

## The National Association for Primary Education

### **The Impact of a Child's Age on Measured Attainment**

The disadvantage of summer born children relative to those born earlier in the academic year has been decisively confirmed by research and well publicised. This is far from being short term but extends as far as the likelihood of gaining five GCSE A\* to C results and to entering university. The focus of public disquiet has been on children born in August and parental concern has led to pressure which in September 2015 prompted the Schools' Minister to promise an amendment to the Admissions Code to ensure later entry to the admission class if this is the parents' wish.

But the issue is far more deep-seated than is revealed by the current debate. Relative disadvantage is not confined simply to the August born. Research has also shown that taking children born in the preceding autumn quartile (September, October, November) as the baseline, there is disadvantage for the subsequent winter quartile increasing progressively until the following summer quartile. The most disadvantaged are indeed the August born but the disadvantage graph is a straight line and there is no cliff edge over which they fall.

One of the roots of the problem lies in the Government's recommendation of a single date for the admission of all rising fives into the admission class at the beginning of the academic year. The oldest children may already be five years old when school starts in September whereas the youngest may not reach their fifth birthday until the following August. The differences in age and maturity are very great and are a severe test of the perception and skills of the admission teacher as they face the challenge of meeting individual needs. There is a considerable risk that insufficient recognition of the earlier stage of development of the younger four year olds can lead to stereotyping and even premature assessment of special educational needs.

There should be a closer matching of the children to the admission class which is an important transition to the more formal teaching of key stage 1. The single date of entry into the admission class should be abandoned in favour of entry at the beginning of the term during which the child becomes five. Learning is largely through play at this early stage and there would be no problems in assimilating the new entries during the year. Indeed coming into the class would be facilitated by the new entrant joining children who are already familiar with school routines.

The government eases away, all too slowly, from the crude assumption that all children can be expected to reach the same level of achievement at any one time and moves towards a concern for individual progress. It is time for every primary specialist to make a similar shift

in focus. Each child's chronological age and level of maturity matters enormously and this should be the first consideration as we plan learning. Not for the first time we will be ahead of slow moving government. Perhaps it may help to persuade them if we draw attention to the results of the phonic screening check in 2018. In an old fashioned way it is expected that all children, irrespective of their age when the screening takes place, will reach a predetermined level but an analysis of the results tells a different story. 75% of the youngest children born in August met the expected level but 89% of the oldest born in September did so. The attainment gap narrowed a year later but was still evident at 6%. The impact of age upon teacher and parental assessments of children's progress and potential is significant. Government advice is that children who do not reach the phonic pass mark should be notified as failures. Failure is a highly inappropriate description of children who are simply too young for the test.

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