reads happily in English and Polish. I went at 5 in Scotland, learnt to read, but rarely read for pleasure. I think all the gold star "Jack and Jill" rubbish put me off early. It's clear that the schools in the UK are a custodial service for 19th century factory workers. "A child is a fire to be lit not a vessel to be filled."

Paul, Warsaw, Poland

So, we need to send our kids to school so we can go out and work. And those kids need a good education, so they can get a good job, and repeat the cycle. Message -

money is more important than kids.

Darren, Cheltenham

Both my kids attend Finnish schools. It is true that kids in Finland start school at 7 but they also attend pre-school at 6 which is usually organised through daycare. Many children can read and do simple arithmetic before they attend school at 7. The norm in Finland is that both parents work and so kids are normally in daycare from the age of 3 and during this time there are professionals over-seeing the children and ensuring that they learn in a play environment. It should also be noted that Finland has a very high proportion of parents that have attended higher education which likely plays a part in their own childrens' development. These parents spend hours with their children in the evenings and at weekends working through huge amounts of homework. Finnish children might start formal schooling 2 years later than their UK peers and spend less hours in the class but it's worth remembering that there is a lot of learning/teaching done outside of classrooms here in Finland! The Finnish system would be very difficult to model in the UK which anyway does not have the childcare model in place to cope.

Michael Hardy, Helsinki, Finland

Whilst my August-born four year old is enjoying full-time school since she started in January, I do think it is far too young an age for such a long day. They should rather finish at 12:30 or 1pm and then come home for lunch until the age of six - they would be getting the stimulation that they need, yet without forcing such ridiculously long hours on them. And perhaps more parents should stay at home with their children, but that's another 'Have your say' subject!

Pam, Teesside

My father was sent to boarding school at 4 in 1939, and I was sent to boarding school at 7 in 1982. That was considered normal by our parents and their peers. So I'm not really interested in what society or the government considers normal - I'd rather assess things from an individual, intelligent, emotional, humane point of view. My daughter's an August baby - and sending her to school when she's just turned 4 seems moronic and cruel. Just another reason I'm emigrating from this horrible country in May. The British seem to think that the answer to their decaying society is getting both parents in every family to work longer hours for more money. Good luck.

Rupert, London

My sister is a single mother, who in an ideal world would love to stay home with her children, but on the other hand does not want to live off the state on benefits. Therefore she has to work as do many parents. If school ages were to be increased I feel that there would be higher unemployment as child care costs are so high. Every parent would be happy to have more time with their children but it is not always as easy as that. There are many things that have to be taken in to consideration if a change like this is to be made.

Karen, Scotland

I think children in this country start formal education far too early, as a parent you feel under pressure to put them into school and feel a failure when they do not learn to

read and write from an early age. My son is 7 and is in his third year at school, he has only just started to read and write and is taking in the concept of learning. He was always very well behaved and participated but just could not write or read in any activity, this made him feel very stupid which has taken a lot of work to compensate this. I strongly think that children should not start school until they are 7 when they are mentally and physically mature enough.

Libby, Tetbury, Gloucestershire

Having been raised in England and with a September birthday, I actually started school at four. Now living in Alberta, children attend kindergarten (4-5 mornings or two full days a week) at five and full time school at six. Unlike the UK, the huge majority of students remain in school for the full twelve years until they are eighteen. I could not imagine sending any of my children, especially my youngest who is now four, off to school full time at age five. I think children have a hard enough time remaining children in today's society without pushing them out of the door into full time education prematurely.

Susan, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

My summer-born 4-year-old son goes to a public nursery school in the afternoons and absolutely loves it, even his homework. His reading, writing and math skills have come on no-end, and he gets help at home with everything as well. He's one of the brightest in his class according to his teacher, and we're looking forward to him starting "full time" in a few months. Right now, we've no problem with him spending 6 hours a day getting an education to set him right for the rest of his life.

Craig, Nottingham

In France, children start school at three years old (although it is not compulsory until six years old). A comparison between my daughter (educated in France) and her cousin (in the UK) at exactly 4 yrs 9 1/2 months old showed that a British education gives kids the tools they need to read and write much more quickly.

Sarah, Apt, France

Whereas the minimum compulsory age for schooling in Ireland is 6 years, 95% of four years olds and 98% of five years olds attend state schools (National Schools). The number of children in each class can be anything up to 35 with one teacher and they follow a curriculum made up of 11 subjects.

Mary, Dublin, Ireland

Here in Austria children start school at 6/7 and have 12 weeks summer holidays like Sweden. However as somebody who works with pre-school children (aged 3-7) I think you cannot make generalisations about children starting either earlier or later. I have some children that are able to start doing reading at the age of 3 but have to wait around in Kindergarten for 4 years before they are given the opportunity to develop further in school. My parents in law purposely held back their youngest son to start school at 7 and I know it's a decision that they regret, as he is now underchallenged in school. The grass is never absolutely greener on the other side.

