Delaying children?s school entry linked to poor academic performance

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Delaying school entry could cause poorer academic performance, according to new research from the University of Warwick and funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

Many parents are keen to hold their children back a year if they were born prematurely or in the summer months. They argue their child will not be mature enough to start school and previous research has suggested children who are born more than three weeks before their due date would benefit from starting school a year later than those who were born at full-term.

However, a new paper published in the *Journal of Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology* contradicts these findings and claims starting school a year later does not lead to better academic performance for pre-term or full-term children and could in fact cause poorer academic performance as the children get older.

The paper has been authored by academics at the University of Warwick, Ruhr-University Bochum (Germany), Loughborough University, University of Oxford and the University of Leicester.

Corresponding author Professor Dieter Wolke, from the Department of Psychology and Warwick Medical School at the University of Warwick, said: "Our study shows that delaying school entry has no effect on Year 1 teacher ratings of academic performance, but it is associated with poorer performance in age-standardised tests of reading, writing, mathematics

and attention as the children get older."

The research team used a natural experimental design to test their hypotheses as they could not carry out a randomised trial.

Professor Wolke said: "We obviously could not delay children starting school for the experiment, so we had to find a suitable study sample. We chose the Bavarian Longitudinal Study because Bavarian policy requires all children to be assessed by a community paediatrician three to 12 months before their school entry date to assess their readiness for school."

At the time of assessment in Bavaria, all children reaching six years of age before 30 June started school the following September. The team studied 999 children, of which 472 were born preterm. These new findings are particularly applicable to preterm children who are born up to four months before their due date and may enter school less mature compared with their peers. The researchers compared teacher ratings of achievement in Year 1 and then looked at the results of standardised mathematics, reading, writing and attention tests when the children reached 8 years of age.

Co-author Julia Jaekel, from the Department of Developmental Psychology at the Ruhr-University Bochum in Germany, said many parents of pre-term children believed delaying school entry would be more beneficial.

Dr Jaekel said: "Many parents demand that preterm children should be held back, particularly if they were born in the summer. This is also supported by many charities supporting parents with preterm children.

"However, we found missing one year of learning opportunities was associated with poorer average performance in standardised tests at 8

years of age for both pre-term and full-term children. Future research is needed to determine the long-term effect of delayed school entry on academic achievement, but our results certainly give parents and educational providers food for thought."

More information: Jaekel J, Yu-Chun Strauss V, Johnson S, Gilmore C, Wolke D. "Delayed school entry and academic performance: A natural experiment." *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology* (In press).

Provided by University of Warwick