

What is the right age for a child to start going to school?

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The earlier wisdom was for schooling to begin around the age of 6. The home was seen as the right place to build early capacities. Language and social processes are best learnt in an environment of care and nurture, and what better place than home? By the age of 6, when the child is more mature, they could engage independently with the outside world—and begin schooling.

This credible argument has been challenged by a series of developments over the past 10-15 years. Improvements in imaging have helped us understand brain development. From birth, there is a frenzied increase in neural connections, peaking by the time the child is 3. Alongside, there is a process of pruning, where the neural connections become more efficient and complex. By the age of 6, the child's brain is almost adult-like—future learning is significantly dependent on the basic language and higher cognitive capacities the brain has developed in the early years. While lifelong neuroplasticity has been the other remarkable discovery, it too seems to be shaped significantly by this early development of the brain.

The development of the brain is not a purely biological process; it depends on the kind of environment and care the child has. For instance, when an infant babbles or makes facial expressions, it is engaging with its world. When an adult responds to that, it creates a cycle that directly builds the brain's language ability. If the child is in an environment of inadequate responses, the brain does not develop as well. Studies have shown that by age 2 or 3, there are already significant differences in the vocabulary of children—directly connected to the varying richness of language in their homes.

This capacity for language is not stand-alone—the brain develops in an integrated manner. When children grow in a nurturing environment rich with experiences, they develop physically, emotionally and socially, which in turn forms the basis for more complex language and cognitive capacities. In essence, the foundation for successful education, work and life in general is laid by the age of 6. This also means that when a child grows in a deprived environment, or in an environment of abuse or neglect, it disrupts brain development, sometimes irretrievably.

Alongside, new longitudinal studies from other disciplines have emerged showing that the differences in abilities with which children enter school tend to remain through schooling and later adult life. Many of these early differences in ability tend to correlate with the

child's home environment. A child from a home in poverty, where parents struggle to make ends meet, affects the level of nutrition or nurturing they could offer, and disadvantages the child for the rest of their life compared to a child from a middle-class home.

Meanwhile, a social development has changed the rules of the game. Driven by various factors—the break-down of the joint family structure, dual-income households, a desire to fast-track their child's future, etc—the middle class in India began sending its children to pre-schools. This demand found ready suppliers in the liberalized economy of the 1990s, and private pre-schools began proliferating across the country. Today, almost every child from a middle-class home begins schooling at age 3, effectively bringing us to a situation of even greater inequity between the early childhood experiences of children across social classes.

A philosopher and an economist can never agree on any substantive matter of education. However, on this matter there is consensus—India needs a robust early childhood education programme. The economic argument is that every rupee invested in early education leads to greater long-term returns for the economy than investments in later years. The philosophical argument is that high-quality early care is critical for a democratic society. Else, since early childhood experiences determined by families' economic circumstances are determining the future of our children, the inequities in our society are deepening and hardening.

India already has one of the largest public early childhood programmes in the world. The Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) runs around 1.3 million anganwadis, with a presence in just about every village in the country. It is a holistic programme, with nutrition, health and child care beginning at birth, and early education from age 3. It also includes support for pregnant and lactating mothers.

However, it is an inadequately funded scheme, with a majority of anganwadis running out of temporary premises, and teachers who are neither professionally qualified nor adequately compensated. A large proportion of children in the 0-6 age group, especially from the most marginalized homes, are still not in the scheme.

The private pre-schools are of poor quality, but often much better resourced than anganwadis. While this hardens the inequities, both are woefully inadequate. Over the next 10 years, India needs to significantly improve the funding and quality of anganwadis, make early childhood education a legal right, and regulate private pre-schools.

In the early years, it is critical that every child has an environment that is safe and caring, that is rich in language and art, and with opportunity for play and engagement. If that cannot happen at home, then it is a public responsibility to offer a high-quality and equitable system of early childhood development to the child.

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