

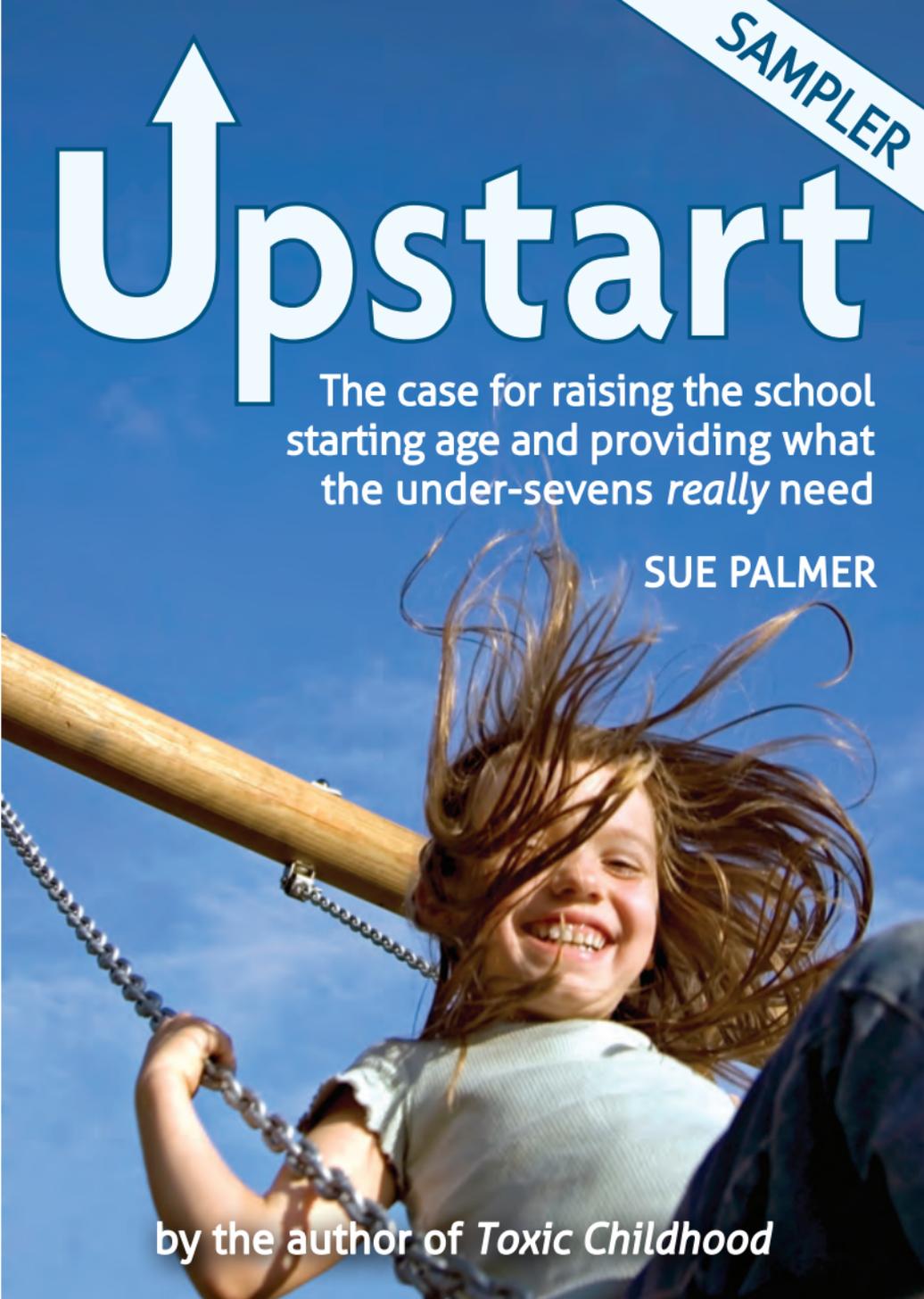
SAMPLER

Upstart

The case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens *really* need

SUE PALMER

by the author of *Toxic Childhood*

A young girl with long, wavy brown hair is swinging happily on a wooden playground structure. She is wearing a light-colored, short-sleeved shirt. Her hair is blowing in the wind, and she has a wide, joyful smile. The background is a clear blue sky. The image is the central focus of the book cover.

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The case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens *really* need

SUE PALMER

Floris Books



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Welcome...

... to the *Upstart* sampler, a free first chapter of Sue Palmer's groundbreaking book *Upstart: The case for raising the school starting age and providing what the under-sevens really need*, due out 16 June 2016.

Sue's aim is to: 'influence public opinion so that by the next general election the introduction of a kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds is high on the UK's political agenda.'

This sampler tells you what children and society gain from starting formal education later, and why we cannot afford to brush this need aside. Please be part of the change!

