

## Starting School in SA

Making better use of the flexible amount of time in Reception.

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As a preschool teacher of 25 years and mother of four adult children I am concerned about the short amount of time some children spend in Junior Primary in South Australian schools and how it may impact on their potential for future educational success.

Generally, South Australian children spend a minimum of three and a maximum of six terms in Reception, usually starting school in the term following their 5<sup>th</sup> Birthday.

Most schools have a policy that children who start in Term 3 must have six terms of Reception, so these children continue in Reception in their second year of school. Children who start in Term 2, however, mostly progress into Year 1 in their second year of School after three terms of Reception.

So, in effect, if your birthday is in May you would have six terms in Reception and if it is before the middle of April you would have only three.

As a Mum I have seen my own children experience different amounts of time in Reception (our daughter having the minimum 3 terms) and have sent hundreds of children to school from Preschool at the start of Term 2.

Having had these experiences, I feel worried about some of the children we send to school at the start of Term 2, often hoping that their Reception teachers will request that these children remain in Reception in the following year. I think, however, that this has not been the case.

In general, it appears that most of these children are put into Year 1 in the following year. A long-term Reception teacher I spoke with recently said that to her knowledge in her school only one Term 2 intake child she could think of had been put back into Reception, and this child had a global developmental delay.

I feel that parents, Junior Primary teachers and principals need to consider how only three terms in Reception may could affect these children. While many are ready and cope well, others would benefit from another Reception year rather than progressing through school as the youngest in their cohort. If anything, it seems that there is a “put them up and see how they go” mentality, which is, in effect, a step along the road to “this is how it’s going to be.”

If there is already some indication at the end of three terms of Reception that a child has been struggling socially, emotionally, physically or intellectually, it is then quite possible that putting them up into a straight Year One class will impact detrimentally on their future education. But sadly, it seems to be common practice.

Why put them up in the hope that they *might* catch up, when they have shown that they are already struggling? How likely is it that they are going to catch up and actually excel when they have got off to a difficult start?

Repeating or continuing for a further year in Reception is a simple way of giving them the best possible chance of catching up. In fact, countries like Finland don't start their kids in school until their seventh birthday, a practice hailed as beneficial by researchers at Cambridge University in England. The university's *Primary Review* found the disadvantage of being the youngest in a year group persisted right through primary and secondary school. While 60.7% of September-born girls achieved five good GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education), only 55.2% of August-born girls achieved the same.

These research findings raise some important questions. Why start and continue through school as the youngest in the class when you can be the oldest? Would it not be preferable to have a firm grasp of all the routines and expected skills? Wouldn't it be better to be the confident child who helps the other students and the teacher? Is it not preferable to develop your self-esteem in a situation where you are continually succeeding and doing well?

I have asked the parents of these Term 2 intake children to think carefully before allowing their child to begin an educational journey that may place them at a disadvantage throughout their time at school.

Many parents do not feel empowered to make educational decisions regarding their children and need the advice of teachers. I believe that teachers should be carefully considering the advice we give parents and encouraging them to give their kids ample time to develop emotionally, socially, physically and intellectually before rushing to move them on from Reception.

Some teachers may not fully consider the big picture when letting these children go up, or it may simply be a matter of school policy.

There can also be pressure in those schools that have high enrolments to keep the students moving along to create spaces for those waiting.

### **Individual children develop and cope very differently within the preschool environment.**

Some children leave preschool at the age of five with well developed social and emotional skills; many have good concentration and are able to separate happily from their parents; many manage independently to meet their own needs with eating, toileting and belongings; many leave with a good grasp of the English language and can converse well with their peers and adults. Physical skills differ greatly at the beginning and at the end of preschool, with many developing good fine and gross motor skills and a genuine interest in physical activity and games.

Many children, however, do not master all of these skills and abilities during their time at preschool. They have mastered some and are developing or beginning to develop others.

- We have children from many cultures whose first English is learnt at preschool.
- We have children who show high levels of anxiety at preschool, that are only just beginning to manage to separate happily and manage independently by the end of their preschool year. Some are just learning play entry skills, how to socialise, play cooperatively and take turns.

- We have many children (often boys) going to school who are not able to physically sit and concentrate in a group for any real length of time. They are often interested in gross motor activities and outside play but are only just beginning to show an interest in drawing and writing, and only just beginning to have the fine motor skills to hold a pencil correctly or cut with scissors.
- We have children who are still having difficulties with listening and following instructions, with accepting boundaries and limits, and in managing their own physical behaviour towards others as they leave us for school.
- We have children leaving preschool that are still in or only just out of nappies, some are still having bottles and dummies at home and are still sleeping mostly in their parents' beds. For some, expectations of independence with own food; toileting and belongings are actually introduced for the first time at preschool and many still need lots of reminders and assistance at the end of their year with us.

Children develop at different rates and experience stages when a great deal of new learning takes place. Their basic personality, innate intelligence, interests and learning styles, however, are already in place by the time they start school. They are also influenced and affected by the kind of experiences and parenting that they have received in these early years.

One of the problems for the children who are heading towards Year One after just three terms is that there is pressure on them in Reception to make up all their deficits in just 3 terms or to 'catch up' with their peers. They are competing not only with those same age peers who arrived at school with them ticking all the boxes but also with children who have been at school for 6 terms – twice as long – some of whom also started with high skills. This environment must be difficult as they see other children effortlessly completing tasks that may seem overwhelming to them.

The Reception teachers are amazing. They work incredibly hard to try and help all of these children to achieve so much in what is a short time – so that they can go into Year One with as many of the required skills and experiences as possible. But, in effect I feel that they are sending many of these children on to struggle for the rest of their schooling.

Term 2 children are “set on the path to failure because they have been set up through no fault of their own.” Adelaide Reception Teacher, February 2010.

Possible effects on these younger children later in their schooling.

- Many of these younger children find the jump in expectations from Year 2 to Year 3 to be the one that makes them panic, shut down and think *can't do it - too hard*.
- These children will go off to High School at the age of 12. This is with peers who have been at Primary School for 8½ years, while they have only had 7 years and 3 terms.
- They start Year 12 – a very stressful year, still aged 16. They have to make decisions about their future in this year as well as socialize with peers who are already 18 and entitled to purchase alcohol.

- They graduate from High School to start further education at a young age. Many do not have the maturity to manage the self-directed learning required. Some also begin study in a field that is chosen quite arbitrarily.

To sum up some of the points and questions I have raised: -

- Why give a child the shortest possible time in school purely because of when their birthday falls?
- Why not give the children who need it the longest possible time in Junior Primary School to get the best possible start to their education?
- Why put a child who has not fully grasped the basic requirements of Reception the under the stress of being the youngest child in their class for the rest of their schooling?
- Where are they, in fact, heading at such a great pace?
- What, in fact, is the rush to finish Primary School or High School?
- There is no advantage in being one of the youngest in your class.
- There are definite advantages in being one of the oldest in your class.

In closing, I think the termly intake that is offered in SA Schools could work well. It offers the simple possibility of allowing children a flexible amount of time in Reception according to their individual needs. It is, in effect, the *only* block of flexible time available in their entire schooling.