

SUMMER BABIES

When you feel your little one is just too little to start school

Lucy Johnson found it harder than she had expected. Illustration by Vicky Scott

In September, my young son had only recently turned 4. He was still ambidextrous, having not settled on his right or left hand; had yet to draw a stick man and could not pronounce several letters in the alphabet. Despite this, I bundled him into his over-sized blazer and packed him off to school. As his mother, I knew he was not ready. But when I tried to delay his entry by a year I discovered that it was not that simple to hold him back. In the current school system, he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't.

When I approached the prep school that he was starting to ask about him entering a year later, they were reluctant, to say the least. It was not standard policy; they did not like children being "out of year". When I pushed harder, they told me that even if they did let him come a year later, we would find it hard to find a secondary school that would allow him to apply. Suspecting I was being fobbed off, I decided to phone the six secondary schools that we thought we would most like our son to go to. When I did, I got a real shock. Of the six schools I called, only one, Dulwich College, said they would even let our son apply.

According to the Summer Born Campaign group, thousands of parents are being prevented from holding their children back a year. By law, compulsory school age is the beginning of the term following a child's fifth birthday. The Department of Education's guidelines state that summer-born children (those born between 1 April and 31 August) can be held back if it is deemed to be in the best interests of the child. However, in reality, campaigners say it is a postcode lottery, with some local authorities allowing children to enter late and others not. In our case, we were looking at both state and private schools and quickly found that private schools in London are the least likely to take children out of year. Pauline Hull of the Summer Born Campaign told me: "Private schools in London are the worst we've seen in the country." Our local state primary was more willing to be flexible, saying he could start a year later or start late in the January, but we were worried about him getting lost in a class size of 30 and it didn't deal with what would happen to him when he got to 11.



A 2013 study for the Institute of Fiscal Studies found that summer-born children tend to perform worse academically than those born in the autumn. Even more worryingly for a pointy-elbowed middle-class mother such as myself, another IFS report from 2011 found that children born in August were 20% less likely than their classmates born 11 months earlier to go to Russell Group universities.

Wave after wave of research showed that summer born children tended to fall behind their older peers, not just academically but also in terms of their behaviour. The same report found that younger children were two and a half times more likely to report being unhappy at school and twice as likely to report being bullied at the age of seven. A 2015 study in the Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry found that the youngest children were almost twice as likely to have both language difficulties and behaviour problems than older children in the same class.

On top of that, a large number of child development experts believe that sending a child to school before they are ready can have long-term negative consequences. Steve Biddulph, child psychologist and author of Raising Boys, told me that the problem is magnified for boys who tend to be less developmentally advanced than girls at a young age: "It's not good to be smaller, slower, and less up with other children through school. A year is a quarter of a child's life at that age, and the development differences are enormous..."

Faced with this tidal wave of evidence, what on earth, I wondered, is the reason for sending them when they are just 4 if you, as a parent, don't believe they are ready? "The schools are letting administrative, bureaucratic neatness trump children's interests", according to Pauline Hull. I spoke to the Admissions department at Dulwich College who told me that, while they do take boys out of year: "Overall, we are keen to have boys in the academic year group that is the standard for their age; socially and emotionally boys of a similar age thrive together and particularly during their adolescent years. In addition, in many competitions, be it sporting, debating or chess, there are often strict age regulations and being 'out of year' may prevent pupils taking part."

I also spoke to Ben Thomas, Headmaster of Thomas's Battersea, which, in line with all Thomas's, welcomes children starting a year later, although with the caveat that it will diminish your chances of sending your child to a highly academic secondary school. "1st September is an arbitrary, man-made cut off date and it doesn't have any bearing on anything in terms of children's development", says Thomas. He believes that the main reason private secondary schools don't allow children out of year is that they are massively over-subscribed already: "The main reason for resistance is it's too much hassle, it would open the floodgates to too many children coming later. These are fiercely competitive school places." The situation is less bleak in the country, where both prep and public schools seem more willing to be flexible.