Skip to the end for information about how to get involved.

Introduction

Why is the achievement gap in UK schools steadily widening? Why do boys lag behind girls right from the beginning of their educational careers? Why, despite endless local and national strategies, policy initiatives and educational campaigns, has the UK failed to improve its performance in international surveys of literacy and numeracy?

As a literacy specialist who's spent fifteen years researching the effects of modern lifestyles on children's ability to learn, I know there's no simple answer to any of these questions – or, indeed, to the question of why developmental disorders and mental health conditions are increasing among UK children at an alarming rate, to the point that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services simply cannot cope.

However, I'm convinced that one very significant factor should be taken into account: the extremely early school starting age in most English-speaking countries, and the growing trend to 'schoolify' the care of children at a younger and younger age.

This sampler is the first chapter of a book to be

published in Spring 2016. *Upstart* argues the case for raising the school starting age and introducing a kindergarten stage for children between three and seven. This sample chapter offers a brief historical overview of early years education and the reasons behind the UK's increasingly early start on formal schooling. It explains why we're treating little children in ways that, according to a mass of educational research and theory, are fundamentally damaging.

Nothing can be more important for a society's future than the way it raises and educates its children. Yet outside the early years sector, the subject of early 'schoolification' is scarcely discussed – and all attempts by early years specialists to influence government policy are met, at best, with lip-service and, at worst, with outright contempt.

I'm therefore enormously grateful to Floris Books for inviting me to research and write *Upstart* and for putting this sampler together. I'm even more grateful to Cosy Direct for financing its publication and distribution in the hope of stimulating public debate about early childhood education and care in the UK.

Over twenty-five years of unprecedented preschool expansion, parents and the general

public have had little chance to discuss the general direction of travel, because changes have happened at breakneck speed. There's been no political debate on the subject either, because the major parties have maintained a remarkable consensus about the desirability of the 'schoolification' agenda.

However, as this sampler argues, it's becoming urgent that the UK wakes up to the damage a 'too much too soon' approach can wreak on small children – and the knock-on effects for the educational system and society as a whole. Parents and politicians also need to know that many early years practitioners are desperately unhappy at being required, by law, to treat children in ways they *know* are not in their best interests.

In *Upstart*, I've tried to explain why *all* children – rich and poor, boys and girls – benefit from play-based, developmentally appropriate early education. Not only does kindergarten education provide the soundest possible foundation for wellbeing and lifelong learning, it also improves children's achievement at school. The challenge now is to spread the word so that, by the next general election, the introduction of a kindergarten stage for three- to seven-year-olds is high on the UK's political agenda.

Please read the sampler, discuss the issues with colleagues and friends, and help raise the profile of early years education so that change becomes possible. We can't afford to let entrenched Anglo-Saxon attitudes – backed up by political pride and prejudice – hazard the health, wellbeing and educational chances of the nation's youngest citizens.

Sue Palmer
Edinburgh, 2015

Chapter 1

How Did We Get Here?

Why school starts so early in English-speaking nations, how politicians are now ‘schoolifying’ the pre-school years and why this is damaging for children and society

He’s not yet five. Yesterday he was messing about in the back garden, building a ‘dinosaur trap’ from sticks and mud. Today he’s scrubbed and shining, looking very cute in his smart new uniform but unnaturally subdued in this strange new school environment. The teacher is welcoming him into the classroom, along with twenty-odd other little boys and girls: four- and five-year-old children – wide-eyed, wondering, trusting, hopeful... and so, so young!

Starting school is a big moment in anyone’s life. Indeed, in today’s highly competitive educational environment, it’s one of the biggest moments of all – early success or failure at school is likely to

affect every aspect of a child's future existence. So it would be reassuring for parents to know that the rationale underpinning the school starting policy is governed by careful consideration of young children's needs, backed up by well-established educational research, and endorsed by experts in child development.

Unfortunately, it isn't.

A very British story

In fact, starting ages for formal schooling around the world were chosen by politicians, as opposed to educational experts. And even for most politicians, the thought of putting four- and five-year-olds into a formal school environment seems to have been unpalatable. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the governments of 66 per cent of countries worldwide chose six as the school starting age, while in 22 per cent (including some of the most educationally successful nations) they preferred seven years old.

That leaves only 12 per cent of countries worldwide where children start school at five or younger. Interestingly, this 12 per cent consists of the four nations of the United Kingdom, and a selection of its ex-colonies and protectorates,

including Australia and New Zealand.¹ In effect, every wide-eyed, wondering child around the world who starts compulsory schooling *before* the age of six is the great-great-grandson or daughter of the British Empire.

So why, back in 1870, did Victorian politicians decide to send children to school at such a young age? There's an apocryphal story that they chose five in order to go one better than Prussia, which had recently settled for six. I've never found any official confirmation of this, but it certainly accords with my own experience of educational politics: international competition and point-scoring are powerful drivers.

