

School Starting Age - A Guide for Parents

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Summary

1. This guidance outlines some of the issues which parents should consider as their child reaches the age to start primary school.
2. There is a range of legislation in place relating to this subject which is summarised below. The Department has a general expectation that children will progress through school with their chronological age group (i.e. children born within 12 months of each other from 2nd July to the following 1st July).

Who is this advice for?

3. This advice is primarily for parents and will also be highlighted to relevant staff in the Department of Education, Education Authority (EA); schools and pre-school education settings. It is also available via www.deni.gov.uk and www.eani.org.uk.
4. If you have any questions on the issues outlined in this guidance, please see contact details for the Education Authority and Department of Education below.

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Background to the Foundation Stage of the Curriculum

5. The Foundation Stage of the curriculum is the beginning of compulsory education for children in primary school and has been specifically designed for children in year 1 and year 2 of primary education. It is delivered by qualified teachers, often supported by classroom assistants. Further information on the Foundation Stage can be found on the [NI Curriculum website](#).
6. The Foundation Stage aims to provide a smooth transition from the pre-school education phase to primary school. It recognises that young children come to school from a variety of backgrounds, having had a diverse range of learning experiences at home and, for most, some form of pre-school education. It is designed to build on children's earlier learning experiences by providing an appropriate learning programme to equip children with the skills and competencies they will need to succeed in school and in later life.
7. The Foundation Stage provides a learning environment which best suits the individual and specific needs of young children. It uses play as a context for learning, recognising that stimulation through play is an important factor in the physical, social, emotional and educational development of the child. As children progress through the Foundation

Stage, they are introduced to more formal learning, particularly the development of literacy and numeracy skills, at a pace that takes account of their age and level of development.

8. The Chief Inspector's Report (2012-14) found that of the Foundation Stage lessons evaluated, 84% were good, very good or outstanding. In general, the report found that 'play-based and other learning activities facilitated well, the development of early literacy and numeracy skills'.

Compulsory School Age - the legal definition

9. Compulsory school age is governed by Article 46 of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Children who have reached the age of 4 on or before 1st July will start primary school at the beginning of the September of that year. **In this document, we describe the year group of children starting school together as the 'chronological age group'.**

Some examples:

- 1: A child born on 1 September 2010 would start school on 1 September 2015 aged 5 years.
- 2: A child born on 1 July 2011 would start school on 1 September 2015 aged 4 years and 2 months.
- 3: A child born on 2 July 2011 would start school on 1 September 2016 aged 5 years and 2 months.

10. The legislative provisions for starting school and funded pre-school education places include the following:

- i. [Article 45 of the Education and Libraries \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1986](#)

explains the duties of parents to educate their children. It states that the parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him/her to receive full time education suitable to his/her age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs he/she may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

- ii. [Schedule 13 to the 1986 Order](#) provides for the enforcement of Article 45 as to the education of children of compulsory school age.

- iii. [Article 46 and 46a of the Education and Libraries \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1986](#) defines compulsory school age and the chronological age for transfer to post-primary school.

- iv. [Article 17\(8\) of the Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1998](#) defines the age range of children eligible to apply for a funded pre-school education place.

- v. [Part III of the Education \(Northern Ireland\) Order 1997](#) determines the arrangements for open enrolment.

Process of applying for a Year 1 place

11. Application forms for Year 1, information on the admissions process and the admissions criteria of each school can be downloaded from the EA website (www.eani.org.uk/) or can be viewed at any primary school or library. This information will be published online and in hard copy six weeks before the closing date for applications. You are advised to list at least four schools, in order of preference, on the application form and ensure all information relevant to the admissions criteria of each school is recorded on the application form. You should return the application form to the Principal of your first preference school.
12. Each school has a maximum admissions number determined by the Department of Education. In the event of the number of applications being greater than the admissions number, the Board of Governors of the school will apply the school's published admissions criteria to determine which children will be offered places. If your child is not accepted into your first preference school, your application will be sent to your second preference school. This process will be repeated until your child is accepted by a school or the preferences are exhausted. In the unlikely event that your child is not offered a place, the EA will advise you of those schools in which places are still available and ask you which of

these schools you wish your child to attend.

If you are worried that your child may have difficulties settling into primary school

13. The Department of Education issued guidance on 14 April 2015 on "[Induction and Transition to Year 1 of Primary School](#)". It noted that primary schools may need to put in place different arrangements for induction and transition to Year 1 to take account of the individual circumstances of children, including any special educational needs they may have.
14. If you have any concerns or feel that your child would need additional arrangements in order for him/her to settle into primary school, please contact the Principal of the primary school you wish your child to attend.

