

Summer born children at bottom of the class, warn experts and parents

Younger pupils should have their test results graded more favourably than older classmates, to correct the academic disadvantage faced by children with summer birthdays, a new study will say.

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Sara Slade has just got the local authority to agree that her daughter Ava, born in August, can start school a year after her age group starts Photo: GEOFF PUGH



By [Julie Henry](#), Education Correspondent

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Researchers believe that primary school tests should be “age adjusted” to prevent younger pupils in the year group being penalised unfairly.

It follows an analysis of the academic performance of the entire state school population of England which found dramatic differences in the fortunes of children born in August, the youngest in their class, and their classmates who have their birthdays in September, and are the eldest.

Summer-born children get consistently lower results, are also more likely to leave education at 16, tend to be more unhappy at school and have less chance of getting in to a high-performing university.

The findings, from the Institute for Fiscal Studies, add to growing evidence that August children suffer serious educational disadvantage because they are less physically, socially and emotionally ready for school, compared to their classmates.

In its latest report, due to be published in April, the IFS will conclude that the fairest way to close this “persistent and damaging” attainment gap is to “age-adjust” primary school test scores and GCSE results.

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It comes as growing numbers of parents are challenging local authority admission arrangements which force them to enrol their summer born children in full time school when they are barely four years old.

Ellen Greaves, a research economist from the institute who is working on the study, said: “Age adjusting the tests may not solve the problem in the classroom, as August born children are still the youngest. But it is a way of giving parents a better idea of how their children are doing and it may help children’s confidence.”

Under the proposed system, exams results would be analysed to identify the differences in performance between the different age groups.

Then, a statistically complex equation would be applied to all results to take into account the month in which each pupil is born.

It would likely mean, effectively, that those with an August birthday given the biggest boost, and September-born pupils, are benefited the least.

Ms Greaves added: “We have the results of every children in the country, and if those born in summer are doing, on average, half a standard deviation worse than those born in September, then you adjust all the scores accordingly.”

Such an approach is already used in some independent and grammar schools entrance exams. Kent County Council, for instance adjusts the pass mark in the 11-plus test to allow for the child’s age.

The IFS study will stop short of saying that the GCSE results given to pupils should be manipulated in this way, but it will recommend that the same scores are “age adjusted” when given to sixth forms and further education colleges, to prevent summer-born from missing out on A-level places and vocational courses.

The plight of summer-born children has been well documented but has yet to be tackled successfully in policy terms.

An increasing number of parents with August-born children are attempting to get round the problem themselves, by waiting a year to enrol their children, so they are the eldest, rather than youngest, in the year.

Legally, children are not required to attend school until the term after their fifth birthday but most children start full-time education in reception class aged four.

The Government’s school admission code says that council’s should allow entry to be delayed by a few months but families have been warned by councils that they risk losing their primary school place altogether if their children do not start with their age group.

Stefan Richter, a father of three from Leicester whose daughter Louisa, three, was born on August 26, has set up a campaign group to help parents challenge the status quo. In a meeting with the Department for Education last week he asked for the Government to make it clear to councils that they must be more flexible.

“I just think that weeks after your fourth birthday is too young for some children to start full time school so I want Louisa to wait a year,” said Mr Richter who runs a software company. “When I talked to the local authority I was told I could ‘defer entry’ but that means Louisa stays in pre-school and then has to jump straight in to Year 1 of primary, missing reception year. That’s ridiculous and goes against the whole point of the exercise.”

Mr Richter said hundreds of families across the country wanted a later school start but were being warned off by councils.

But Ms Greaves, at the IFS, said shifting start dates would only help some children.

“Allowing a later school start may solve the problem for that child but that doesn’t solve the problem as a whole,” she said. “If you allow all August born to start later, you then have July children who are the youngest in the year and you have exactly the same problem.”

A DfE spokesman said: “We have changed the Schools Admissions Code to make it easier for parents to defer their child’s entry until they reach their fifth birthday. We are listening to parents whose experience of seeking a deferred entry for their child has been difficult and will consider further action if necessary.”

CASE STUDY

Sara and Richard Slade, have spend two and a half years battling with Reading Borough Council to allow their daughter Ava, four, who was born on August 29, to start reception class when she is five.

“Ava is a bright child developing at a normal rate. She probably would cope but I don’t want her to have to just cope. Why make it harder for her than for the next child,” said Mrs Slade, who is a teacher.

Despite having the support of her local primary school, Mrs Slade was told by officials said that there was no provision for starting a year later, that it would have a detrimental impact on Ava and that it would set a precedent.

“They couldn’t produce any evidence of a detrimental effect,” said the mother of two. “And their concern about precedent doesn’t chime with their duty of care towards Ava. Any decision must be based on her best interests.”

After dozens of meetings and a grilling from a council-appointed lawyer, the Slades finally won their battle. The local authority agreed that Ava could enrol after she had turned five.

“We have to look at August and July children as individuals and consider what is right for them, not what is right for the system,” said Mrs Slade.

“The local authority put us under a lot of duress. It was one of the hardest things I have had to do. But now we can be positive about Ava starting school instead of dreading it.”