

THE ADVANTAGES OF A LATER START TO FORMAL EDUCATION

Sue Palmer

Sue Palmer is a former headteacher, literacy specialist and author of many books including *Toxic Childhood* (2015) and *Upstart: the case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens really need* (2016).

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises 'early childhood' (which it defines as birth to age eight) as a distinct developmental stage but points out that

'definitions of early childhood vary in different countries and regions, according to local traditions and the organization of primary school systems. In some countries, the transition from preschool to school occurs soon after four years old. In other countries, this transition takes place at around seven years old.' [UNCRC, 2005]

Most countries now have systems of 'early childhood care and education' (ECCE) starting when children are about three [OECD, 2017]. However, owing to the variations described above, for some children ECCE extends for three or four years, while for others it may be as little as a year.

ECCE is very different from the 'formal education' associated with school, which involves the teaching of specific literacy and numeracy skills in order that children achieve age-related standards in these subjects (e.g. in England, the National Curriculum). In ECCE the aim is to support young children's learning as appropriate to their personal level of physical, emotional, social and cognitive development and most learning is through the medium of play, the arts and outdoor activities [Bruce 2015]

This pedagogical model underpinned the developmentally-appropriate, play-based systems of ECCE devised by early years pioneers such as Froebel, Steiner and Montessori [Elkind 2015], all of which recommend that ECCE should continue until children are seven years old. The overwhelming majority of early years experts (such as the UK's Early Childhood Forum, 2014) still agree.

Play and development during early childhood

As the Harvard Centre on the Developing Child succinctly puts it: 'brains are built over time, from the bottom up' [Harvard 2007] and the role of play in the building process is well established [Pellegrini 2009, Sigman 2015]. A research review from the American Academy of Pediatrics entitled 'The Power of Play' argues that

'research demonstrates that developmentally appropriate play ... is a singular opportunity to promote the social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills that build executive function and a prosocial brain.' [Yogman et al 2018]

Play-based ECC plays a significant role in developing children's cognitive and self-regulation skills [Whitebread et al 2009], language skills [Weisberg et al 2013] and pro-social behaviour [Bagdi et al 2005; Jarvis et al 2014], whilst also laying the foundations for lifelong creativity and problem-solving [Tucker, 2014].

By promoting physical health and fitness (e.g. UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines, 2019) and the emotional resilience required for mental health [Gill 2007] it also contributes to lifelong wellbeing – and play in natural environments is particularly beneficial in this respect [Kemple et al]. The serious

decline in childhood play over recent decades has been linked to worrying increases in health problems among children, both physical [Tremblay et al, 2018] and mental [Gray, 2011; Whitebread, 2017].

The importance of positive relationships

The quality of relationships during early childhood is as important as play in terms of overall healthy development [Cortazar et al 2010]. When adult carers are positive, supportive and responsive, children are more likely to build a positive 'internal working model' (IWM) of their own worth, which contributes to lifelong well-being [Thompson 2008; Jarvis, 2020]

Developmentally-appropriate ECCE therefore places at least as much emphasis on 'care' as on 'education', recognising that playful, non-judgemental interactions promote secure attachment [Tuber 2008]. Since play is 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' [Playwork Principles 2004], it is the ideal medium for learning during this developmental stage, allowing children to focus on 'means' rather than 'ends' [Pellegrini 2009].

However, once formal education begins— no matter how caring or supportive the teacher – children are generally required to follow a set curriculum which focuses on age-related 'goals', 'targets', 'benchmarks' or 'outcomes' (see National Curriculum above). This is why early years specialists recommend that formal education should not begin until children are seven years old, when (with the benefit of several years in a relationship-centred, play-based learning environment), the vast majority should have developed the physical, emotional, social and cognitive skills and capacities that underpin lifelong learning and wellbeing:

'Those calling for academic instruction of the young don't seem to appreciate that math and reading are complex skills acquired in stages related to age. Children will acquire these skills more easily and more soundly if their lessons accord with the developmental sequence that parallels their cognitive development.' [Elkind et al 2001].

Laying sound foundations for later learning

A critical task for adult carers in an ECCE setting is to support children in developing a positive disposition to learn. [Katz 2003] This includes nurturing children's interest in literacy and numeracy so that they are intrinsically motivated to learn to read, write and reckon.

A high-quality, play-based ECCE setting is therefore 'literacy-rich' (e.g. plenty of books, songs, rhymes, stories, language activities and games, access to reading and writing materials) and maths-rich (e.g. plenty of opportunities for problem-solving, counting, sorting, mark-making; songs, rhymes, stories, games and activities involving maths concepts). ECCE practitioners would support and encourage interest in acquiring the skills as appropriate to each individual child [Bruce, 2015].

Some children show early interest in one or more aspects of the three Rs and make rapid progress; others need more time and appropriate experiences to develop foundational skills such as language and problem-solving, as well as their disposition to learn. For instance, there is a well-established 'attainment gap' at the age of three between children from high- and low-income families in both the above-mentioned foundational skills [Eisenstadt et al, 2019].

