

Early Entry to School Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What is early entry?

Answer: Children in all Tasmanian schools may begin Kindergarten if they are four years old on, or before, 1 January in the year of enrolment. Children must begin Prep if they are five years old on, or before 1 January in the year of enrolment.

In every community there are a small number of children who are 'gifted'. Their cognitive development (their ability to think, understand and process information) is significantly more advanced than other children of the same age - see question 4 for more information about what it means to be gifted.

Such children can benefit from starting Kindergarten or Prep up to six months earlier than usual and this is known as 'early entry'.

Parents of a gifted child can apply to an expert committee, known as the *Early Entry to School Cross Sectoral Placement Committee*, to consider their child for early entry to Kindergarten or Prep. The Committee includes a representative from all school sectors (Government, Catholic and Independent), parents, principals, teachers and a psychologist.

2. Why is early entry to Kindergarten or Prep available?

Answer: As gifted children are advanced in their cognitive development, placing them with an older group who are closer to their stage of development provides a better match between their abilities and the learning they will do at school. It helps to ensure that they are sufficiently challenged and are learning new things, including how to learn from their mistakes, rather than repeating things they can already do. This means they are engaged and learning how to learn, from the beginning of school.

Early entry also provides gifted children with classmates who have similar interests and skill levels, so they develop essential social skills and positive relationships to give them a sense of belonging. In the longer term, it may avoid later grade skipping which can be quite disruptive.

3. Is early entry suitable for children born in January and February who seem to be ready for school?

Answer: No. Having their fourth birthday before school starts, is not a good reason on its own, to apply for early entry to kindergarten.

An early start to school means the child will always be younger than their class-mates. If the child's cognitive development is advanced for their age, they are likely to cope well with the learning and social demands of school, as outlined in question 2.

If their cognitive development is average, being younger than classmates can put them under pressure and may cause unnecessary stress and anxiety.

A registered psychologist can assess a young child's cognitive development with tests that measure their understanding of language and their ability to think mathematically and solve problems. The assessment provides an objective measure of the child's ability, compared with other Australian children the same age. It gives a good indication of the child's potential for success at school. For early entry to be recommended, the assessment needs to show that the child is in advance of 98% of other children their age.

Early entry is a special provision for children whose cognitive development is in the top 2% of the population.

Research shows that such advanced cognitive development is often (but not always) accompanied by more advanced social and emotional development. Evidence of all aspects of a child's development is collected from their parents and carers through the early entry application form.

Children who are born in January and February and who don't have this level of advanced cognitive development should begin Kindergarten at the usual age. They will be one of the older children in their class and that may set them up for success at school.

4. What exactly does it mean to be 'gifted'?

Answer: The formal definition of giftedness used by the Department of Education is:

"Students who are gifted have the capacity for advanced development relative to their age peers in at least one ability domain (cognitive, physical, creative or social), to a degree that places them at least among the top 10% of their age peers."

Within this group of 10% of children there is a range of levels of giftedness: from 'mildly' gifted (1 in 10 children) through to 'extremely' gifted (less than 1 in 100,000 children).

Children who are mildly gifted should begin school at the usual age. Children who are assessed by a psychologist as being in the top two percent of the population for cognitive function, may apply for early entry (see question 8 for details).

In general terms, gifted children often walk and talk early; they can show extreme curiosity and ask complex questions and commonly have an exceptional memory and excellent powers of observation. Often they show an early interest in numbers and reading and may teach themselves without prompting. They can be very sensitive, intense and/or show a well-developed sense of humour. They may relate better to older children than those of their own age.

It is important to know that being well ahead in one of these areas does **not** automatically mean that the child will be advanced in all areas. Some children are cognitively gifted while being similar to other children their age socially and emotionally. Some children are gifted across more than one area, while others have a particular strength in one area (e.g. logical and mathematical reasoning), while being average in other areas. Children can be gifted in some areas while at the same time having a communication difficulty (such as an Autism Spectrum Disorder), or a physical disability (such as hearing impairment), or even a learning disability.

