Starting School - Information about delaying, deferring & repeating in England

At the end of the last century, children started school the term before they turned 5. However the government then introduced nursery vouchers. Schools saw the opportunity to set up Reception classes in order to claim this extra funding. The School Admissions code was changed in 2012 which meant children would be ordinarily admitted to school in the September after they turned 4.

However there is no legal requirement for any child to be in school until they reach compulsory school age.

Compulsory School Age (CSA) is the age by which a child must start full-time education once they turn 5.

Education is not only school - it may be home education, tutor or an online provision.

For a child born in September, October, November or December, CSA is 31st December.
For a child born in January, February or March, CSA is 31st March.
For a child born in April, May, June or July, CSA is 31st August.

This means that the child must be in school on the first day of the following term. e.g. If your child is born in January, and thus reaches compulsory school age on 31 March, then they must start full-time education at the beginning of the next term (summer term).

Parents have a choice about when exactly their child starts school.

The majority of parents start their children at school in Reception in September after they turn 4. This is their 'usual' school year.

There are other options:

Defer

Defer means to start your child later in their 'usual' school year that they should be starting in.

When you apply for a school place, you can choose not to start your child until the term when your child turns CSA. So you can accept a place in the 'usual' application year in Reception, and then not start your child at school until the start of the term after they turn CSA (see dates below).
This is to defer entry. There is no requirement for the child to attend school prior. You do not need to tell anyone as the place remains your child's until they turn CSA, but ideally let school know.

A child turning CSA on 31st December can defer until the first day of the Spring term.
A child turning CSA on 31st March or 31st August can defer until the first day of the Summer term. A Summer born needs to attend on the first day of the summer term in order to hold their place for Year 1.

After these dates the school place gets removed.

Delay

Delay means to start a summer born child at school a whole year later.

There is an anomaly above, in that a deferred summer born child would have to start school in the Summer term. This led to a legal challenge which confirmed that a summer born child does not need to be in school until the start of the Autumn term in September after they turn CSA.

A summer born child - one born in April, May, June, July, August - can therefore start school a whole year later in September aged 5 at CSA.
This is your parental right.

A summer born child has lots of options! They can start school in September after their 4th birthday; or they can defer and start at any point in that school year; or they can do part time school all year (as long as they attend the first day of the summer term to hold their school place for Year 1); or they can delay entry and start school in September once they turn CSA age 5.

However they would start school in Year 1.
The legal challenge asked if the child could start in Reception instead of Year 1 and it was agreed.

A parent can therefore request to the admissions authority (this may be the Local Authority (LA), an academy, faith school etc.) that their child starts school in Reception, not in Year 1. The Head is likely to be asked for their views.

The decision must be made in the child's best interests, with sound educational reasons provided. This must include the impact on the child of missing out a year of education (Reception).

There are four pieces of guidance produced by the Department for Education (DfE) to assist parents with getting a Reception start. The DfE totally supports Reception starts. The first document is the main one.

Guidance on handling admission requests for summer born children:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/summer-born-children-advice-for-admission-authorities/guidance-on-handling-admission-requests-for-summer-born-children

Admission for Summer Born Children for parents:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/summer-born-children-school-admission/summer-born-children-starting-school-advice-for-parents

Making a request for admission out of the normal age group:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/summer-born-children-school-admission/making-a-request-for-admission-out-of-the-normal-age-group

The final piece is hidden in the first document in the fifth paragraph - The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State's statement in The National Archives. You need to click on the link embedded in the document to read.

Delay for Medical Reasons

It is possible to use Down syndrome as a reason to delay a non summer born by year especially if your child has been very poorly.

It is possible to get a child delayed a whole year if they are not a summer born child. However be prepared to have to fight for this because there is a culture of inclusion within the right year group.
There is a mention in the 'All Party Parliamentary Group Down Syndrome (APPGDS): good practice guidelines for education' which may help you either delay entry or repeat Reception (see below):

"76. Pupils with Down syndrome should move up with their chronological age group.....in exceptional cases, school staff along with an educational psychologist may propose that a child with Down syndrome should repeat a year, especially in foundation/reception, such as when a pupil has been absent from school for extended periods due to illness and hospitalisation, or has a late summer birthday so that the pupil with Down syndrome is one of the youngest in the yea group. Consideration of potential impact and benefits should take place with the pupil's family/carers. Children who are placed in a class below their chronological year group should then move up each year with that class throughout their school careers, and must not skip a year at any stage. The decision to place a child out of age group should be reflected in Part 3 of their statement of SEN as special educational provision."

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/educational-psychology/newsletter/resources/APPGDS_guidelines.pdf

Note that this document is dated 2012. Education Health Care Plan's (EHCP) have since replaced statements, and this was published before the first Summer Born Guidance.

As the APPGDS guidelines state, this would need to be agreed by the professionals around the child in conjunction with the Head teacher and the LA. This is usually done where a child has had an EHC Needs Assessment or has had an Annual Review. LA SEND Panel would have the final decision. There is a possibility your child may need to miss a year out later on. The year group should be put in the EHCP as a provision in Section F.

