

Compulsory age of starting school in European countries, 2009

This table includes information on school starting ages in all 34 countries participating in Eurydice, the information network on education in Europe.*

Age	Country
Four	Northern Ireland
Five	England, Malta, Netherlands, Scotland, Wales
Six	Austria, Belgium, Cyprus ¹ , Czech Republic, Denmark ² , France, Germany, Greece ³ , Hungary ⁴ , Iceland, Republic of Ireland, Italy, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg ⁵ , Norway, Portugal, Romania ⁶ , Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Turkey
Seven	Bulgaria, Estonia, Finland, Latvia ⁷ , Lithuania, Poland ⁸ , Sweden

The compulsory school starting age detailed in this table often represents the latest age at which children must start school. In several European countries, most children enter school below compulsory school age (for example, schooling in the Netherlands is compulsory from age five, but virtually all children start school at four).

¹ Cyprus: Compulsory school age is actually determined as children who are five years eight months old before 1st September – the start of the academic year. Pre-primary education is compulsory for five-to six-year olds, that is, for one year, for children who are four years and eight months old by 1st September.

² Denmark: reduced to six from seven in August 2008.

³ Greece: pre-primary education is compulsory for children who have reached the age of five by 31st December of the year in which they enrol.

⁴ Hungary: but kindergarten attendance is compulsory at age five.

⁵ Luxembourg: but pre-primary attendance is compulsory from age four.

⁶ Romania: reduced to six from seven from the 2003-04 school year (at the same time, the period of compulsory education in Romania was extended from eight to ten years).

⁷ Latvia: but pre-primary education is compulsory for five- to six-year-olds.

⁸ Poland: but kindergarten is compulsory at age six.

Children in UK countries start school at a comparatively young age, with Northern Ireland having the lowest statutory age of entry to school. The compulsory school starting age in Northern Ireland was changed from five to four years in 1989 because it was thought that all children would benefit from spending a total of 12 full years at school (seven years at primary school and five at secondary school).

In Scotland, compulsory education starts at age five, although many children start at four because schools have a single intake at the beginning of the school year. Local authorities set a cut-off date (normally 1st March) defining the cohort of children eligible to start school at the beginning of the following school year (normally in August). This means that Scottish children do not usually start school below the age of four years and six months.

England and Wales have a similar system, with a compulsory school starting age of five, although the majority of children start school at four. Because the cut-off date is the same as the beginning of the school year, children born in August can start school in September, just after their fourth birthday.

* The Eurydice Network includes the Member States of the European Union (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom); the three countries of the European Free Trade Association which are members of the European Economic Area (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway); and Turkey (an EU candidate country involved in the lifelong learning programme).