

# Data link exam success to birth date

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Birth date has a striking – and enduring – impact on academic performance, with summer babies doing worse in exams than September-born children at every stage of their school career, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies.

Of September-born girls, some 60 per cent reach the government's target for attaining good GCSEs; August-born girls fall short of it. The IFS, one of Britain's most prestigious think-tanks, says this gulf means "access to further and higher education, and hence future success in the labour market, is likely to be significantly affected by the month in which you are born."

The IFS research, which follows earlier figures from the Higher Education Funding Council showing autumn babies are 20 per cent more likely to go directly to university than late summer babies, who are almost a year younger than some classmates, will send shudders through millions of parents.

The institute called for "urgent steps" to "eliminate this inequity", such as adjusting GCSE results for age when deciding whether children had passed the hurdles necessary to continue education after the age of 16.

But ministers' response was guarded. Lord Adonis, schools minister, said: "We will be considering its recommendations alongside other issues during the Children's Plan" – a wide-ranging report looking at children inside and outside schools, to be published in December.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families, which partly funded the research, said it had started pilots that would allow children to take national tests leading up to Key Stage 3 (usually taken at 14), "when ready" rather than when scheduled.

The IFS research draws on administrative data covering England's entire state school population. It shows dramatic differences between the proportions of September- and August-born children reaching the government's expected level, from Key Stage 1 at age seven through to A-levels.

Four out of five September-born girls reach the expected level at Key Stage 1, compared with barely half of those born in August. The attainment gap in performance is maintained throughout school, but shrinks from 27 percentage points for seven year-olds to 6 points by the time of GCSEs. While 61 per cent of September-born girls achieve at least 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE, only 55 per cent of August-born girls do the same.

The disparity is smaller for A-Level results, as a large number of summer babies will already have left school after failing to achieve sufficiently highly to pursue sixth form studies. The English educational system is more rigid about age than that in many other countries. Younger children cannot be held back a year if their performance is disappointing.

The difference in achievement is most extreme between September and August babies, but the IFS says every extra month makes a difference to a child's ability. The IFS report considers four factors that might be driving these differences: the age at which children sit the test, the age at which they start school, the amount of schooling they receive before the tests, and whether they are amongst the oldest or the youngest in their class.

It concludes that it is "overwhelmingly" the age at which a child sits the tests that matters. The IFS also finds that at age 11, August-born girls are 72 per cent more likely than September-born girls to be recorded as having "non-statemented" – less severe – special educational needs, and 25 per cent more likely to be recorded as having "statemented" – more severe – special educational needs.

Claire Crawford, one of the report's authors, said the report highlighted the penalty that August-born children faced for being born late in the school year.

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