The important thing to understand is that each gifted child is unique and will have individual strengths and needs. Families and educators must take into account the 'full picture' of the child when considering the best age for them to begin school.

5. How do I know if my pre-school child may be gifted?

Answer: Parents are often the first to notice that their child may be developing differently to other children of a similar age. A good resource for parents to identify possible giftedness in their child is the '*Early Entry to School for Gifted Students Application Form*', available on the Department of Education web site. The form contains two checklists that parents can use to think about their child.

The first checklist describes fifteen characteristics of gifted young children. Parents are asked to share examples of their child's development and behaviour that relate to each characteristic. The observations on the second checklist refer to how the child functions in a group situation. This checklist should be completed in consultation with an early learning educator or child carer who knows the child in a group context.

Parents are invited to use the checklists to reflect on their child's development and the behaviours they currently show. If the child shows the characteristics to a strong degree, parents may consider having them formally assessed for cognitive giftedness by a psychologist.

A good overview of general characteristics that may indicate giftedness in pre-school children is also available from the Tasmanian Association for the Gifted Inc. (TAG) web site at <http://www.tasgifted.com/> using the link “*Is My Child Gifted?*” If parents think their child may be gifted it can be helpful to make contact with the local TAG group for further information, resources and support.

6. Is early entry suitable for all gifted children?

Answer: A child who starts Kindergarten or Prep early is likely to be the youngest in their class throughout school. They need to be able to succeed across all areas of learning and relate to an older peer group. Research shows that for some gifted children, this is exactly what they need to thrive and so early entry is a very successful strategy for them.

However, early entry doesn't suit the needs of every gifted child. If they are not keen to start school it can cause anxiety and stress for the child. It is possible they may have to repeat a year later on at school if early entry turns out to be inappropriate for them.

While it is important to consider early entry as a possible strategy, it is not appropriate for all gifted children and each child needs to be considered individually.

7. Should I apply for early entry for my child?

Answer: If, after reading the information outlined in the previous questions parents feel their child does not show indications of giftedness, they should start Kindergarten at the usual age and not apply for early entry.

If parents think their child may be cognitively gifted, they should also consider their child's physical, social and emotional capacity to cope with school.

The Department of Education web site gives information about the sorts of activities children do at kindergarten and ways parents can help them to prepare for it. This can help parents decide whether or not their child is ready for kindergarten.

If parents are unsure, or have questions, they can talk with a professional (such as an early childhood educator, school psychologist or child carer) or make an appointment with the school principal, senior staff or Kindergarten teacher to discuss their concerns.

If parents think their child may be cognitively gifted and will cope with school, they can apply for early entry using the process outlined below in Question 8.

8. What is the process for early entry?

If parents are thinking of applying for early entry to Kindergarten or Prep for their child, they should read the document called the *Early Entry to School for Children who are Gifted Cross Sectoral Guidelines* which is available on the Department of Education web site.

The Guidelines provide details of the process that is used for early entry, the criteria used, important dates and details for people to contact for further information.

9. What options other than early entry are available for gifted children?

Answer: Early entry is just one option, among a range of strategies that are available to schools and parents for meeting the needs of gifted children.

Parents might also consider providing opportunities for their child to participate in community-based activities and/or providing activities at home that develop their strengths and interests. The document called '*Supporting gifted pre-school children*' available on the Department of Education web site provides some ideas and resources.

Schools make a range of provisions to meet the needs of their gifted students. These include differentiated tasks, extension groups or classes and enrichment learning opportunities. Many schools support acceleration whenever it is required during a student's school career to meet their needs. For government schools, details are available on the Department of Education web site.

10. How can I best support my gifted child at school?

Answer: The education of your child is an important ongoing partnership between you, the school and your child. Every child has a unique profile of learning strengths and needs and it is important to work closely with the school to provide an appropriately challenging and personalised program for them.

One of the most positive things parents can contribute to their child's education is keeping communication with the school happening in an open, supportive and ongoing way.

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