Repeating Reception / Restarting Reception

Repeating or Restarting is when your child completes, or almost completes Reception and then does the Reception year again.

There are usually one of three reasons for this:
Firstly the child has missed a lot of school through medical reasons, family issues or other.
Secondly the child developmentally is not ready to move into Year 1.
Thirdly the child is a summer born, and the parents have decided that it is in their child's best interests to restart at CSA.

The first two routes would be repeating Reception. The decision to do this usually is the Head's decision. They usually need to have space in Reception, however if you decide before school places are allocated in mid April, then a space can usually be reserved. There are times where it is decided that a child with an EHCP would benefit from repeating Reception. As above this would be decided at an Annual Review meeting, or with a first EHCP, by the professionals around the child, and then agreed by LA SEND panel. See section above re 'Delaying for Medical Reasons'.

The danger with these two routes is that the child gains a year of education and may need to miss a year later on. If there is an EHCP, the year group needs writing in as a provision in Section F.

The final option is a mind shift! You need to pretend your child never had Reception but you are starting them at CSA (see the delaying option above). This can be done in two ways.

a) the Head simply agrees that your child stays in Reception in September - if this happens ensure their year group is changed on the school records.

b) if the Head isn't agreeable or you wish, you can request a summer born CSA start either in current school or at a different school. This needs to be done hypothetically speaking to ensure you have agreement, because you will need to formally leave the school in order to start again fresh on paper. Why would you do this? It doesn't leave any question that your child was a summer born CSA starter, and they are then protected by the summer born guidance.

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Moving Down a Year / Back Classing / Holding Back / Decelerating / Repeating

The terms above are used usually for children higher up in the school who move down or repeat a school year.

Moving back down a year, back classing, decelerating, holding back and repeating can all be used if a child needs to move down or repeat a year later on in school.

These terms have all been heard to describe a child who is having a CSA start aged 5 in Reception, but try to use the correct terminology. Many people mix up deferred with delayed too. The difference is a whole year!

These children are at high risk of having to miss or skip a year later on in school.

Missing a year out later on?

All children out of their usual age group are at risk of being forced up a year at some point. Summer born children have a high level of protection and it is very clear in all four pieces of guidance what anyone wishing to move a child up a year has to provide.

Similar arguments can be used for other children, however there are no actual documents that you can use. The Ashton Checklist is used by some LA's and is useful to be aware of. Special Schools frequently say that the child will have to rejoin their usual age group. However this is a blanket policy and can be challenged. There are many children in specialist provisions out of age group.

NOTES
Although the Summer Born guidance documents have been around since 2013, many Head Teachers and professionals still are totally unaware of the option and process. Be prepared to complain - it is part of the process.

At the top of the Summer Born Guidance it states:
'This guidance does not apply to children with education, health and care (EHC) plans. If a summer born child has an EHC plan and parents would like them to be admitted to school at age 5 to start in reception, the local authority will need to discuss this with them.' In the absence of any specific guidance for children with EHCPs, the current guidance is being used. Ideally secure agreement for a reception start before starting an EHCP as it is easier, however you can still apply for a Reception start once you have an EHCP, however the application will go to the LA SEND department, not the admissions team.

It is strongly advised that you get agreement for a summer born start BEFORE you get an EHCP, because then this will be helpful if a disability discrimination claim is needed.

Some LAs are very on board with summer born CSA starts, some are very anti them. Your success may well depend on where you live, your SEND panel, how much power your professionals have, and whether your Head supports. Ultimately the Head could overrule once your child is admitted to the school as they can decide which year group your child is in - this could work both ways - and they can overrule the LA.

In all instances keep everything in writing, and keep a hard copy. You may be asked to show this e.g. at secondary transfer. Also keep a copy of the summer born guidance / APPPGDS if relevant.

Further Information

With thanks to Justine Cornforth for her expertise in compiling this document.

Justine is contracted by DSUK to provide support to families with a child with Down syndrome. This service is free to families via our Facebook groups. For those wishing to book a 1:1 review of a Draft EHCP or a general advice call, there is a charge - considerably less than many organisations!

Join our EHCP Online Support Group

Our EHCP Support Service provides expert guidance on the EHCP process through online support groups, 1:1 drop-in sessions, and a detailed draft review service. Led by one of our specialists, this service helps DSUK families navigate applications, reviews, and parent representations with confidence.

School Starters 2027

School Starters 2026

School Starters 2025

School Starters 2024

For more information about educational support visit:

For parents

For professionals

Book an EHCP Support and Draft Review Session

Book a full review of the draft EHCP and professional reports with Justine. This is followed by a call of up to 2 hours to share feedback. During this call, Justine will run through the EHCP with you to ensure you understand any issues with the draft so that you can put your parent representations effectively to the Local Authority. After booking, you will receive instructions for contacting Justine to arrange a suitable day and time for the session – please allow up to two hours for the call.

Book here