Special Educational Needs

15. A number of children may have special educational needs (SEN) at some stage in their school career. The needs of most pupils will be met in mainstream schools and without a statutory [SEN assessment or statement](#). However, in certain cases the child's needs may be such as to require a statement of SEN.
16. Children with SEN, including those with statements, should, wherever appropriate and taking into account the wishes of their parents, be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools.

17. If you have any concerns or feel that your child may have SEN, please contact the Education Authority's [Special Education Service](#) which provides advice, information and support to schools and parents.

Consultation on Deferral of School Starting Age

18. The Department consulted in 2014/15 on proposals to give parents the option to defer their child's school starting age in exceptional circumstances. A summary of the results of the consultation is available on the [DE website](#). The Minister has decided that legislation to bring forward a process of application for deferral of school starting age will **not** proceed at this time. However, he remains keen for legislation to come forward as soon as possible. As such, parents currently do **not** have the option of applying to defer school starting age.

Making your own arrangements to educate your child of compulsory school age

19. Parents have a duty to ensure that their child receives a suitable full-time education when he/she reaches compulsory school age. The most common way that parents do this is by sending their child to

school. However, parents can decide to make their own arrangements outside the formal school system. If parents decide to make their own arrangements to educate their child, they have a duty to ensure that their child receives an efficient full-time education "suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have...". If at any stage it appears to the EA that a parent is not meeting this duty, the EA will write to the parents asking them to demonstrate that their child is receiving suitable education.

20. If a parent who has educated their child of compulsory school age outside of a school setting subsequently decides that the child should attend school, the parents should contact the Principal of the school they would like their child to attend. We would advise parents to do this well in advance of the child starting school. The child would not be placed in primary school via the normal admissions process.
21. Provided the school has room to admit the child within its enrolment number¹, a parent could apply for his/her child to enter its chronological age group.

1. Each school is given an admissions number and an enrolment number. For a primary school, the admissions number is the number it can admit to Year 1. The enrolment number is the number it can have enrolled across all year groups. Children with a statement or admitted on appeal are supernumerary.

Educating a child outside his/her chronological age group

22. In exceptional cases, it may be in the child's best interests to be educated outside his/her chronological age group. Some children may 'skip' a year and join a more advanced year group; other children may repeat a year; For example, some children whose first language is not English, being educated for a period with a year group below their chronological age may be in their best interests.
23. The decision either to retain a child in a class **outside** his/her chronological age group or to move a child **into** his/her chronological age group is made by the Board of Governors, taking into account the parent's views, with advice from the Principal and with regard to advice received from the EA. The Department recommends that primary school Principals should review all such cases annually. However, the Department recognises that every case is different and needs to be looked at on its own merits. The best interests of the child are paramount.
24. In relation to transfer from primary to post-primary, the Board of Governors will have to consider at an appropriate stage, whether a child being educated outside his/her chronological age group should transfer a year later or a year earlier than normal or whether he/she should transfer at the normal time. **At all times, the best interests of the child should be central to the decision making process.**

EA / DE Contacts

25. If you have any questions on this guidance please contact the following email address or telephone number:

a. Education Authority:

Florence McCaw email: Florence.McCaw@eani.org.uk
Tel: 028 9056 6981

b. Department of Education:

Dale Heaney email: de.curriculumpolicyteam@deni.gov.uk
Tel: 028 9127 9402

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1: Is there a process of deferring my child's school starting age?

No, there is no current process to defer a child's school starting age.

Q2: Can my child stay in a funded pre-school education setting for another year instead of starting school at age 4?

No, a child over compulsory school age is not entitled to a funded pre-school education place.

Q3: Some parents have had experience of "holding their child back" for a year until they felt he/she was ready for school – how did they do this?

The EA is aware of a small number of parents who for various reasons felt their children were not ready to start school and decided to make their own arrangements to educate their children instead of sending them to school.

In such cases, we would strongly advise parents to discuss any concerns they may have about their child's readiness to start school with the Principal of the school they intended applying to. If the child is starting school later than normal, the Principal should only admit the child if the school has spare capacity within its enrolment number². At all times, you must be aware that the law requires that every child of compulsory school age should receive full-time education "suitable to his age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise".

2. Each school is given an admissions number and an enrolment number. For a primary school, the admissions number is the number it can admit to Year 1. The enrolment number is the number it can have enrolled across all year groups. Children with a statement or admitted on appeal are supernumerary.

Q4: If I make my own arrangements to educate my child for a year when he/she would normally have been in Year 1, what year would he/she enter if I enrol him/her in a primary school the following September?

