



Kids of summer

How soon is too soon to start school? Michelle Melson and Pauline Hull from the Summer Born campaign explain why summer-born children should not be penalised educationally when it comes to school starting age and how, ultimately, the decision should lie with parents.

Early years practitioners and professionals have a key role to play in protecting our young children from what many experts are calling the ‘too much, too soon’ syndrome or inappropriate ‘schoolification’ of early childhood in England. And nowhere is this more prescient than in the case of summer-born children, whose parents have the choice to enrol them in school early but face unprecedented educational penalties should they choose not to.

This is largely due to misconceptions regarding the legalities around the school starting age in England, but also failure by the government to create a clear, fair and objective admissions policy for these children. So, amid what has become an unnecessarily stressful postcode lottery for parents, there is a need to

set the record straight on some key summer-born facts.

Asking the right questions

Thanks to plenty of media coverage recently the summer-born issue in England is unlikely to have escaped your notice. The BBC, ITV, radio, newspapers and online media have covered personal stories, as well as the Education Select Committee evidence check. However, with many headlines and discussions misunderstanding or misrepresenting the issue in hand (in particular, “Should summer-born children delay school start?”) it’s evident that the wrong questions are still being asked. So what are the right questions to ask? Many people, teachers included, mistakenly assume that children must

start school at age four, or at the latest by age five. This is a myth: parents are not seeking to ‘delay’ their child’s school start, they’re just not choosing to send them early. Crucially, this is the parents’ decision, nobody else’s.

A more probing question – perhaps the one we really should be asking – is: “Should children be penalised with the removal of one year’s education by our state-funded school system, simply for starting school at compulsory school age?”

The School Admissions Code (the Code) contains a requirement that ‘admission authorities must provide for the admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday’ but this is widely misinterpreted as ‘school start is age four’.



Other factors have also contributed to this so that, together with Northern Ireland, England now has the lowest school starting age in the world.

For many parents, the first port of call for advice regarding school start is their children's local early years provider. Unfortunately, this feedback can often be extraneous or even incorrect. For example, parents are commonly told that:

- Four-year-olds are not entitled to early years education funding
- All children must start school at age four
- Children can't have six terms in an early years setting and then go into reception
- Summer-born children cannot start school at compulsory school age in reception class
- They may as well be in reception – it's all part of the EYFS curriculum.

Misinformation and misunderstanding are rife, but the early years sector is by no means alone. Evidence shows that heads, teachers, admissions authorities and local authorities are getting their facts wrong too.

But help is at hand, and early years providers can help parents by ensuring that the correct information and support is given when parents ask questions.

Mythbusting

Four-year-olds are not entitled to early years education funding

Not true.

"[Parents] can choose to continue to take up their child's 15-hour early education entitlement at another early education provider until their child reaches compulsory school age if they choose not to take up their right a place in a maintained school reception class in the September following their child's fourth birthday"

Your child must start school at age four

Not true.

For ease, compulsory school age begins the term after a child's fifth birthday.

Admission authorities have to ensure that places are available as per the provision within the Code but parents are under no obligation to start their children in full-time education prior to compulsory school age, either at school or otherwise.

Children can't have six terms in an early

years setting and then go into reception

Not true – see myth 1.

It's not possible for a summer-born child to start school at compulsory school age in reception class

Paragraph 2.17 of the Code states that parents of summer born children can 'request' a reception class start, and the admission authority must make a decision on the basis of the circumstances of the case, in the best interests of the child.

The decision here is whether that child should enter reception class or go directly into year one at compulsory school age. Serious inconsistencies in practice have resulted in different admission authorities making different decisions regarding the same child, with the number of parental complaints increasing. But nevertheless, this perfectly legitimate and lawful request is possible. There is no statutory barrier to an admission authority educating a five-year-old in reception class – in fact, primary legislation completely supports it.

They may as well be in reception – it's all part of the EYFS curriculum

It is the parents' decision and their decision only, as to whether their child starts school early or at compulsory school age.

There are many reasons why a parent may prefer their four year child to remain in a nursery/pre-school/childminder setting, such as smaller ratios, access to free-flow and outdoor play throughout the day, or preferring to avoid the commencement of formal education in reception class.

How you can help

Parents, often at the request of admission authorities to provide 'evidence', might approach their childcare provider regarding the developmental or academic profile of the child, since very often these children are just three years old when the 'request' process with admission authorities begins. The following points should be considered:

- **Understand your significance and potential influence**

Think carefully about how you word any letters of support that parents might request and remember that it is their decision when their child starts school. Unless you truly believe that their child should miss reception class and will thrive in year one, make it clear that, in your professional capacity, you are certain that it is

in the child's best interests to experience their foundation year of school at age five.

- **Be wary of EYFS interpretations**

Many admission authorities are erroneously using children's EYFS reports to evaluate whether they should be offered a place in reception class or year one at compulsory school age, and in this process they may 'cherry pick' any information provided to condone a year one entry. If a child is 'meeting expectations' (and sometimes even when they're not), parents are told that their child should remain 'in their correct cohort', and comparisons are then made with other summer-born children starting school at age four instead of the autumn- or spring-born children of the following year group.

- **Put the child's best interests first**

It may be that a child is meeting expectations at age three, but does this mean they should be thrust into year one at age five? Some admission authorities have very strict policies around educating children in chronological age batches, in what education minister Nick Gibb has termed an emphasis on 'bureaucratic neatness'. You may or may not be able to persuade these decision-makers, but parents are relying on practitioners to make a more informed and fair judgement than those administrators and staff who have never met their child.

Summary

It is the parents' decision as to whether their child starts school early or at compulsory school age, and their choice and wishes should be valued. As early years practitioners, you can support parents' wishes to preserve a child's right to access a more developmentally appropriate curriculum when that child will be starting school at compulsory school age.

Ensure any letters in support of reception class entry requests are clear and concise to help prevent admission authorities manipulating your reports and using them to make judgements about children who may appear to be doing well as a justification for early school entry or forced year one entry. Think about the pressure in a year one class compared with reception and any damage that it may cause to a child's social and emotional wellbeing or the real risk of impairment to a child's inherent natural curiosity and love of learning. Evidence clearly shows how detrimental a lost year of education can be.