

Structured play trumps age for future school success

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A Kingston University London psychology researcher has backed the Government's stance on maintaining Britain's school starting age saying structured play, not formal learning, is the key to success for the under fives.

A senior psychology lecturer from London's Kingston University says the Government is right to resist calls to raise the starting age for schoolchildren in England – but should shift the focus of early learning away from formal topics like writing and arithmetic, and concentrate instead on structured play and developing basic learning skills.

Dr Jo Van Herwegen has conducted extensive research into how play can be used as a learning technique for pre-schoolers and said that while an early start to education could be helpful, it was pointless if not handled appropriately. "If the Government is talking about school in terms of a formalised setting with trained people, then, yes, providing this at a young age is good but if it means sitting down and doing formal, proper learning at the age of four or five, then that's wrong," Dr Van Herwegen explained. "Pre-schoolers need the basic building blocks, as their working memory and language isn't complete until they reach five or six, so developmentally they're simply not ready for formal learning before that."

As part of a research project which she hopes to submit to the Journal of Education later this year, Dr Van Herwegen has developed a system of number games for pre-schoolers, known as PLUS which she has piloted

locally. The games support [children's](#) basic number ability, which is all about differentiating between quantities without specific counting – known as the approximate number system.

Dr Van Herwegen said the trial had been really promising. "We tried the games out in six local nurseries, first with our researchers playing them with the children and then with nursery staff who had been instructed on how to use them. They worked so well that I was asked to train staff at five more locations in the local area," Dr Van Herwegen said. "The operations manager of one of the nurseries we trialled PLUS games at was so impressed by the results we gleaned that he has recommended them to Kingston Local Education Authority."

British children are amongst the youngest to start proper school in the whole of Europe, and Dr Van Herwegen said the system in her homeland Belgium offered some pointers on how this experience could be improved. All people working in Belgian pre-school settings were trained teachers, which allowed for higher pupil to staff ratios without any loss of quality, she said. "In Britain working in a nursery is a totally undervalued job and that's part of the problem. The key is structured play and that's what the children are given in that environment," she added.

Dr Van Herwegen described how, in Belgian pre-schools, children got involved in carpet time discussions and carried out school-related activities, such as painting, and learning to hold a pen while sitting at tables and chairs. "This is not formal, sit down [learning](#) as such, but is still about instilling the routines and practices of a school environment and that's what pre-school should really be for," Dr Van Herwegen stressed. "The aim of my research is to make parents and educators realise we can establish basic skills for pre-schoolers in such a way that will really help with school [education](#) in later life."

In recent times, childcare costs have rocketed, leading to many parents facing an uncomfortable decision about whether or not to return to work. Dr Van Herwegen said labelling of institutions was a problem and a clearer delineation between nurseries and pre-schools would enable children to become more school-ready as well as easing the financial load. "Nursery should be about [play](#), pre-school should be when you still have free time but with structure. It's too early for children to learn anything academic, but they can develop vital skills like standing in lines, where to put things and how to listen which will help enormously when they start school," she said.

At the moment, Dr Van Herwegen explained, parents had to find – and usually fund – provision up to the age of four through childminders, grandparents and nurseries which meant children hit school with varying levels of readiness depending on which environment they had been in. "If school nurseries became proper pre-schools with times and routines more akin to those the children will experience in reception, children would be better prepared for [school](#) and parents would save money as well as being able to consider going back to work," she said.

Provided by Kingston University, London

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