It *is* on the record, though, that the most important considerations in 1870 were economic ones, determined by the needs of big business rather than small children. Child labour had recently been outlawed, so elementary education was considered 'of great utility' for keeping poor children off the streets while their mothers went to work. The early starting age was also a sop to irate employers, who had recently

1 This chapter focuses on the English education system, which has inevitably influenced policy and practice in other English-speaking nations, with nods to the influence of the USA.

been deprived of numerous cheap, biddable workers: the sooner school started, the sooner factory fodder could be released at the other end.

The early start policy was quickly absorbed into the national consciousness. And once children were out of sight in their primary schools, they remained out of mind, so for over a hundred years what happened to them there was of little interest to politicians or the general public. Even when, in the middle years of the twentieth century, people began to ask questions about the efficacy of state schooling, solutions were always sought in changes to secondary and tertiary education. Comprehensive schools and polytechnic colleges were introduced, examinations and qualifications redesigned, universities expanded...

It wasn't until the 1980s that the political spotlight swivelled once more on to the under-elevens. By this time, Britain's heavy industry was in terminal decline and it seemed the nation's future success would depend upon 'a knowledge economy'. Secondary teachers, under attack for their students' academic performance, pointed out that the problems started in primary schools, where many children were failing to pick up the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic.

The result was fierce controversy among politicians and academics about the best way to teach the three Rs at primary level, but no one dreamt of questioning the wisdom of starting formal education so early. After a century of habit, everyone assumed that packing off five-year-olds to school was completely normal. Indeed, in England they were soon ready to accept an even younger starting age.

Economic considerations again. By the late 1980s working mothers were, as in Victorian times, once more the norm and the English government offered to grant free 'early years education' for four-year-olds – an apparent boon for both families and employers. The cheapest way to provide this education was to enrol four-year-olds in primary school, in the class for the youngest children, known as 'reception'. Since schools are paid per capita to educate their pupils, most primary headteachers welcomed these tiny new recruits – the policy was affectionately known among the profession as 'Bums on Seats' – and an even earlier start to education was rapidly normalised. Within a decade or so, the overwhelming majority of English four-year-olds were in reception classes, including 'summerborns' who'd only just celebrated their fourth birthday.

Everyone out of step but us

Why, then, did the rest of the world opt to start schooling at least one year (and up to three years) later than the Brits and their former colonies? When the fashion for state-provided education began in Europe in the nineteenth century, there was no scientific evidence on which to base the decision. There was, however, a long history of education for more privileged children – at least the male ones – which had traditionally begun around seven years old.

The historian of childhood, Hugh Cunningham, tells us that, since Roman times, European adults thought of childhood in three seven-year chunks: '*infans* up to seven, *puer* [boy] seven to fourteen, and *adolescens* from fourteen to twenty-one'. It was the *pueri* who went to school, and that tradition continued long after the Roman Empire had disintegrated. In the chivalric system of the Middle Ages, for instance, the son of a wealthy family would stay at home until the age of seven, then go to another privileged family as a page for seven years of chivalric education, before beginning another seven years' apprenticeship as squire to a knight.

This pattern is echoed in attitudes to childhood

around the world. The prophet Mohammed said that ‘the first seven years are for play, the second seven are for discipline and education, and the third for keeping with the adults’, and according to an ancient Japanese aphorism: ‘until seven years old, children are in the gods’ domain’. It seems that, in terms of school starting age, worldwide ancient wisdom accords with many of today’s most successful education systems.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European educationists such as Frederick Froebel (1782–1852), Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and Maria Montessori (1870–1952) developed educational programmes based on observations of children’s intellectual development. They also held fast to the belief that ‘the first seven years are for play’, which meant that pioneers of education for the under-sevens took a different approach from schooling systems for older children. Froebel coined the term *kindergarten* (literally: children’s garden) for the world’s first Institute of Play and Activity for Small Children, and the schooling systems set up over a hundred years later by Steiner and Montessori (and now held in high regard around the world) also adopted an essentially play-based approach until children are seven years old.

When the science of developmental psychology began to emerge, its two earliest luminaries – Piaget in France and Vygotsky in Russia – provided scientific evidence that the first seven years or so of children’s cognitive development is qualitatively different from later stages. Ever since, there has been a significant difference between the ethos of early years educational systems worldwide, and those of traditional schooling.

There are many different names for systems of early years education around the world – nursery school, preschool, playschool – but I’ve chosen to use the Froebelian term ‘kindergarten’ throughout this book, partly because it avoids the term ‘school’. The younger children are, the more the educational emphasis has to be on helping each one *develop* various physical, emotional, social and cognitive abilities – as opposed to *teaching* skills and knowledge, as in traditional schooling systems.

