

THE CONVERSATION



Why are more parents choosing to delay when their child starts school?

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Boys are more likely to start school later. from www.shutterstock.com

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Many parents worry about when is the right time for their child to start school. While some use their child's individual characteristics to judge school readiness, others have philosophical beliefs that lead them to delay their child's school entry.

In Australia, a child is considered to be ready for formal schooling around the age of five, although legally a child is not required to start school until they are six years old.

Although school starting ages still differ between the states and territories, most children begin school between 4.5 and 5.5 years of age.

Using age as a basis for determining whether children are ready for school is problematic given the developmental variability in young children of the same age.

Parents choose to delay their child's entry to school for a variety of reasons but most make their decision in the belief that it will benefit their child. However, the research evidence is still relatively mixed.

Which children are most likely to start school late?

Many parents, both in Australia and internationally, make the decision to voluntarily delay their child's entry into formal schooling until they are six.

In the US, for example, around 5% of parents choose delayed entry, whereas in Australia it's much higher at around 14.5%.

Danish enrolment statistics indicate that gender plays a role, with parents choosing to delay school entry of one in five boys and one in ten girls.

Research suggests that children are most likely to be delayed if their birthday falls three to four months before the age cut-off, and that those delayed are most likely to be white, male and from families of higher socio-economic status.

One reason for why children from wealthier families are more likely to be delayed is that the decision to delay often means children spend an extra year in daycare.

This extra year comes with a financial cost, which families with higher incomes are more able to absorb.

For families with less financial means, ending daycare costs by sending a child on to public schooling as soon as they are of age may be a financial necessity.

Some studies have suggested that delayed children score higher in reading and mathematics than children who began school on time, but others have found no differences in achievement between those children who started school on time and those who were delayed.

Starting later gives more time for children to mature

There is also evidence that the youngest children in the first year of school are at an increased risk of behavioural problems and poor academic achievement.

A later school starting age may benefit these children by allowing greater time for maturation, which leads to increased self-regulation and decreased inattention or hyperactivity.

Principals and teachers also subscribe to the notion that a later starting age is beneficial for children.

A 2015 report by the Early Childhood Teachers' Association (ECTA) revealed that 60% of teachers surveyed believed children shouldn't start school before the age of five.

The most common reasons for this given by prep teachers were that children should be able to concentrate for up to 20 minutes, play and share with others and eat lunch independently before coming to school.

What can school enrolment trends tell us?

Research being conducted by myself and a colleague analysing data compiled by the Queensland Department of Education and Training of all public school children entering prep (the first year of school in Queensland) in the years 2010 to 2014, showed that 2.1% of children who were attending prep were delayed entry.

80% of those 4,695 children were born in the months from March through June, making them the youngest in their cohort. Also, the majority (64%) of delayed entry enrolments were male.

Our research also suggests that delayed entry is on the increase in Queensland. Results show that the percentage of children with delayed entry into prep almost doubled between 2010 and 2014, increasing from 1.5% to 2.9% respectively.



Children whose birth date falls within four months of the cut-off date are those more likely to start school later. from www.shutterstock.com

More parents opting for their children to start school later

These figures indicate that more parents appear to be deciding that delaying entry will benefit their child.

Due to delayed entry, however, it is now possible to have four and a half year olds sitting and learning alongside six year olds.

At this developmental time point, this represents a very pronounced age difference because the developmental abilities of children at these ages are vastly different.

Such wide variation in children's developmental abilities places additional strains on teachers who are required to differentiate the curriculum to meet all children's needs.

It is possible that as the number of delayed entry children in prep rises, even more parents may choose to delay their children.

National statistics must be collected so that the rate, and impact of delayed entry across the country is determined.

In addition, the reasons parents give for choosing to delay must be understood.

As a decision to delay a child's start to school has important implications for the child, the teacher and the wider school community, gathering detailed and national data in this area is essential.



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