In this case, you would complete Form API (“[Application for admission to a primary / post-primary school other than Years 1 and 8](#)”) which is available from the Education Authority website) as your child would be outside the open enrolment process (for Year 1). Your child would be admitted to his/her chronological age group (in this example, Year 2) in primary school. When seeking admission to a school, you should contact the Principal of the school you intend applying to. The Principal can only admit the child if the school has spare capacity within its enrolment number.

Q5: If I decided to make my own arrangements to educate my child (in line with the duty of a parent to arrange suitable education) whom should I contact?

We strongly recommend that you contact the Education Authority (EA) as it will be able to provide useful guidance, advice and information. If your child has

already been offered a primary school place, you should inform the Principal of that school that you no longer require the place in order that it can be reallocated. If at any stage it appears to the EA that you are not providing a suitable education for your child, the EA will write to you, asking you to demonstrate that your child is receiving a full-time education “suitable to his age, ability and aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have...”.

Q6: What are the potential risks of not enrolling my child in school when he/she has reached compulsory school age?

You should consider carefully whether this is the best decision for your child. If you choose not to enrol your child in a school when he/she is of compulsory school age, legislation requires parents to make arrangements for their child’s education which are “suitable to his age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise”.

If you make your own arrangements for your child’s education for one year and then intend for your child to be educated with the year group below his/her chronological age, you should be aware that your

child would reach 16 and be legally able to leave school before he/she had completed GCSEs or equivalent qualifications.

If you make your own arrangements for your child's education when they would normally be in Year 1 and then seek to enrol them in primary school, your child will be admitted in the first instance to Year 2. After admission, the decision to educate your child outside his/her chronological age group will be made by the Board of Governors, taking into account your views, the advice from the Principal and the views of the EA, in the best interests of the child.

You may wish to note that recent research conducted by Ofsted indicated that younger children make significant progress when they learn and play alongside their older early years peers³. They benefit from hearing more sophisticated language and seeing personal, social and emotional behaviours in action. Such experiences are built on by the teacher (or leader of the playgroup) through the creation of a programme of learning to meet the child's individual needs that extends his/her thinking skills and personal capabilities.

Q7: If my child starts school with his/her peers and is not coping well, what will happen?

All children are individuals and have different needs. For this reason primary schools may need to put in place different arrangements for induction and transition to Year 1 to take account of the individual circumstances of the child and any additional support that is needed. This will include any special educational needs they may have. If you are concerned about how your child is settling into school, you should contact his/her class teacher and discuss what arrangements could be put in place to support him/her.

Q8: Can my child repeat a year in primary school?

In exceptional circumstances, it is possible for a child to repeat a year of primary school. This is a decision made by the Board of Governors, taking into account your views, with advice from the Principal and the views of the EA and would only be taken where it was in the best interests of the child.

3. Source: Ofsted - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-and-play-in-the-early-years-a-balancing-act> - 13 July 2015

Q9: What happens to a child who repeats a year (e.g. any year of primary school)?

Where a child is being taught with pupils a year behind his/her chronological age group, in most cases, the aim should be to seek to re-integrate the child with his/her chronological age group as soon as possible and the Department recommends that primary school Principals should review all such cases annually. However, the Department recognises that every case is different and needs to be looked at on its own merits. The best interests of the child are paramount.

Q10: My child is awaiting assessment for a statement of special educational needs. Should I apply for a primary school place for him/her or wait for the statement?

You should apply for a primary school place for your child. If the assessment results in your child receiving a statement, the statement will specify the type of school or other institution which the EA considers would be appropriate to your child's needs. If you find that you do not need the primary school place, you should inform the Principal of the school as soon as possible.

Q11: My child doesn't have a statement of special educational needs but has some additional needs. What will happen when he/she begins primary school?

Primary schools are ideally placed to provide support to children with a range of needs. If you have any concerns over how your child will be supported in primary school you should speak to the Principal of the school your child will attend.

A child over compulsory school age is not entitled to a funded pre-school education place, even if he/she has some additional needs. There is no legislative provision for deferring the normal age of starting school, except where the child's statement of special educational needs has determined that this is necessary. It may also be helpful to visit a number of schools to decide which school would be best placed to support your child.

Q12: What if I choose to send my child to an independent school when they are of compulsory school age?

An independent school is a school at which full-time education is provided to pupils of compulsory school age (ages 4–16) that is not grant-aided by the Department. They may also admit children

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under 4 or over 16. These schools are not obliged to cover the statutory curriculum.

If you choose to send your child to an independent school, you should contact the school directly to arrange for their enrolment as these schools are outside the open enrolment process operated by the Education Authority for entry to Year 1.



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