The power of play

Kindergartens stress the importance of play, which is the natural means by which young human beings have always explored, experimented and developed understanding of their social and material environment. Along with adult support

and guidance, children's own active, self-directed play is now widely recognised as critical to the development of:

- * physical coordination and confidence, the ability to focus attention and control behaviour
- * emotional strengths, including a can-do attitude, resilience and the patience to pursue long-term aims rather than immediate rewards
- * social competence, such as getting along with their peers, working collaboratively in a group and communication skills (including active listening)
- * cognitive capacities, such as the use of language to explore and express ideas, and a 'common-sense understanding' of the world and how it works, which underpins mathematical and scientific abilities.

To enrich and support children's own play, kindergarten education usually includes frequent opportunities for children to be outdoors in natural surroundings, and stresses the age-old (and fundamentally playful) human activities of song, dance, story-telling, art and drama. All this is combined with adult-led activities (of growing length and complexity as the kindergarten years go

by), designed to lay firm foundations for children's future success at school. But developmentally based kindergarten education isn't merely about 'school readiness'. It's about readiness for life in general.

Perhaps the most significant difference between kindergarten and schooling, then, is that the former takes the 'bottom-up' approach of helping individual children develop their full potential, and the latter takes a more 'top-down' adult-directed approach involving transmission of an agreed curriculum and the expectation that all children should achieve specific educational standards deemed appropriate for their age-group. So, while kindergarten practitioners ask themselves, first and foremost, 'What is this child interested in? What support does she or he need to move forward?', the emphasis for school must be on 'What does this child need to know? What skills do I have to encourage in order to ensure she or he gets there?' A kindergarten approach to learning is often described as 'play-based' or 'child-centred', as opposed to the more formal, curriculum-centred methods employed in traditional schooling.

The great question, of course, is *when* children are ready to move from a play-based to a more formal approach, and at the heart of this debate we usually find the vexed question of literacy. Many children

are clearly ready to read and write long before they're six or seven but, while kindergarten teachers would support and encourage early interest of this kind, they wouldn't want to emphasise it to the detriment of a child's overall development (that complex mix of physical, emotional, social and cognitive capacities outlined above). They certainly wouldn't require kindergarten children to decode a reading book unless they showed an interest, or attempted to write before they were physically competent to do so. By contrast, in early start countries *all* children are expected to reach certain goals in reading and writing at five, or even younger, regardless of their interest or their individual stage of physical development.

The unhurried attitude in countries with a later start to formal education seems to be linked to a more benign attitude to young children among the adult population in general, including concern that youngsters enjoy opportunities to play for as long as possible. When I talk to parents and teachers in other parts of the world about English children being instructed in literacy skills at four, most are horrified. I've heard several teachers describe the approach as 'cruel', while a Dutch headmaster simply laughed and said 'Here on the mainland, we educators think you Anglo-Saxons are mad!'

The quest for the three Rs

Nevertheless, there's usually method in madness. Perhaps, back in 1870, those English politicians reckoned that the sooner children started formal education, the better they'd do in the long run? The Victorian poet Matthew Arnold, whose day job was as an inspector of schools, described the duty of elementary education as 'to obtain the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic for the greatest number'. He and his colleagues therefore expected instruction in the three Rs to begin as soon as children started school. Arnold was, however, right in thinking that these educational aims wouldn't be achieved by poorly qualified teachers employing punitive teaching methods to control classes of sixty or seventy pupils, which was often the case in schools serving the poorest areas of the country.

Fortunately, over the next half century conditions in UK primary schools gradually improved (teachers were better trained and class sizes decreased). Children's performance in the three Rs improved with them, and alongside rising levels of literacy and numeracy came a steady narrowing of the gap between rich and poor. Both these factors were

clearly related not only to changes in schools but to improvements in diet, housing and general social conditions, including the development of the welfare state.

My own family's experience was typical: thanks to social and educational progress they moved over three generations from extreme poverty to moderate prosperity. As one of the third generation, I started school in 1953, and became – like many of the baby boomers – the first in my family to attend university. By the early 1970s, I had become a primary teacher myself, and firmly believed that all was for the best in a rapidly improving system, that universal literacy and numeracy were well within the nation's grasp and that greater equality of opportunity would follow in their wake.

Then, suddenly – and quite unexpectedly – the trend went into reverse. Despite the fact that living conditions for most British families were better than they'd ever been, the achievement gap mysteriously began to widen again, and social mobility ceased. According to UK research published in 2013, young people in the second decade of the twenty-first century are on average less literate and numerate than their counterparts fifty years ago, and also lag behind youngsters in other western countries. At the

same time, social mobility in Britain has decreased significantly since the 1970s, and our country is now less socially mobile than most of the developed world.

