

'Too much, too soon': Children should not start school until age six or seven, say education experts

- **130 teachers and academics call for schooling to be delayed by two years**
- **Warning that current system is causing young children 'profound damage'**
- **Call was dismissed as 'misguided' by a spokesman for Michael Gove**

By Sara Smyth



Too much, too soon? According to a group of teachers and academics, these children shouldn't be starting school until the age of six or seven and not at four or five as the system currently requires

Children should not start primary school until they are six or seven-years-old, according to a coalition of education experts who warn of the damaging pressure to perform in class at a young age.

A letter written by 130 teachers, academics and authors said the UK should follow the Scandinavian model and put off formal lessons for two years.

Under the UK's current system, children start full-time schooling at the age of four or five.

Experts say this is causing 'profound damage' in a generation which is not encouraged to learn through play.

But the call was last night dismissed by as 'misguided' by a spokesman for the Education Secretary Michael Gove.

Children in the UK are obliged by law to be in school aged five, which the lobby group said is creating a 'too much, too soon' culture.

The warning singled out recent government proposals which mean five year olds could be formally tested from the beginning of their schooling.

Under the current system, children are first assessed at the age of seven. But under Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg's proposals, a 'baseline' test could be introduced in the first year of primary school.

The group of experts warned that monitoring a pupil's progress from such a young age promotes stress and fear around learning.

More...

- Outrage as 'loopy' UN inspector lectures Britain: She's from violent, slum-ridden Brazil, yet still attacks us on housing and human rights
- Decline of 'once upon a time...' as third of parents no longer reader a bedtime story to their children

The letter said: 'The continued focus on an early start to formal learning is likely to cause profound damage to the self-image and learning dispositions of a generation of children'.

A spokesman for Education Secretary Michael Gove said the group who wrote to the Daily Telegraph are promoting 'bogus pop-psychology.'



Overwhelming: According to the group, starting formal lessons too early creates a fear of learning and puts too much pressure on younger children

These people represent the powerful and badly misguided lobby who are responsible for the devaluation of exams and the culture of low expectations in state schools,' the spokesman said.

Sir Al Aynsley-Green, former Children's Commissioner and one of those to sign the letter, said countries where children start school later, see better results.

He said: 'If you look at a country like Finland, children don't start formal, full-scale education until they are seven.'





© Alan Davidson/The Picture Library Ltd.

Dismissive: A spokesman for Education Secretary Michael Gove's (left) office described the calls as 'misguided', while Nick Clegg (right) has suggested 'baseline' tests for children in the first year of primary school

'These extra few years, in my view, provide a crucial opportunity, when supported by well trained, well paid and highly educated staff, for children to be children'.

Other signatories of the letter include Lord Layard, director of the Well-Being Programme at the London School of Economics, Dr David Whitebread, senior lecturer in psychology of education at Cambridge University, and Catherine Prisk, director of Play England.

The Telegraph said the letter was circulated by the Save Childhood Movement, which will launch its Too Much, Too Soon campaign tomorrow.

It will reportedly call for reforms including play-based schooling for children between three and seven. Wendy Ellyatt, the founding director of the movement, told the newspaper: 'Despite the fact that 90 per cent of countries in the world prioritise social and emotional learning and start formal schooling at six or seven, in England we seem grimly determined to cling on to the erroneous belief that starting sooner means better results later.'

'There is nothing wrong with seeking high educational standards and accountability, but there is surely something very wrong indeed if this comes at the cost of natural development.'



© PA Archive/PA Photos

Outspoken: Former Children's Commissioner Professor Al Aynsley-Green was one of those to sign the letter