Catherine, Vienna, Austria

As a teacher in an underprivileged school, most students

are actually better off the longer they stay in school. Parents with long hours in poorer communities cannot provide adequate supervision at all times. After school activities decrease the students participation in violence and use of drugs. Unfortunately, some cases, the teachers are the adult role model that is healthiest for the child

Kristen, Knoxville Tn, USA

Children can start school at 2 1/2 in France. It's a rigid system of learning, controlled from the centre, focused on results, tests marked out 20 most weeks. Yet, I don't think it is a system that turns out unbalanced adults, and some of the best creative talent comes from France, Nobel winners etc, so I don't think that starting early in school is necessarily a big problem. I think this is all about the right balance between traditional schooling, from whatever age, and support from home.

Joe, France

I live in Sweden and there are many good things for parents and kids and some things that are more of a problem.

1. Childcare is cheap ie subsidised (I pay £180 per month for 2 kids).
2. We get 14 months parental leave at 80% pay which is shared (2 months reserved for mum and for dad, the rest you split as you like). Most parents make this stretch to 18 months by taking less pay, so kids start daycare much later than in the UK.
3. All parents of children under 8 have the right to work 80% on a full time post (for 80% pay). This is meant to create more equality between mum and dad which is good, in reality while many mums work 80%, the vast majority of dads work full time. One consequence is that there are hardly any half time jobs or job shares. The expectation is absolutely that both parents will have a full time job as their norm. So starting school later doesn't mean kids are with their families more.
4. School starts at 6 for 99.5% of kids who attend the voluntary reception year (there is no other childcare for 6 year olds available). There is no expectation that kids will learn to read or write before this.

Is this good or bad? Kids are individuals! Your kid and my kid may love learning early or it may create feelings of failure. But is it really important for 4-5 year olds to be able to read? The important thing is that kids are stimulated mentally and physically and learn good social skills. When they start to learn to read at 7 - well they just learn faster! So why inflict the sense of failure on those that aren't ready to read! There are other equally valuable forms of stimulation.

Katherine, Stockholm, Sweden

Being an August baby, my son was barely four when he started school - he was much too young, not developmentally ready to be launched into formal learning and still needing to play and be a little boy. I phoned the education authority to ask if I could hold him back a year (it was a matter of being a few days short of the cut-off), but was told categorically no. Consequently, I always feel he started school on a back foot and has been disadvantaged ever since.

KF, London

Full-time education is not mandatory until 6 but is certainly the norm here as young as 2. My son loves school, is bi-lingual, eats really healthy school lunches including thing such as calamari, fruit everyday and is slowly learning to write and read. He has music, PE and has swimming lessons in the schools pool.

Stacey, Barcelona

My daughter could have started school in Spain when she was 2 years and 11 months old! I thought this was far too early and as it was not compulsory I sent her the following year as the majority of children attend school at the age of 3 in Spain. I don't think that it has done her any harm but probably the only benefit was learning to read and write early. The day is far too long though but they have a 2 and a half hour break at lunchtime.

Joanne, Barcelona, Spain

I am of the view that British children start school way too early, and would advocate a change to the mainland Europe approach of starting when they are 7. My daughter's birthday is 31 August and due to the increasing number of school having only one intake each year in September (as apposed to having a second in January) she will be due to start school a mere couple of days after her 4th birthday! This horrifies me, and I can see no direct benefits to her through starting school so young.

Clare, London

It's on dodgy ground in PC-terms to say this, but I'm going to anyway... I firmly believe that the discrepancy between richer and poorer kids' grades is nothing to do with money. The money is merely an indicator of well-educated, caring, conscientious parents. In broad terms a richer modern household is comprised of better educated parents who spend more time and give more priority to supporting their child's learning. It has little to do with money, and everything to do with the fact that if a child comes from "good stock" they will be a good child.... There are exceptions to prove the rule, and my exceptional but certainly not affluent ex-miner parents are a testament to that. I credit them with my success.

Dan Mann, Bristol

Here we go again! It is the too early, I send them but my heart bleeds for my angel versus the we have to both work and all can blame the classroom for the woes. As someone who is intimately connected to the early years system, the truth (heaven forbid we should ever get this) is that many children arrive at 4, they are not compelled to attend until the year in which they are 5 and do not know how to socially interact as their overindulgent parents are too busy to teach them, nor do they know how to say please or thank you; another great British tradition that is being lost. Therefore, the schools spend an inordinate amount of time educating these 'angels' in basic manners and social interaction, not to mention toilet training to establish any basis for formal education. There is a quantum shift needed to our system and that is seen in the Finnish, French and other nations where respect and community still forms part of the social fabric of the country; rather than the self interest and blame others for your shortcomings of this once world leader.

James , Lincoln

As a father of a summer baby, we will need to start applying for a primary school place this autumn for our son. Personally I would prefer him to start school a little later. However I am worried that if I hold him back, he will not get a place at a decent primary school and end up in an estate sink school instead. Starting school too early may be bad for a child's education but I think that being in a bad school would be even worse.

Matt, Hampshire

It's simple, it's a necessity for both parents to work so getting your kid into education early helps you get back to work. Clearly if there's no tangible advantage for being at school earlier and longer then I would suggest the problem is about what's actually going on in the classroom.

Martin, London

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