It's desperately sad that – despite considerably higher living standards and advances in teaching methods and materials – UK schools are not delivering 'the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic to the greatest number.' While the reasons are undoubtedly complex, it would be amazing if aspects of primary education weren't involved. And one of the most significant differences between education half a century ago and education today is the approach to early years.

Back in the 1950s the influence of developmental psychology had stretched its tentacles even into the English educational system, and my memories of a reception class in 1953 are of dressing-up clothes, a 'home corner', sand and water play, songs, rhymes, storytime, nature walks and learning how to tie my shoelaces. The nearest we four- and five-year-old pupils came to the three Rs was 'Ten Green Bottles' and the alphabet song: serious teaching of literacy and numeracy didn't start till Year 1.

The reminiscences of other baby boomers suggest my experience is not unique. I suspect that, for a few decades after the Second World War, formal

schooling for most children in England began at the same age as their European counterparts: six. At the very least, their early years at school were far less pressurised than they are for children today.

The primary wars

Part of the reason for this informality in mid-twentieth century English reception classes was the special relationship between the UK and the USA. America had unshackled itself from Britain long before the introduction of state-sponsored education, and most of its States – like the rest of the world – chose six as the age when children were admitted into the first grade of elementary school.

However, American children enter school premises at five, since they traditionally spend a year in a kindergarten class. By the 1950s, US kindergarten practice was very much influenced by the European educationists mentioned above and amounted to a gentle, child-centred transition from home or nursery into a formal school environment. My reception experience was almost certainly influenced by fashionable trends in American education.

Unfortunately, however, these trends were

soon to cause educational havoc. By the 1960s, many American educationists were convinced that this 'child-centred' approach should be extended upwards from kindergarten into elementary schools. They argued that since the key to successful learning is motivation, older children would also learn better if they learned through play. Throughout primary school, they should be supported in discovering facts and ideas for themselves, and the teacher's role should be as 'a guide on the side', not 'the sage on the stage'. These progressive theories met fierce resistance from more traditionalist thinkers, who believed in the straightforward transmission of knowledge. The debate soon became polarised and politicised, and spread around the English-speaking world.

During the 1970s and 80s, the progressive philosophy was very much in the ascendant. In England (as in some areas of the USA) it became the default model of many influential educationists, who urged primary teachers to abandon any methods seen as 'traditional'. As a primary teacher and headteacher during this period, I was by no means alone in finding these polarised views frustrating – surely the most effective teaching involved a sensitive balance between the two approaches?

We worriers were particularly concerned about the effect on literacy teaching – in their most extreme form, progressive methods amounted to giving children picture books and leaving them to work out how to read for themselves. It seemed obvious that, however motivated they were, most children would not learn to read and write a complex language like English unless they were taught something about how it works, especially phonic encoding. It was also becoming clear that the children whose progress was most affected by lack of explicit teaching were those from the poorest homes.

In my case, fate – in the form of motherhood – intervened and when I re-emerged in the 1990s as an educational writer, politicians on both sides of the Atlantic had joined the debate. They were taking increasing control of primary education and insisting on a return to more structured teaching methods. At first, many teachers were relieved at these developments, but we hadn't foreseen *how* the US and UK governments would impose their new regime, how far the pendulum would swing back, and the knock-on effects for younger and younger children.

No child left behind

By the turn of the century, educational policy in America was firmly under the control of central government, influenced by traditionalist zealots who'd won the battle about teaching methods. In 2001, George W Bush's government passed an act called 'No Child Left Behind', requiring year-on-year improvements in reading standards and introducing a draconian system of standardised testing to keep teachers on task. Unsurprisingly, the tests were narrow in focus, and based on the acquisition of specific skills that could be easily measured. Schools were also encouraged to adopt 'early intervention' programmes to prepare for this high-stakes testing, thus dragging kindergarten teachers into the target-driven fray. Indeed, ever since 'No Child Left Behind', in most states of the USA formal education has effectively begun at five, or (as parents became terrified that their child might be 'left behind') even younger.

Similar policies were being pursued in England where, in 1998, Tony Blair's government introduced National Strategies for literacy and numeracy, based on the same regime of tests, targets and – an exciting added extra for teachers on this side of the

Atlantic – performance league tables for schools. These measures combined with other policies (and the spirit of the times) to ensure that the demands of high-stakes standardised testing have dominated English primary education ever since. (In fact, England now boasts the most frequently-tested children in the world.)

Coincidentally, while all this was going on, concern was also growing in the UK about the hotchpotch of pre-school childcare provision springing up around the country as more and more mothers went out to work. A group of English early years experts was commissioned to create a regulatory framework called ‘Birth to Three’ for the care of children outside the home. Another group was asked to devise a two-year Foundation Stage Curriculum, defining ‘desirable outcomes’ for the education of three- to five-year-olds. This Foundation Stage would encompass a wide range of provision, from F1 (any out-of-home care for three-year-olds, from nursery school to pre-school playgroups and childminders) to F2 (the primary school reception class, where most four-year-old bums were now firmly on seats).

