

FIGHTING FOR flexibility

Author and journalist
Pauline M Hull argues that
current school admission
practices are unfair to many
summer-born children



The challenges faced by summer-born children, the very youngest in every school year group, is nothing new.

The increased likelihood of these children experiencing long-lasting effects throughout their education, specifically

related to their initial maturity differences – such as being more likely to be unhappy at school, weakest in mathematics, considered below average, report bullying, and significantly less likely to go to university – is well documented, and yet, as a recent review of research spanning

20 years concluded that “this very serious issue... has been neglected by agencies central to education and training policy”¹.

Why? Perhaps because these challenges are not experienced by *all* summer-born children, or perhaps because of a seemingly laissez-faire attitude that

argues that “someone’s got to be the youngest in the year. It’s just the way it is.”

But a new campaign group, set up by parents of summer-born children, believes there is something that can be done, and that furthermore, legislation already exists to support it; the Department for Education just needs to make parents’ – and children’s – rights much clearer.

Many parents of summer-born children want greater autonomy over when and how their child starts school, in accordance with current legislation. Compulsory school age is defined as “the term following” a child’s fifth birthday (which, for summer-born children, is the September of a new academic year), and reception class is defined as “an entry class to primary schools providing education suitable for children aged five and any children who are under or over five years old whom it is expedient to educate with pupils of that age”.

Furthermore, the law states that every child of compulsory school age shall “receive efficient full-time education suitable to his age, ability and aptitude”, that “everybody has the right to an effective education”, and that parents have the right “to ensure the education and teaching of their children in conformity with their ... philosophical and pedagogical convictions”.

However, overtly rigid and prescriptive admissions policies have rendered much of the above legislation immaterial, so that, although almost a third of parents would prefer to wait until their child is five before starting school² and although “admission authorities must ensure that the practices and the criteria used to decide the allocation of school places are fair, clear and objective”³, this legitimate choice is not permitted by most schools and councils.

Applications for summer-born children to enter reception at age five are flatly refused, and worse, many parents are often not even given the option of part-time attendance for their child, with deferrals until later in the year strongly discouraged.

In short, admissions procedures are predominantly based on chronological date of birth entry into school rather than each individual child’s readiness and legal right, and while applications for an early

school start are unquestioningly approved, parents choosing an age five start – entirely within the law – are expected to provide documented evidence to demonstrate their lack of readiness. How can this be fair?

There is less disagreement about the fact that summer-born children can start school aged five, but schools and local authorities then insist they start in Year One – thereby missing reception altogether – an option that is evidently not in the child’s best interest, negates the point of a delayed start, and again, not ‘fair’.

And so faced with this Hobson’s choice of complying with what authorities deem a ‘normal’ and ‘correct’ age-four entry or no reception at all, and in a backdrop of oversubscribed school places, very few parents can afford the risk of waiting to apply for an age-five reception place, fighting for equal treatment of their child’s application, only to be left with no school place at all if they lose and Year One is full.

Interestingly, as far back as 1967, *The Plowden Report* acknowledged that chronological age “can be a misleading guide to a young child’s development” and as such, “the law should... allow a good deal of variation in practice”. It even recommended that attendance at a nursery group should be permitted for the first term of compulsory education, such that “a child should, if his parents wish, be allowed to attend school for a half day only until he reaches the age of six”. This “modest raising of the age of entry for some children by a few months”, the report argues, would have “several beneficial effects”.

More recently, eminent educationalist Sir Ken Robinson questioned why “we still educate children by batches”. “We put them through the system by age group,” he stated. “Why do we do that? Why is there this assumption that the most important thing kids have in common is how old they are? ... It’s like the most important thing about them is their date of manufacture ... If you’re interested in the model of learning, you don’t start from this production-line mentality.”

Similarly, Early Childhood Action, a collaborative organisation concerned about early school entry, insists in its manifesto: “There needs to be much greater flexibility in the school-entry framework for a number of reasons, including the importance of every child

having the necessary time to achieve emotional and social readiness for more formal learning ... Parents also should not be pressurised in any way to bring forward school commencement before statutory school age.”

The campaign group believes that the pendulum has evidently swung too far in recent decades. By allowing early entry for children deemed ‘ready’ for school, it is now perceived as ‘the norm’ for everyone, when in fact there are still parents whose choice is to wait until statutory entry – without prejudice and without having to fight.

Exacerbating the situation further is a reception environment that is increasingly curriculum-led rather than play-led, with EYFS Profile assessments being completed in the final term. As such, forced entry into school at age four can prove a very worst case of ‘too much too soon’ for some children.

That said, it’s worth remembering that educational challenges do not affect every summer-born child, and in fact many have a very positive experience. Therefore, by allowing flexibility for parents who choose to delay entry until compulsory school age, we would not simply ‘shift the problem’ to other children.

Fortunately, there is a small number of school headteachers who are taking the lead on this matter, who recognise that this is not an issue of SEN requiring documented evidence, but rather one of maturity, readiness and giving each individual child the opportunity to enjoy and thrive in school – regardless of the month in which they were born.

Where these heads lead, campaigners hope the Department for Education forces others to follow.

Pauline M Hull is an author, journalist and mum of a summer-born son.

References

1. February 2009 *Birthdate Effects: A Review of the Literature from 1990-on*. Elizabeth D A Sykes PhD, John F Bell, Carmen Vidal Rodeiro PhD
2. *The Parents Omnibus Survey* (2009)
3. School Admissions Code