

SCHOOL STARTING AGE

Priya Mahtani asks, what is the effect on our children when we expect them to start formal education at such a young age?

When my son was three and a half years old, he joined a lovely little nursery near our home. Soon expecting my second child, I was eager for him to have an established rhythm and begin his school journey in earnest. There were many wonderful activities, set in a small classroom and an outdoor space. However, after just a couple of months, the light in my son's bright sparkly brown eyes seemed to dim. Watching him 'perform' in a Christmas play, dressed up and singing festive songs with his peers, I was horrified to see how awkward, uncomfortable and frightened he looked. In that moment, it dawned on me. The daily activities carefully organised by the adults and the pressure to perform at such an early age made the nursery simply not the right

environment for his journey of self-discovery and exploration.

My son was due to start Reception at a local primary school the following September, and I knew that if he stayed in this environment expectations of him would only increase. My intuition told me he needed more space to play. Not just physical space, but space to explore the wonders of his imagination. Space to uncover what his own unique relationship was to his peers and teachers. A few years later I stumbled upon extensive research that evidenced child-led play as a crucial foundation for future >



Julia Hamilton



Liens Hedley at Michael Hall

TOO MUCH TOO SOON?

Only 12% of countries worldwide require children to start school at 4 or 5. (These are the four UK nations and former members of the British Empire such as Australia and New Zealand.) In almost two-thirds of countries around the world the school starting age is 6, and in 22% of countries children don't start formal education till they're 7.

Despite (or more probably because of) their remarkably early start, UK pupils don't have a particularly good educational record. In the 2015 OECD survey of educational achievement, they came 20th out of all the countries in the survey.* On the other hand, the three Western nations that scored highest in this survey were Finland, Estonia and Switzerland, all of

which have a starting age of 7 and provide a play-based kindergarten stage for their 3- to 6-year-olds.

English children between 3 and 5 years old who are cared for outside the family are required by law to follow the Early Years Foundation Stage, which expects them to be able to do basic reading, writing and reckoning tasks by the age of 5. Looming ahead of them is a demanding phonics test in Year 1, when they are 6, with tests in core subjects (SATs) the following year.

Because of the pressure of these tests, many nurseries now make a start on simple phonic activities, teaching children to write their names and so on, at the age of 3. I've even heard of a 'phonics table'

being set up for 2-year-olds. This process of 'schoolification' will soon be exacerbated by the introduction of 'baseline testing' for 4-year-olds.

A mounting body of research suggests that this early pressure for academic achievement is linked to the UK's shamefully low level of childhood wellbeing compared to other Western nations. If you are opposed to early schoolification, please visit www.toomuchtoosoon.org and register your support.

Sue Palmer is a writer and educator. Her book *Upstart: The Case for Raising the School Starting Age* will be published by Floris Books in early 2016.

* tinyurl.com/global-school-rankings

EARLY YEARS IN STEINER SCHOOLS

I recently heard a tale of a state school primary teacher who was moving abroad with her family. This teacher said that when they return in a couple of years with their children at school age, she will not want them to enter the state sector, because she doesn't like what she sees going on in schools. She thought she might enrol them at a Montessori school. When asked, "What about Steiner?" she had replied, "Oh no, I wouldn't go *that* far."

So how far from normal is a Steiner school in the early years? A Steiner kindergarten educates children in mixed-age groups from 3 to 6 years old. Siblings will be in the same group, and indeed the group is a kind of family, with the elder ones having special responsibilities for contributing to kindergarten life. The structured morning includes free play, 'ring time' with songs, poems and movements; crafts and cooking; painting, drawing and modelling; sharing a meal together; story time and puppet shows. There are regular seasonal

festivals, with special decorations, foods, songs and clothes. In my son's kindergarten, the toys in the room are made of natural materials and include blocks and bricks, a rocking horse, pine cones, bells, ropes, a wooden castle, baskets and play cloths for making dens. Although there is an attractively filled bookshelf, this is only one element of a busy room. Great care is taken that the room is aesthetically beautiful.

In Rudolf Steiner's view, the prime direction of life under the age of 7 is physical development and integration. Most of a child's energy is needed for this growth. 5-year-olds are at the pinnacle of their capacity to dream up storylines and to invent fluent games according to a counter-factual world as if they were as real as their own heartbeat. Kindergartens are designed to be a living invitation to play. In this critical window of time, during which children lay foundations for lifelong creative thinking, they *need* such a

magical opportunity. Without force, they will quite naturally lose this genius and become much more 'realistic' as their bodies reach a certain point of maturation.