By this time I was working as a consultant to the National Literacy Strategy, helping write their

training materials, so frequently found myself attending high-powered meetings in government offices. At that time, like most of my Strategy colleagues and our political masters, I knew practically nothing about child development (or indeed what nursery and reception teachers actually *did* all day), so couldn't see why those 'desirable outcomes' shouldn't include a few literacy targets, such as phonic knowledge, a basic sight-word vocabulary and the ability to write the alphabet. It would be a great help to us in achieving our aspirational literacy goals.

I was therefore rather surprised when the early years experts resisted, arguing that such a move would be 'developmentally inappropriate' and that the emphasis before six years of age should instead be on children's social, emotional and spoken language development. There was one day in particular when they became positively strident and our leaders had to apply significant pressure to bring them into line. I wasn't present at that meeting but someone commented later that there were 'blood and feathers on the floor'.

However, in those days literacy specialists were a real power in the land, so our collective will prevailed and 'aspirational' literacy and numeracy targets

were included in government guidelines going out to all nursery schools and reception classes. The schoolification of English preschools had begun. As the target-based agenda took hold, three-year-old children would soon be weeping as nursery nurses coaxed and cajoled them into trying to write their names.

More haste, more problems

Mea culpa then. You must have guessed that I have more than an academic interest in this subject. Not long after the arguments in Whitehall, I became concerned about the number of children diagnosed with developmental disorders, and began research into the effects of modern culture on child development. The more I found out, the more horrified I became at the process we set in motion on the day of blood and feathers.

All the international evidence suggests that the optimal time to start formal teaching of the three Rs is around six or seven. Even though some children do learn to read easily at five, or even younger, by the time they reach double figures their average test performances are no better than those of children who start formal schooling two years later. In maths and science, there's also plenty of evidence that

practical experiences and opportunities for real-life problem-solving lay better foundations than pencil and paper work. Due to the complexity of human development, the idea that ‘the sooner they get started on the three Rs, the better they’ll do’ simply doesn’t hold water.

On the other hand, there can be a heavy price to pay for children who *don’t* cope with an early start. There’s a growing body of international research showing that the social and emotional effects of early formal instruction can contribute to lifelong problems, affecting the health and career paths of the individuals concerned. One recent study, the Longevity Project in the USA, involved analysis of an enormous mass of data accumulated over eighty years, and concluded that starting formal schooling before the age of six is associated with ‘less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and most importantly, increased mortality risk’.

In 2012, the chief researcher on this project wrote:

I’m very glad that I did not push to have my own children start formal schooling at too young an age, even though they were early readers. Most children under age six need lots of time to play, and to develop social skills, and to learn to control their impulses.

An overemphasis on formal classroom instruction – that is, studies instead of buddies, or ‘staying in’ instead of ‘playing out’ – can have serious effects that might not be apparent until years later.

It’s not easy to prove these long-term causal links, because the consequences of too-early pressure for academic achievement obviously vary depending on children’s personal biological make-up, gender, socio-economic background, and so on. Much of the longitudinal research conducted in this field relates to children from disadvantaged homes (although the Longevity Project cited above focused mainly on middle-class Californians who were ‘intelligent and good learners’). Nevertheless, it’s reasonable to conclude that if the effects are experienced by a large number of children in a society, they’ll also impact on the wellbeing of the society itself.

While there are obviously many other variables to take into account, it’s interesting to compare statistics for the UK with those for Finland, a country where children spend three or four years in kindergarten before starting formal education at age seven. The UK has less-than-inspiring scores in international comparisons of educational achievement and a

shamefully low record in surveys of childhood wellbeing. It also has one of the widest gaps between rich and poor and the highest incidence of family breakdown in Europe. Finland, on the other hand, has regularly topped the European charts for literacy and numeracy, and also scores high in the childhood wellbeing stakes. It has one of the smallest gaps between rich and poor, and the lowest rate of family breakdown in Europe.

Why, oh why?

So, given the weight of the evidence, why do so many English-speaking nations remain committed to an early start? If there are no long-term educational advantages and significant long-term losses in starting school so young, why don't we just raise the school starting age and introduce a kindergarten system for younger children?

As already suggested, part of the answer must be that it's simply a national habit. And bad habits are remarkably easy to pass on through the generations. I witnessed another example of this as a young primary headteacher, when I had a couple of depressing encounters with angry old men who supported corporal punishment in schools: 'Well, I was regularly beaten,' they fumed, 'and it never did

me any harm.’ Fortunately, public opinion finally overruled their particular prejudice and corporal punishment was banned in UK schools in 1987. Unfortunately, most of us have never given any thought to another highly questionable aspect of schooling, handed down from Victorian times and normalised by familiarity. After all, we’ve been sending children to school at five for 150 years and it never did us any harm.

