

Review backs later formal lessons ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Children should not start formal learning until they are six, a review of primary education in England says.

Instead the kind of play-based learning featured in nurseries and reception classes should go on for another year, the Cambridge Primary Review says.

There is no evidence that an early introduction to formal learning has any benefit, the review says, but there are suggestions it can do some harm.

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Most children start primary school in England aged four, and a large proportion are taking advantage of free, part-time pre-school places in local schools and privately-run nurseries from the age of three.

The kind of learning that goes on there follows the government's "Early Years Foundation Stage", which currently runs to the age of five and is a play-based curriculum which includes some early literacy and numeracy goals.

Continuing this informal but structured learning for a year or so would bring children in England in line with many European countries, where school starts at six or even seven, and standards are often higher.

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The report stops short of calling for the age of compulsory schooling to be put back to age six, but does call for an open debate on the subject.

However, it adds, that the issue is less about where children learn than what they learn.

Dame Gillian Pugh, who co-authored the review, said play-based learning was not a "wishy-washy, 'just let them get on with it' thing".

"It's a balance between children-initiated and adult-initiated learning," she said.

She said four and five-year-olds tended to be at a stage where they were just "tuning in" to learning and that they could be "turned off" if they were made to follow too formal a curriculum, too early on.

This would be of particular benefit to children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with speech and language delays, she added.

But she argued it would not hold back brighter children who were ready to begin basic numeracy and literacy in reception classes.

The review also notes that there are downward pressures to get children in reception year ready for the early years of school and the tests that follow.

It also calls for free part-time nursery provision to be offered to two-year-olds in areas of social disadvantage and for children with particular needs. This would help them get the most out of school and hopefully close the achievement gap, it says.

The authors also call for national assessment tests, known as Sats, to be abandoned, saying their high-stakes nature, being linked to league tables, encourages a too-narrow focus on literacy and numeracy.

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