

Children born prematurely are disadvantaged at school and into adulthood but delaying school entry may not be the answer

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Children born before 34 weeks gestation have poorer reading and maths skills than those born at full term, and the difficulties they experience at school continue to have effects into adulthood: by the age of 42, adults who were born prematurely have lower incomes and are less likely to own their own home than those born at full term.

These findings are from a study led by Professor Dieter Wolke at the University of Warwick and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The study analysed data from four large-scale longitudinal studies and found that the poorer reading and maths skills of children born prematurely were associated with lower educational qualifications on leaving [school](#) and lower income in [middle age](#).

This is a problem faced by a growing number of people: premature births currently represent 11% of all live births worldwide. On average, any primary school classroom will include two children born prematurely.

The study also looked at whether delaying school entry enabled children born prematurely to do better at school but found no evidence to support this. Children who started school a year later did not perform better in teacher ratings of their academic attainment than children who had started at an age appropriate time.

In light of this, the researchers recommend that children born prematurely should enter school at an appropriate age but receive additional support. However their research showed that over 80% of teachers and over 50% of educational psychologists had received no formal training about the effect of preterm birth on children's development and learning, something which needs to be addressed if the growing numbers of preterm children are to be supported.

The report, *The Impact of Premature Birth on Mathematics Achievement and Schooling*, is being launched at a seminar today at the Nuffield Foundation. The research team also includes Samantha Johnson from the University of Leicester, Julia Jaekel from the University of Tennessee and Camilla Gilmore from Loughborough University.

Dr Johnson said: "Teachers and educational psychologists receive little formal training about the effects of preterm birth on children's long term development and learning and are often not aware of appropriate strategies to support preterm children in the classroom."

The lead researcher Prof Wolke, who is based at the University of Warwick's Department of Psychology and at Warwick Medical School, concludes: "Our findings lead us to recommend that all preterm children born before 34 weeks of gestation may benefit from regular follow-up after discharge from hospital. Interventions are required around the time of school entry to facilitate [preterm children](#) to have an optimal start to their schooling career. Delayed school entry is not recommended on current evidence, but more research is needed."

Provided by University of Warwick

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