

# School Starting Age (SSA): A Brief Summary

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## Introduction

The age at which children begin school, known as school starting age (SSA), has been the topic of considerable debate in contemporary times. The age of compulsory entry to schooling in many countries has persisted, unchallenged and unchanged since their establishment in early 20th century (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016). However, in research literature and the media, the question of whether children should have a later ingress to schooling has recently increased in volume. Indeed, media attention has focused on negative effects on children of beginning school at an age seen as too young (Weil, 2007), while demands for improved performance and accountability of schools has led to an increased level of research interest. Although the complexity of the question is acknowledged, with recognition of the multiple influences on outcomes, most findings suggest considerable benefits to delayed school entry.

## Arguments for early starting ages

Woodhead (1989) contended that arguments for early starting ages were not based on developmental or educational criteria. Instead, arguments in favour of an earlier SSA have related to supposed child protection, where schooling is seen as protection from unsafe homes and unhealthy street environments (Sharp, 2002). In a seemingly contradictory argument, others have declared that with parents now having better education backgrounds and encouraging the effective socialisation of their children, cognitive skills are developing earlier, and thus children are ready for schooling earlier (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016) or that they will simply learn more from being at home (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011). Again, in contradiction, arguments are made that children will learn more at school, especially if they come from homes rated as 'disadvantaged', while parents are thought to provide more

help to their children if they are young for their grade level (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011). Politically associated reasons have involved the benefits of the resulting early *leaving age*, when children who have begun school at an early age are then expected to enter the workforce younger (Sharpe, 2002). Early leaving age has been used to argue the perceived benefits to pension systems in Poland (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016). Those making this argument cite the extended time that these children will have in earning, resulting in greater investment from the human capital of a country (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011).

## Arguments for later starting ages

In contrast to the arguments for an early starting age, the findings related to effect for a later SSA demonstrate a wide variety of both short, medium, and long-term advantages. One consistent finding is the **scoring higher on standardised exams** both in primary and secondary school in in different countries (see Attar & Cohen-Zada, 2017; Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Datar, 2006; Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2007; Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2010; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Kawaguchi, 2011; Landersø, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2017; Lubotsky & Kaestner, 2016; McAdams, 2016; McEwan & Shapiro, 2008; Nam, 2014; Puhani & Weber, 2007; Robertson, 2011; Smith, 2009; Sprietsma, 2010). Perhaps not surprisingly, the benefits from a delaying kindergarten entrance has been shown to be significantly larger for at-risk children (Datar, 2006).

While some research has demonstrated inconsistent results (Dobkin & Ferreira, 2010), little effect on educational attainment of boys or girls (Black & Deveraux, 2011), negative results (Hemelt & Rosen, 2016; Hurwitz, Smith, & Howell, 2015), or that the positive effects of age-at-school-entry on scores tend to get smaller as children move to higher grades (Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Cascio & Schanzenbach, 2007), others have continually shown that later SSA results in improved **test scores within classrooms** (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Cook & Kang, 2016; Fertig & Kluge, 2005; Fredriksson & Ockert, 2014; Fredrikson & Ockert, 2005; Kawaguchi, 2011; Pena, 2017; Puhani & Weber, 2007). Even in country-wide research, country-level studies demonstrate that children with later SSA consistently tend to score higher (Crawford, Dearden, & Meghir, 2007; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Fredrikson & Ockert, 2005; McEwan & Shapiro, 2008; Puhani & Weber, 2007). Most researchers agree with children who start school later achieve better in school as well as

attending school for longer durations than their younger classmates (Fredriksson & Ockert, 2005).

Other positive effects of later SSA within the **secondary schooling contexts** include increase in contributions to high school leadership (Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2008) placement in track placement (Bedard & Dhuey, 2006; Muhlenweg & Puhani, 2010; Puhani & Weber, 2007; Schneeweis & Zweimuller, 2014), and greater uptake in secondary students' application for disability identification, assistance with mental health, and support from special education assistance programs (Black et al., 2011; Dee & Sievertsen, 2017; Dhuey & Lipscomb, 2010; Elder, 2010; Elder & Lubotsky, 2009; Morrow et al., 2012). Effects have also been found in relation to teen pregnancy, with reduced probability in those with a later SSA (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011; McCrary & Royer, 2011; Pena, 2017; Tan, 2017). There have also been positive effects on IQ scores measured at age 18 (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011). Research with boys has found that 18-year olds who started later are less likely to have poor mental health compared to their earlier-beginning peers (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011). Indeed, Dee and Sievertsen (2018) found that a 1-year increase in SSA led to significantly improved mental health results and further demonstrated that these positive effects appear to persist into later childhood.

Research relating to the **later life effects** of a later SSA has produced some mixed results. However, many studies have shown long-term positive effects on areas such as higher wages (Fredriksson & Ockert, 2014; Kawaguchi, 2011; Pena, 2017). Although this effect seems to disappear after the age of 30 (Black & Deveraux, 2011), the effect should still be considered as positive (Fredriksson & Ockert, 2005). Other later life effects have been seen in the association of later SSA and employment in corporate CEO positions (Du, Gao, & Levi, 2012), as well as entering politics (Muller & Page, 2016). A higher SSA has been associated with decreased likelihood of young people committing crimes (Cook & Kang, 2016; Depew & Eren, 2016; Landersø, Nielsen, & Simonsen, 2017).

As well as consideration of the positive effects of later starts to schooling, **starting school too early** is associated with negative effects. Beginning school at too early an age has shown the adverse effect of having a traumatic effect on children (Herbst & Strawiński, 2016) as well as the children not being developmentally ready for learning at too early an age (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011). Alongside this recognition of the child's well-being,

are arguments that the school environment may not be an appropriate for young children (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011).

## The challenge of SSA research findings

Although there are copious research papers on the effects of SSA, understanding and simplifying the results is not easy. One of the most frequent arguments for the complexity of the findings is the **age-related effects**, which argues that older students are expected to perform better on tests (Black, Devereux, & Salvanes, 2011; Crawford et al., 2010). The consideration in this argument is that it is difficult to separate the effects of a later SSA with recognition that children who start school later will be older when they undertake tests, and so are more likely to perform better than their younger peers. In this argument, a later SSA may have so many positive effects due to children's levels of maturity, rather than to the relative age in the class (Fredriksson, & Ockert, 2005).

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