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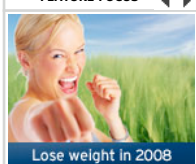
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FEATURE FOCUS



Does early schooling harm our children?

By Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Last Updated: 2:15am BST 02/08/2007

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Child development expert Elizabeth Hartley Brewer on why she supports the call for children to start school later.

Just as we are all in a state of angst about Britain's depressed, underperforming, over-eating offspring, teachers are recommending that children should stay well clear of formal school until the age of seven. The Professional Association of Teachers said at its annual conference yesterday that children ought to be allowed to delay the start of formal education, allowing them more time for play. Are they mad? Or is it just possible that the organisation could be plugging this for all the right reasons, having seen at first hand the consequences of the present directive regime of pressure and performance targets on fragile, five-year-old minds?

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Increasingly, when I have visited schools and met parents, teachers and child psychologists, there have been discussions about why our children have to start school so early. Raising the starting age is not a radical idea - many countries have followed the practice for decades and their children do not suffer. American research recently found that children who had "teacher-led, academic lessons" at the age of five did not display "lasting academic advantage" over those who began later. Moreover, they were more likely to suffer emotional problems as adults.

The compulsory starting age for school is six in 19 European countries, including France and Germany, and seven in a further eight countries, including Sweden and Poland. Casting around the world, age six is when most children start school. In 2002 in the UK, 59 per cent of four-year-olds were in infant classes, although five is our compulsory starting age.

Barry Sheerman, MP for Huddersfield and chairman of the House of Commons Education Select Committee, is lending his support to the call for change. Age of entry is also one of the features of the present primary regime under consideration by the current National Review of Primary Education based at Cambridge University, which is due to report in October next year.

The power - and sense - of this policy rests upon the realities of child development. Significant changes occur around the age of seven, a fact already acknowledged by the move children make at that stage from infant to junior school. It is when children begin to think differently and see themselves differently. Crucially, they have a clearer and more separate sense of self that enables them to better understand their mistakes and accept helpful criticism. The present system of regular measuring and testing introduces children to notions of success and failure against set expectations far too young.

Very young children's brains are programmed to learn differently, to connect up and grow through play, exploration and the close, warm attention they receive from adults and, later, other children. This is the way children build their sense of who they are, what they can do, their curiosity and their general competence. Quality play underpins identity and self-belief, both essential components of self-esteem and mental health. Many children are not ready for the noise and rigours of organised school, the requirement to do this activity in this particular way for this amount of time at the tender age of four, let alone being assessed at five and tested at seven. Don't forget that the year between the fourth and fifth birthdays amounts to almost one quarter of that child's life.

If early schooling does potentially damage young children's already less well-rooted confidence and self-esteem, boys are certainly likely to suffer most. Boys and schools don't mix well at the best of times and boys are generally less mature than girls. They are born six weeks behind girls developmentally and their natural tendencies and strengths - their physicality, immediacy and lack of ease with words - make them less well suited to straitjacket schools and formalised learning than girls of a similar age. If boys started school at seven and then transferred to secondary school at 13, perhaps we'd raise boys' results and reduce disaffection.

A compulsory school age only tells part of the story. Many countries with later starting ages offer high-quality pre-school systems. All parents want children to do well and it's not illogical to think that the earlier they start, the better they will do. British parents who understandably fear their child could fall behind if the enthusiasm to learn is not captured as it emerges would not have to worry if better pre-school support were available to all. Many years ago, as the mother of a chirpy three-year-old already into books, I was on the verge of calling a local school to take him in early - until a puzzled teacher friend told me I was mad. I now see I was - and that was before testing had been introduced. Even fairly benign baseline testing at aged five of skills such as tying shoelaces, sitting still and writing first names, can whip parents into a frenzy of pressure essentially to prove their own credentials as a great parent and to ensure their child gets labelled as advanced from the start. Though parental involvement helps children to achieve, too much pressure too soon can end up doing a lot more harm than good.

I believe that most children would benefit from starting school later, having more time to be

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in their confidence and identity, to feed their curiosity, sense of fun and love of learning and, if possible, to spend more time with those who love them. But most helpful to children would be to protect the youngest from targets and testing. Government may be anxious about our children, but they should be far more concerned by the number of anxious children their policies are producing.

• Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer is the author of 'Raising and Praising Boys', 'Raising and Praising Girls' (Vermillion) and 'Talking to Tweenies' (Hodder)

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