In Class 1, the children are 6 or 7 years old. Now they have better gross and fine motor skills and their cognitive thinking capacity shifts a gear. They are better able to access a simple abstract concept and talk about it, concentrate on material that is not necessarily their favourite thing, and govern their social relationships with more balance and perspective. Of course, they will still need to learn playfully, without undue pressure to perform, but this is a different debate!

Steiner parents are abnormal statistically, simply by being few in number (in the UK, but not in Europe) – but what is *normal* for normal children? Shouldn't education go with the grain, not fight it? What is the cost of interfering with Nature?

Abi Allanson, Steiner school teacher

> learning. My gut feelings were now substantiated by scientific proof.

The importance of play in the early years cannot be overestimated. Experimental psychology studies suggest that more effective learning and increased motivation arise from playful approaches. Play is good for language use, for early phonics and literacy, and for intellectual and emotional self-regulation. David Whitebread, a developmental cognitive psychologist at the University of Cambridge, says: "Play shapes children's brains. It strengthens their competencies as they spontaneously experiment with learning and emotions without worrying. It is fundamental to human creativity."

Yet how are we really watering these creative seeds in our young children? In England, compulsory school age is the term following a child's 5th birthday, but most children start school in the September following their 4th birthday, because this is the norm and parents often feel pressurised by schools' admissions criteria to get that vital place in the school of their choice. Consider the challenges for the summer-born children, almost a whole year younger than some of their classmates.

The internationally recognised Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA, 2009)¹ found that children from countries that start formal education at the age of 7 display the most advanced literacy skills, with countries that start formal schooling at the age of 6 far outperforming British children. One of the things driving educational policy in England is a common misconception that earlier is better, as successive



Julie Ruse at Michael Hall

governments take an increasingly consumerist view. Pam Jarvis, a developmental psychologist and senior lecturer at Leeds Trinity University, says: "We are viewing children as human capital; schools [are] becoming a factory system where we produce the best product."

Your child should not be compared to a packet of soap powder. As parents of siblings know well enough, every child really is different. So how do we work with our young learners in an organic fashion? How do we empower teachers to inspire and draw out from our children rather than focus on an increasingly "performance-oriented, transmission model of learning"?

In 2009, professor of education Robin Alexander produced *The Cambridge Primary Review*,² the result of an independent enquiry into the condition and future of primary education in England. Its key findings included suggesting that England conform to international practice and delay the start of formal schooling until children turn 6. It had a "strong and widespread conviction" that children were ill served by starting formal learning at age 4 and that formal learning before age 6 "dents children's confidence and risks long-term damage to their learning". This was the most authoritative and comprehensive research-based report since the 1960s, yet it has been largely ignored.

Jarvis says: "Education is not about an adult having a plan in their own head and taking it out like a memory stick to communicate – it is about the child having their own plan and ideas and the adult listening to them." So if some children are working outside playing on big blocks and others are indoors measuring amounts for cooking, both are building foundations for numeracy. Yet as teachers are relentlessly pressurised to tick boxes in a never-ending charade of assessment – cue baseline testing of 4-year-olds, to be introduced to schools in September 2016 – we can expect an increase in teacher-led activities to fulfil government assessment criteria.

If you are feeling anxious about this as a parent, what are your options? You may consider speaking directly with your child's school to explore delaying the term in which your child starts. Many parents choose to home educate their children, avoiding altogether a prescriptive model of education or one that starts too early. Steiner schools offer another real alternative, where children remain in play-based kindergartens until the age of 6, starting formal education at rising 7 years. Other families choose Montessori schools, which have a strong emphasis on self-directed learning from an early age.

In an extensive study tracking the reading ages of hundreds of children in New Zealand, Sebastian Suggate revealed that those who started to read later had actually caught up by >

SUMMER-BORN CHILDREN

The Summer Born Campaign wants to ensure that the parents of all children born between 1 April and 31 August are able to exercise their legal right to enrol their children in school at compulsory school age, i.e. the term following their 5th birthday, without penalty. Under the 2012 and 2014 School Admissions Codes, it has proved too easy for admission authorities to deny summer-born children access to reception class at age 5 or to make them miss any other year of their education later on.

School admissions have become a postcode lottery, with many families describing experiences that clearly do not support the best interests of their children, while others have had positive responses and faced no objections at all. The application process for school entry admissions is different for parents of summer-born children who do not wish their child to start school early, as they need to contact the admission authority of all the preferred schools they plan to include on their application form, and can then only list school preferences where consideration for reception class entry at compulsory school age has been agreed.