In relationship-centred, play-based ECCE, **all** children are supported as appropriate to their personal developmental stage in all aspects of the three Rs – no child is 'held back' and no child is pressurised to acquire specific skills before s/he displays the disposition to learn them. Children's overall development is considered more important than early attainment of specific cognitive skills because a growing body of research suggests that a too-early start on formal schooling can adversely affect children's long-term wellbeing. For instance, studies have found 'nothing to gain but much to lose' in beginning literacy instruction before the age of seven [Carlton Paige et al 2013].

The Gift of Time

Almost twenty years ago, a review of school starting ages worldwide found that

'The arguments in favour of children being taught academic skills earlier do not appear to be borne out by the evidence... Children who are taught these skills up to three years later seem to acquire them rapidly, and thereafter perform as well as or better than children with an early start. There is also little evidence that an early start in school compensates children for lower achievement that may be associated with deficiencies in their home learning environment.' [Sharp, 2002]

Research has continued to show that short-term academic gains from an early start on literacy teaching 'wash out' by the time children are about eleven [Marcon 2002, Suggate 2013]. And despite considerable investment in education in early teaching of the three Rs in the USA and UK, the attainment gap between advantaged and disadvantaged pupils continues to yawn [Eisenstadt et al 2019]

In addition, two long-term studies in the USA have suggested that the substitution of play-based ECCE with formal schooling has adverse effects in terms of lifelong social and emotional wellbeing:

- A twenty-five year study of disadvantaged children found those for whom formal instruction began before age six exhibited more emotional, social and behavioural problems during their subsequent school careers and more problems in social adjustment during early adulthood (e.g. problems with relationships and holding down a job) [Schweinhart et al, 1993]
- A seventy year study of high-ability middle-class children suggested a correlation between early school entry and poorer academic achievement, worse midlife adjustment and – worryingly – early death. [Kerry et al 2008; Friedman et al 2011]

An ongoing study at Stanford University entitled 'The Gift of Time' has found that, at age six, 'a one-year delay in school entry dramatically reduces inattention/hyperactivity at age seven, a measure of self-regulation with strong negative links to student achievement [and] ... this large and targeted effect persists till age eleven.' (Dee et al, 2018).

Self-regulation – like all aspects of early child development – involves a complex interweaving of physical, emotional, social and cognitive development [Whitebread 2012]. Ever since Frederick Froebel coined the term 'kindergarten' in 1837, evidence has been mounting that every child benefits from the gift of time to learn through play.

Sue Palmer is a former headteacher, literacy specialist and author of many books including *Toxic Childhood* (2015) and *Upstart: the case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens really need* (2016). She is Chair of the Upstart Scotland campaign (www.upstart.scot) and tweets as @UpstartScot.

References

Bagdi A and Vacca J (2005) *Supporting Early Childhood Social-Emotional Well Being: The Building Blocks for Early Learning and School Success* Early Childhood Education Journal pages 145–150

Bruce, Tina (2015) *Early Childhood Education 5th Edition* (Hodder Education)

Carlton Paige N, McLaughlin G.B. and Almon J.W. (2013) *Reading Instruction in Kindergarten: Little to Gain and Much to Lose* (Alliance for Childhood and Defending the Early Years)

<https://www.sarahlawrence.edu/media/cdi/pdf/ReadinginKindergartenreport.pdf>

Center on the Developing Child (2007). *The Science of Early Childhood Development* (InBrief). Retrieved from www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

Cortazar A and Herreros F (2010) *Early Attachment Relationships and the Early Childhood Curriculum* Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood Volume 11 Number 2

Dee T.S. and Sievertsen H.H. (2018) *The gift of time? School starting age and mental health* Health Economics, vol 27(5), pages 781-802

Department for Education (2014) *The national curriculum in England: complete framework for key stages 1 to 4*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4>

Early Childhood Forum (2014) *A Charter for Early Childhood* http://www.earlychildhoodforum.org/docs/ecf_charterleaflet_june2014_v9-2.pdf

Eisenstadt, N and Oppenheim, C. (2019) *Parents, Poverty and the State: 20 Years of Evolving Family Policy* (Policy Press)

Elkind, David (2015) *Giants in the Nursery: A Biographical History of Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Redleaf Press)

Elkind D and Whitehurst G.J. (2001) *Young Einsteins. Much Too Early: much too late* in Education Matters, 1,2,8-21.

