



Starting at six

NATHAN WALLIS explains the advantages of starting school at six. By **KATE BARBER**.

Ready or not, as soon as your little one turns five, it's time for them to go to school. So deeply ingrained is this cultural assumption, many people accept it without question. That parents might hold off sending their child to school until they are five and a half or six seems to go against "common sense" about what is good for them.

Yet in most countries across the world, the starting age is six, often seven, and in New Zealand you can choose to wait until your child is six before enrolling them at school.

Nathan challenges the idea that "holding them back" until they're six will be detrimental to their learning. Rather, drawing on the latest literature on brain development, he explains that those children who start school when they are older than five may be doubly advantaged – by having more free play when their brains need it most, and by being older than their peers when they do start school.

In the mid-twentieth century, developmental psychologist Jean Piaget was able to show from extensive observational studies that children were ready for formal learning around the ages of seven or eight when they entered, what he called, the Concrete Operational Stage of development. As Nathan says, Piaget's findings had a significant impact on the practice of education across the Western world – hence the later starting age in many countries.

Importantly, says Nathan, Piaget's theories are supported today by a large and ever-growing body of research around brain development. The research tells us that the development of the social-emotional brain takes centre stage

between the ages of two and seven years, and that the development of this brain is critical in terms of future outcomes for children.

As Nathan says, the needs of the social-emotional brain must be met for a child to develop certain dispositions like creativity and resilience, and therefore access the higher executive functions of their frontal cortex, which moves into centre stage development when a child is around the age of seven or eight. Perhaps counter-intuitively, this means that in order for a child to reach their full intellectual/academic potential, we need to nurture the development of their social-emotional brain in the years before they are seven, rather than focus on accelerating the development of their frontal cortex.

If the key point is that our kids aren't ready for formalised learning until they are seven or eight, doesn't it follow that we are sending them to school too early? While Nathan doesn't say that five is too early for all children, he explains that there are advantages to starting later.

An extra year as a "preschooler" means more self-initiated, self-directed free play. And, it is through free play that kids develop certain qualities and attitudes, like curiosity, creativity, resourcefulness, perseverance and resilience. (The New Zealand curriculum for early childhood education, *Te Whāriki*, refers to these as "dispositions".) Nathan emphasises that these matter so much more than how many letters a child can recognise and whether they can name all the colours, for instance. It is the combination of these dispositions that drives their learning once they are at school, he says.

Most importantly, "Your perception of yourself as a learner drives output as much as intelligence," says Nathan.

If your child is a new entrant at the age of six, then they are a year older than their classmates – and, says Nathan, "this can compound the advantage" they already have from having had more free play. "If you are older than the other kids in your class, you'll likely hit milestones ahead of the others," which, of course, makes you feel good about yourself as a learner. You'll develop a perception of yourself as someone who's smart and capable, and you'll probably like school, says Nathan. (He adds that there are no measurable long-term disadvantages for those children who start at six, even if they are put in a class with their same-age peers. While there are some apparent disadvantages in the first few weeks, these are not formative and disappear.)

Of course, the opposite is also true. For children who start school when their brains are not ready for formalised instruction, learning to read, for instance, will be "a long, drawn-out process". When we interrupt their play at five, two years before their brains are ready, Nathan says, children who are struggling will pick up particular messages about themselves and about school – that they're stupid or lazy or naughty, and that school is horrible. And these negative perceptions tend to stick.

Yes, some children can "do school" when they're five, Nathan says. And he calls on the example of the first-born daughter who's at the head of the bell curve – writing her name, recognising letters, counting to 100 etc. But, on balance, he says that even these kids would benefit from being in a child-led free-play environment until they're older.