Recently, the downward trend towards early schoolification has been influenced by another national characteristic – one the Brits share with Anglo-Saxon nations around the world, including our cousins across the pond. We’re fiercely competitive. So when international league tables for educational achievement first appeared in the early 2000s, our politicians were determined to rise higher in the listings (indeed, the Obama administration relaunched the ‘No Child Left Behind’ project under the title ‘Race to The Top’). And, since governments have only four or five years in which to make their mark before seeking re-election, this has always been a quest for short-term results. So far – despite a signal lack of success – that’s meant more and more of the same: tests and targets, resulting in top-down pressure for an ever-earlier start on formal instruction.

It's not as if educational experts haven't suggested other ways forward. Over the last three decades, many respected voices have spoken up for a less pressurised approach to the early years. In England as long ago as 1994, a report for the Royal Society of Arts led by the distinguished academic Sir Christopher Ball suggested raising the school starting age to six and providing part-time nursery education for children of three and over. Early years experts have regularly complained about the 'too much too soon' agenda ever since, and a campaign with this name has been running since 2008. In 2009, the Cambridge Review of Primary Education, organised by Professor Robin Alexander (one of the most highly-respected figures in UK educational circles) again recommended raising the school starting age, on the evidence-based grounds that an early start regime 'dents children's confidence and risks long-term damage to their learning.'

But history leaves deep scars. The primary wars of the 1970s and 80s have left English politicians of all political colours deeply distrustful of what they call 'the educational establishment' (or, during Michael Gove's reign as Education Secretary, 'the Blob'). Fury at the misguided progressive educationists who caused such chaos three decades ago has hardened

into deep-seated prejudice against any academic who doesn't wholeheartedly embrace current government plans and policies. So research studies that don't fit the policy are ignored, and critiques of the status quo – including the Cambridge Review's highly authoritative, evidence-based report – are summarily dismissed.

Long-established custom, national competitiveness, entrenched political opinions: it's a powerful cocktail. But there's a further ingredient: in countries with no real tradition of kindergarten education, there's also widespread ignorance about what developmentally appropriate education actually looks like.

Anglo-Saxon attitudes

I thought long and hard about writing 'ignorance' there, because it's such an emotive word. In the end, though, it's probably preferable to 'cruel' or 'mad' and – when knowledge about the subject isn't in the public realm – it's also understandable.

Over the last thirty years, as more and more pre-school children needed out-of-home care, private nurseries sprang up around the country so government had to assume a regulatory role. Politicians and civil servants inevitably focused

their attention on aspects of care that they and the general public understood, such as health and safety, and (since the increased need for out-of-home care also coincided with the literacy and numeracy drive) the potential of out-of-home childcare for bumping up educational standards. This national lack of understanding about the way young children learn is illustrated in the most influential government document of the time – *Every Child Matters* – upon which all major policy was based. In all its 108 pages, the significance of play in learning isn't mentioned once.

These Anglo-Saxon attitudes were also compounded by the media. In 2004, for instance, at the height of my own child development research, I happened to be watching the BBC morning news programme on the day that a major report on 'highly effective' nursery schools was published. The nurseries in the study were highly effective because they adopted a developmentally appropriate kindergarten approach. But, while the BBC news commentary accurately described how high-quality preschool practice supports early language and learning, the accompanying images didn't illustrate the sort of language activities you'd see in an effective kindergarten: songs, stories and 'sustained shared

thinking' (that is, involving talk with teachers and peers) about a range of interesting experiences, outdoors as well as inside the classroom. Instead we saw library footage of tiny children wearing immaculate school uniforms, sitting at desks, clutching pencils and staring silently at something labelled 'My Word Book'. I contacted the BBC and managed to get the pictures changed, but the new version wasn't much better. I suppose one shouldn't be surprised that a *British* Broadcasting Corporation is short on images of high-quality preschool provision.

A few years later, there was another damaging development in English preschool policy. You may remember that, at the turn of the century, a group of experts produced a document about out-of-home childcare entitled 'Birth to Three'. This included 'developmental milestones' – average expectations for naturally occurring aspects of behaviour, such as crawling, walking and talking, which actually vary greatly between different children. But for matters of political expediency, in 2008 'Birth to Three' and the Foundation Stage were hastily cobbled together into something called the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) covering the care of children from birth to five. So average developmental milestones relating to a biologically determined 'bottom-up' process

were seamlessly integrated with highly specific ‘top-down’ educational targets for four- and five-year-olds. Overnight, milestones turned into targets too.