Sally Hobbs, a former Headmistress and education consultant at Mavor Associates says that holding children back a year can impact them socially later on, when they are a year older than some of their classmates. "You can have a bolshy teenager who says: 'why did you keep me down a year?!'" She argues that instead of holding children back, schools should tailor their teaching methods. "What's important ... is what measures are the school taking to support these children? In the private sector, you have small class sizes, high teacher to pupil ratios and you should be doing differentiated teaching for the younger children."

To be fair, a lot of primary and prep schools do try to mitigate the impact. When you are considering which schools would be right for your child, ask about the admissions policies. Do they have a full range of birthdays in each intake? How structured is the Reception class? Do they run a full day school straightaway or can children start

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gradually? Some primaries, like our local state one, allow children to start in January but we were not keen to send our son late, worrying he might then struggle to catch up socially and academically.

The groundswell of parental opinion that children should be held back if it is right for them is having an impact. In September 2015, Nick Gibb, the Education Secretary, said that he would change the Schools Admissions Code to take into account a parent's wishes to hold their child back. However earlier this month, the Government announced that it needs "more information and data" before it can make a final decision. It seems that this decision has been motivated by cost concerns and a worry that the change could potentially give parents an unfair advantage in the admissions system by allowing them to apply twice to their preferred primary school.

The Campaign for Flexible School Admissions for Summer Born Children

☐ summerbornchildren.org

Lucy Johnson is psychotherapist and counsellor ☐ lucyjohansonpsychotherapy.com

CASE STUDIES

Emily Turner spoke to two mothers, both with different experiences of the summer baby conundrum.

Two of Judith's four boys are born in August, the eldest on 31st. Richard has just started at university. Will is in Year 7. Both are the youngest in their years.

Both boys began at their local primary school which allowed them to start gently – mornings only. Judith says that she would not have wanted to send them to the independent prep school they moved to at 7/8 when they were in Reception as it had a much more 'full school day', 'full uniform' approach. Richard, who is academically very able, was always average at prep school both academically and in sport but transferred to his first choice public school at 13. During his time at secondary school Judith says the differences began to even themselves out. He grew, he got into better rugby teams. Age became only a factor. Some boys were going through puberty at 12, others at 16. Maturity became hormonal. Judith also says that being young for your year can be an advantage later. When Richard left school the decision to take a year off, something that many of today's time-starved kids don't feel they can do, was an obvious one.

So when Will started out, they had already had the experience of Richard 'muddling through', something which informed their decision. Will is dyspraxic and the secondary schools they are considering for him are less academic than his brother's. They have also moved out of London. There is much more fluidity in non-London schools as to which year he wants to go into; if he wanted to repeat a year it would not be a problem. However, since he is doing fine academically and happy socially they have decided that he is going to stay in his current year.

Sally's eldest son Tommy had just had his 4th birthday on his first day at an independent London primary. They had tried to start him later but the school were adamant 1 September was a date set in stone. "He could just about form T for Tom. He couldn't write his name, he couldn't ride a bike." They agonised about what to do throughout his time at Primary before moving as a family to the country for him to repeat Year 6 in a prep school that went to 13. He was tested to join both Year 6 and Year 7, the school were happy to have him in either, but Sally and her husband were sure he would benefit from being older. "It was the best decision we ever made," says Sally. "In the end it was a complete no brainer. We had worried about it for years." He left London as little Tommy and went into his new school, head held high as Tom. It just did everything for his confidence. He is now in his first year at a leading boarding school and he is only the fourth oldest in his year. Choosing which public school to go to was not an issue either. Sally concedes this is partly because they were looking at country schools but, from Eton down, not one school were unwilling to consider him for the younger year. The only time it might potentially be an issue would be if Tom was extremely sporty. He plays with his year group against other schools but if he was going to play at county level (or in Rugby 7s), he would have to play with his calendar year. "Just trust your judgement as a parent," is Sally's heartfelt advice.