



# SAINTS PERSPECTIVES

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## What is the Best Age to Learn to Read?

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220228-the-best-age-for-learning-to-read>

**By Melissa Hogenboom, 1st March 2022**

In some countries, kids as young as **four** learn to read and write. In others, they don't start until **seven**. What's the best formula for lasting success? Melissa Hogenboom investigates.

I was seven years old when I started to learn to read, as is typical of the alternative Steiner school I attended. My own daughter attends a standard English school, and started at four, as is typical in most British schools.

Watching her memorise letters and sound out words, at an age when my idea of education was climbing trees and jumping through puddles, has made me wonder how our different experiences shape us. Is she getting a crucial head-start that will give her lifelong benefits? Or is she exposed to undue amounts of potential stress and pressure, at a time when she should be enjoying her freedom? Or am I simply worrying too much, and it doesn't matter at what age we start reading and writing?

There's no doubt that language in all its richness – written, spoken, sung or read aloud – plays a crucial role in our early development. Babies already respond better to the language they were exposed to in the womb. Parents are encouraged to read to their children before they are even born, and when they are babies. Evidence shows that how much or how little we are talked to as children can have lasting effects on future educational achievement. Books are a particularly important aspect of that rich linguistic exposure, since written language often includes a wider and more nuanced and detailed vocabulary than everyday spoken language. This can in turn help children increase their range and depth of expression.

Since a child's early experience of language is considered so fundamental to their later success, it has become increasingly common for preschools to begin teaching children basic literacy skills even before formal education starts. When children begin school, literacy is invariably a major focus. This



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goal of ensuring that all children learn to read and write has become even more pressing as researchers warn that the pandemic has caused a widening achievement gap between wealthier and poorer families, increasing academic inequality.

In many countries, formal education starts at four. The thinking often goes that starting early gives children more time to learn and excel. The result, however, can be an "education arms race", with parents trying to give their child early advantages at school through private coaching and teaching, and some parents even paying for children as young as four to have additional private tutoring.

Compare that to the more play-based early education of several decades ago, and you can see a huge change in policy, based on very different ideas of what our children need in order to get ahead. In the US, this urgency sped up with policy changes such as the 2001 "no child left behind" act, which promoted standardised testing as a way to measure educational performance and progress. In the UK, children are tested in their second year of school (age 5-6) to check they are reaching the expected reading standard. Critics warn that early testing like this can put children off reading, while proponents say it helps to identify those who need additional support.

However, many studies show little benefit from an early overly-academic environment. One 2015 US report says that society's expectations of what children should achieve in kindergarten has changed, which is leading to "inappropriate classroom practices", such as reducing play-based learning.

## **The risk of "schoolification"**

How children learn and the quality of the environment is hugely important. "Young children learning to read is one of the most important things primary education does. It's fundamental to children making progress in life," says Dominic Wyse, a professor of primary education at University College London, in the UK. He, alongside sociology professor Alice Bradbury, also at UCL, has published research proposing that the way we teach literacy really matters.



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In a 2022 report, they state that English school system's intense focus on phonics – a method that involves matching the sound of a spoken word or letter, with individual written letters, through a process called "sounding out" – could be failing some children.

A reason for this, says Bradbury, is that the "schoolification of early years" has resulted in more formal learning earlier on. But the tests used to assess that early learning may have little to do with the skills actually needed to read and enjoy books or other meaningful texts.

For example, the tests may ask pupils to "sound out" and spell nonsense words, to prevent them from simply guessing, or recognising familiar words. Since nonsense words are not meaningful language, children may find the task difficult and puzzling. Bradbury found that the pressure to gain these decoding skills – and pass reading tests – also means that some three-year-olds are already being exposed to phonics.

"It doesn't end up being meaningful, it ends up being memorising rather than understanding context," says Bradbury. She also worries that the books used are not particularly engaging.

Neither Wyse nor Bradbury make the case for later learning per se, but rather highlight that we should rethink the way children are taught literacy. The priority, they say, should be to encourage an interest in and familiarity with words, using storybooks, songs and poems, all of which help the child pick up the sounds of words, as well as expanding their vocabulary.

This idea is backed up by studies that show that the academic benefits of preschool fade away later on. Children who attend intensive preschools do not have higher academic abilities in later grades than those who did not attend such preschools, several studies now show. Early education can however have a positive impact on social development – which in turn feeds into the likelihood of graduation from school and university as well as being associated with lower crime rates. In short, attending preschool can have positive effects on later achievement in life, but not necessary on academic skills.



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Too much academic pressure may even cause problems in the long run. A study published in January 2022 suggested that those who attended a state-funded preschool with a strong academic emphasis, showed lower academic achievements a few years later, compared to those who had not gained a place.