This means that, ever since 2008, a target-based ‘schoolified’ agenda has influenced the way all early years practitioners interact with children in preschool settings, including childminders whose ‘setting’ is their own home. Whether they like it or not, they are obliged by law to help children chase arbitrary educational goals rather than supporting their natural desire to learn through play. The most recent Statutory Framework, published in 2014, includes the expectation that five-year-old children will be able to:

- * read and write words and sentences, spelling phonically regular words and some common irregular words correctly
- * count, add, subtract, double and halve numbers up to twenty, and discuss weight, capacity, time, distance, money and the characteristics of two- and three-dimensional shapes (using mathematical vocabulary).

There is absolutely no reason, other than political whim, to expect five-year-old children to do any of

these things. Even if some five-year-olds (the ones who've shown an early interest in literacy and/or numeracy) are able to achieve everything on the academic 'ticklists', that certainly doesn't mean all children *ought* to do so. Indeed introducing elements of formal learning before children are developmentally ready to cope with them is likely to be counter-productive in the long run. But many nursery managers now think that, to ensure their charges can perform satisfactorily by five, they have to start work on the three Rs when children are three, or even younger.

Political emphasis on sums and spelling at an early age influences parents' attitudes too. For most English families, the EYFS (along with various government-sponsored and commercial off-shoots) has become their major source of information on child development. Its target-driven nature encourages mums and dads to see childhood as an academic race right from the beginning. This can cause deep anxiety, leading many parents to coach their little children in literacy and numeracy skills at home. And as adult carers increasingly focus on educational targets play is inevitably sidelined. The irony is that play is essential for early learning and healthy development; sums and spelling aren't.



In 2014, the UK Early Years Forum, a coalition of national organisations concerned with young children's education and wellbeing, published a 12-point *Charter for Early Childhood*, in the hope of influencing the political manifestos for the UK general election of 2015. Four of its twelve policy recommendations, which are based on current psychological and neuroscientific evidence about early development, stress that developmentally appropriate, play-based education should be provided for children up to the age of seven.

Predictably, the main political parties made no adjustments to their educational policies: an early start policy, accompanied by a schoolified approach to pre-school education is still the default assumption of the English political elite, with knock-on effects on attitudes in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, the English government is at present keen to get children into school-based nurseries at two, to prepare them for a 'baseline assessment' when they're four years old.

It isn't in our children's interests, or those of the societies they inhabit, to cling on to institutions and

beliefs that are likely to cause long-term damage to children's health, wellbeing and learning. Or, even worse, to adapt those institutions in ways that actually exacerbate problems. Much more productive would be to look at issues covered in chapters 2–6 of the full book *Upstart*, including:

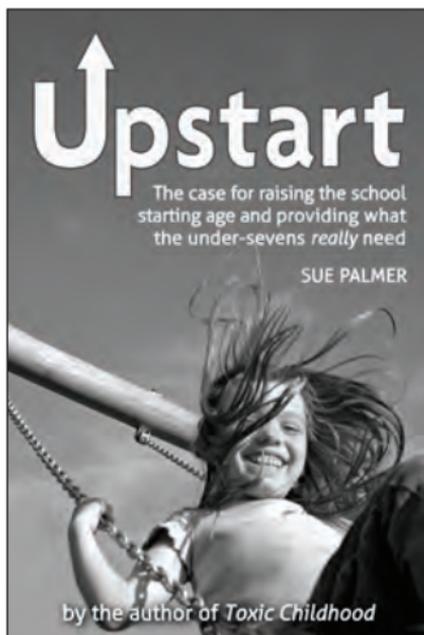
- * what science tells us young children need for healthy development
- * the cultural factors which now inhibit that development in a growing number of children
- * the best ways to prepare children for the three Rs
- * how developmentally appropriate kindergarten education can help close the gender and poverty gaps
- * what early years provision looks like in our most successful European neighbour.

At present, the early start countries are in a hole. It's time to stop digging.

What Next?

How to make the change happen

- * Spread the word – to colleagues, professionals and parents you know. A play-based kindergarten stage is not only possible but *essential* for children aged three to seven.
- * Lobby your local politicians – help them join the dots between current early years policy and long-term medical and social problems.
- * Join us at: www.upstart.scot
- * Link to the Upstart campaign through social media
 -  @UpstartScot
 -  facebook.com/upstartscotland
- * Use  upstartscotland as a reference point for setting up similar campaigns in England, Wales, N. Ireland and other early start countries.
- * Help us promote the campaign and the book: send comments to floris@florisbooks.co.uk



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* Get the book in June 2016!

The full book explores the key issues, including: how children learn, the impact of modern life, how to reduce the attainment gap between rich and poor children, the importance of literacy and numeracy, how Finland (and elsewhere) gets it right, and how we can make change happen.

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