- Friedman H.S. and Martin L.R. (2011) *The Longevity Project* (Hay House)
- Gill, Tim (2007) *No Fear: growing up in a risk-averse society* (Gulbenkian Foundation)
- Gray, Peter (2011) *The Decline of Play and the Rise of Psychopathology in children and adolescents* in The American Journal of Play: <https://www.journalofplay.org/sites/www.journalofplay.org/files/pdf-articles/3-4-article-gray-decline-of-play.pdf>
- Jarvis P, Newman S and Swinarski L (2014) *On Becoming Social: the importance of collaborative free play in childhood* International Journal of Play, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21594937.2013.863440>
- Jarvis P (2020) Pam Jarvis (2020) *Attachment theory, cortisol and care for the under-threes in the twenty-first century: constructing evidence-informed policy* Early Years, DOI: [10.1080/09575146.2020.1764507](https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2020.1764507) <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/V3BRDHCZKJ7QFGCJP7ZB/full?target=10.1080%2F09575146.2020.1764507&>
- Katz, Lilian (2003) *The right of the child to develop and learn in quality environments* International Journal of Early Childhood 35(1):13-22 · March
- Kemple K., Oh J.H., Kenny E., Smith-Bonahue. T (2016) *The Power of Outdoor Play and Play in Natural Environments* Childhood Education, Volume 92
- Kern M and Friedman H, 2008 *Early educational milestones as predictors of life-long academic achievement, mid-life adjustment and longevity* Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2713445/>
- Marcon, Rebecca (2002) *Moving Up the Grades: Relationships Between Preschool Model and Later School Success* Early Childhood Research and Practice
- Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2017) *Starting Strong 2017: Key OECD Indicators on Early Childhood Education and Care*, Starting Strong, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264276116-en>.
- Pellegrini, Anthony (2009) *The Role of Play in Human Development* Oxford University Press
- Playwork Principles (2004) *Playwork Principles* Scrutiny Group. Cardiff: Play Wales. www.playwales.org.uk.
- Schweinhart L and Weikhart D *Lasting Differences: The High/Scope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through Age 27* (High/Scope Press, 1993)
- Sharp, Caroline (2002) *School Starting Age: European Policy and Recent Research* Paper presented at the Local Government Association Seminar 'When Should Our Children Start School?' London (NFER) <https://defenddigitalme.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/44414.pdf>
- Sigman, Aric (2015) *Play, It's in their DNA* <https://www.maketime2play.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/PLAY-Its-in-their-DNA.pdf>
- Suggate S.P, Schaughency E.A. and Reese E. (2013) *Children learning to read later catch up to children reading earlier* Early Childhood Research Quarterly 28
- Thompson, R. A. (2008). *Early attachment and later development: Familiar questions, new answers*. In J. Cassidy & P. R. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* p. 348–365 (Guilford Press).

Tremblay M.S, Longmuir P.E., Barnes J.D. et al. (2018) *Physical literacy levels of Canadian children aged 8–12 years: descriptive and normative results from the RBC Learn to Play–CAPL project*. BMC Public Health 18, 1036 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5891-x>

Tuber, Steven (2019) *Attachment, Play, and Authenticity*, second edition (RL publishing)

Tucker, Kate (2014) 'Play and problem-solving' Chapter 1 of *Mathematics Through Play in the Early Years* (Sage Publications)

UK Chief Medical Officers' Physical Activity Guidelines (2019) UK Government online publication: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/832868/uk-chief-medical-officers-physical-activity-guidelines.pdf

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2005) *UNCRC General Comment No 7: Implementing child rights in early childhood* <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/docs/AdvanceVersions/GeneralComment7Rev1.pdf>

Weisberg D.S., Zosh J.M., Hirsh-Pasek K. and Michnick R. (2013) *Talking It Up: Play, Language Development and the Role of Adult Support* American Journal of Play, volume 6, n

Whitebread D., Coltman P., Jameson, H. & Lander, R. (2009). Play, cognition and self-regulation: What exactly are children learning when they learn through play? *Educational and Child Psychology*, 26(2), 40–52.

Whitebread, David (2012) *Developmental Psychology and Early Education* (Sage Publishing)

Whitebread, David (2017) *Free Play and Children's Mental Health* The Lancet: Child and Adolescent Health, Volume 1 Issue 3: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(17\)30092-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(17)30092-5/fulltext)

Yogman M., Garner A., Hutchinson J., Hirsh-Pasek K., Michnick Golinkoff R. - Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health for American Academy of Pediatrics (2018) *The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children* Pediatrics <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/142/3/e20182058>



Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship

The SWSF is the membership organisation for all the Steiner schools and independent Steiner Early Years settings in the UK and Ireland. Its aims are to safeguard and develop the ethos and identity of Steiner Waldorf education, to support our schools and settings in providing a high quality and distinctive education, and to represent the interests of Steiner education in the wider educational, academic, social and political context.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please email admin@steinerwaldorf.org

This publication is available at www.steinerwaldorf.org

Interested in our work? See our website at www.steinerwaldorf.org

35 Park Road
London
NW1 6XT
Phone: +44 (0)2045 249933
E: admin@steinerwaldorf.org
W: www.steinerwaldorf.org
Registered charity number 296104

Copyright © Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship® All material belongs to the SWSF and cannot be copied, reproduced or printed without permission.