The 2014 Code stipulates that head teachers' views must be taken into account when a request is made, and that every admission authority must make the process clear in its admission arrangements. The Department for Education advises parents to apply for an age 4 school place while they make their age 5 entry request, but this is still the parents' decision and many prefer not to because of pressure to then use the earlier place.

For more information, many parents find our Facebook group helpful. There they can ask advice from parents in their area, as experiences can differ so much across the UK and even within local areas.

Pauline Hull
summerbornchildren.org



Julie Ruse at Michael Hall

the age of 10 and had “slightly better reading comprehension” before the end of primary education as well as being better motivated to continue for their own enjoyment.³

Deepening self-esteem and creating resilience are important goals to help children navigate a future as yet unknown. Asking them to perform and compete when they are developmentally not ready is courting disaster. Even a bright child can be made to feel less able by the pressure of inappropriate testing.

In a culture of increased hyper-competitiveness and high anxiety amongst adults, we are being brainwashed by leaders who say that we must rush in order to progress. This is based neither on evidence nor on what teachers or psychologists say. Creativity pundit Ken Robinson argues that schools are killing creativity. Children enter school with virtually 98% genius levels of divergent thinking at age 3–5, but this capacity is virtually halved after just five years of formal schooling, and significantly more after a further five years.⁴ As parents and educators, our task must be to find ways in which children’s “immense capacities of innovation, of creative thinking, of alternative ways of seeing” can be made our highest priority. Would that be aided by a later school start, or can we work together to ensure that children who start school early are presented with learning environments that support their whole being, fostering creativity and their innate love of learning?

Nearly a decade later, my son is still at the Steiner school he joined at just 4 years old. In the first three weeks of starting at his new kindergarten, he was pretty much outside every day in the magical garden, digging water trenches in the large sandpit or climbing trees, absorbed in his play, the sparkle in his eyes returning. I knew that I had made the right choice. ●

IF YOUR CHILD IS STARTING SCHOOL AND YOU FEEL ANXIOUS

There is an ongoing discussion between parents, educators and government officials regarding the way we teach our children and what they learn in schools. This has led to many alternative schools emerging in the UK which tend to focus more on free play and child-led learning than mainstream schools. However, such options are not ideal for or available to everyone, so don’t be put off by criticisms of mainstream schooling. Yes, they do tend to focus too heavily on adult-led structured learning, but there is a lot you can do with your child to balance those strict learning schedules with opportunities for free play, outdoor play and child-led learning. Take small steps towards these achievable actions – they’re great excuses to take part in creative projects, travel to new places and spend more time outdoors – and they will benefit the whole family.

Extracted from *The Ultimate Guide to Green Parenting* by Zion Lights, New Internationalist.

References

1. www.oecd.org/pisa
2. cprtrust.org.uk
3. tinyurl.com/nz-reading-age
4. tinyurl.com/ken-r-creativity

CLAIRE THOMAS HELPED SET UP THE BEEHIVE, AN ALTERNATIVE TO SCHOOL

My son is one of those children who gets off equipment at a playground if another child comes near. He hates hand dryers in toilets, and echoey rooms, and he doesn’t like people he doesn’t know speaking to him. At the end of 2013 I was getting increasingly worried that he wouldn’t be ready for school. I also had huge concerns about not being allowed to spend several days settling him into the classroom, how he’d cope with a large group of children, and the discipline policies most schools tend to use.

I organised a meeting at my house with a group of friends I had met at local Attachment Parenting meetings – I instinctively knew that they had the same concerns as I did. The outcome of this meeting was to set up The Beehive, an alternative to school

where children can continue to learn naturally and explore the world. The Beehive will be opening as this issue of JUNO goes to press, based in a local Scout Hut in Bradford on Avon until we find a more long-term location.

The children will meet three days a week and the teacher will plan activities for them based on their interests. Multiple subjects will be incorporated into each play activity and the children will be encouraged to learn from each other and develop analytical skills and creative thinking. It has been a lot of work, organisation and commitment from us as parents, but I hope that it will suit the needs of my son at this stage in a way that formal schooling would not be able to. www.beehivechildren.org

Priya Mahtani is a writer, a consultant and a mother of two children, both of whom attend a local Steiner school. She has a passion for supporting individuals and organisations to deepen authentic connections and build community.