This chimes with research on the importance of play-based learning in the early years. Child-led play-based preschools have better outcomes than more academically focussed preschools, for example.

One 2002 study found that "children's later school success appears to have been enhanced by more active, child-initiated early learning experiences", and that overly formalised learning could have slowed progress. The study concluded that "pushing children too soon may actually backfire when children move into the later elementary school grade".

Similarly, another small study found that disadvantaged children in the US who were randomly assigned to a more play-based setting had lower behavioural issues and emotional impairments at age 23, compared to children who had been randomly assigned to a more "direct instruction" setting.

Preschool studies like these don't shed light on the impact of early literacy per se, and small studies in single locations must always be treated with care, but they suggest that how it is taught, matters. One reason why early education can result in positive social outcomes later in life may have nothing to do with the teaching at all, but with the fact that it provides childcare. This means parents can work uninterrupted and provide more income to the family home.

Anna Cunningham, a senior lecturer in psychology at Nottingham Trent University who studies early literacy, argues that if a setting is too academically focused early on, it can cause the teachers to become stressed over tests and results, which can in turn affect the kids. "Of course it's not good to judge a five-year-old on their results," she says. Parental anxiety about how well their child is doing at school can also feed into this: according to a survey commissioned by an educational charity in the UK, school performance is one of parents' top concerns.





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## **Later start, better outcomes?**

Not everyone favours an early start. In many countries, including Germany, Iran and Japan, formal schooling starts at around six. In Finland, often hailed as the country with one of the best education system in the world, children begin school at seven.

Despite that apparent lag, Finnish students score higher in reading comprehension than students from the UK and the US at age 15. In line with that child-centred approach, the Finnish kindergarten years are filled with more play and no formal academic instruction.

Following this model, a 2009 University of Cambridge review proposed that the formal school age should be pushed back to six, giving children in the UK more time "to begin to develop the language and study skills essential to their later progress", as starting too early could "risk denting five-year-olds' confidence and causing long-term damage to their learning".

Research does back up this idea of starting later. One 2006 kindergarten study in the US showed there was improvement in test scores for children who delayed entry by one year.

Other research comparing early versus late readers, found that later readers catch up to comparable levels later on – even slightly surpassing the early readers in comprehension abilities. The study, explains lead author Sebastian Suggate, of the University of Regensburg in Germany, shows that learning later allows children to more efficiently match their knowledge of the world – their comprehension – to the words they learn. "It makes sense," he says. "Reading comprehension is language, they've got to unlock the ideas behind it."

"Of course if you spend more time focusing on language earlier on, you are building a strong foundation of skills that takes years to develop. Reading can be picked up quickly but for language (vocabulary and comprehension) there's no cheap tricks. It's hard work," says Suggate. In other work looking at differing school entry ages, he found that learning to read early had no discernible benefits at age 15.



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The question remains that if reading ability is not improved by learning early, then why start early? Individual variation in reading appetite and ability are one important aspect.

"Children are hugely different in terms of their foundational skills when they start school or start learning to read," explains Cunningham. In her study of Steiner-educated children, who only start formal education at about seven, she had to exclude 40% of the sample as the children could already read. "I think that's because they were ready for it," she says. She also found the older children were more ready "to learn the process to read in terms of their underlying language skills" because they had had three extra years of language exposure.

Studies also show that reading ability is more closely linked to a child's vocabulary than to their age, and that spoken language skills are a high predictor of later literary skills. However, we know that many children who enter school are behind on their language skills, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some argue that formal teaching allows these children to access the support and skills that others may pick up informally at home. This line of thinking is espoused by UK educational authorities, who say that teaching reading early to those behind on their spoken language is "the only effective route to closing this [language ability] gap".

Others favour the opposite approach, of immersing children in an environment where they can enjoy and develop their language comprehension, which is after all central to reading success. This is exactly what a playful learning setting helps encourage. "The job of teaching is to assess where your children are and give them the most appropriate teaching related to their level of development," says Wyse. The 2009 Cambridge review echoed this and stated: "There is no evidence that a child who spends more time learning through lessons – as opposed to learning through play – will 'do better' in the long run."

Cunningham, whose daughter has also recently started learning to read, has a reassuringly generous view of the ideal reading age: "It doesn't matter whether you start to read at four or five or six as long as the method they are taught is a good, evidenced method. Children are so resilient they will find opportunities to play in any context."



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Our obsession with early literacy appears to be somewhat unfounded, then – there's no need, nor clear benefit of rushing it. On the other hand, if your child is starting early, or shows an independent interest in reading before their school offers it, that's fine too, as long as there is plenty of opportunity to down tools and have fun along the way.

Melissa Hogenboom is the editor of BBC Reel. Her book, *The Motherhood Complex*, is out now. She is @melissasuzanneh on Twitter.

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