

**Social Inequality at School Entry in Germany.  
The Impact of Social Origin and Child Care Attendance on Timing of School  
Entrance based on SOEP Data**

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Although in Germany, there is a regular age of school entry, some children start school later than usual and some children start ahead of schedule. While there has been some decrease in delayed school entries in the last years, the rate of premature school entry has increased substantially. Paradoxically, while the delayed entry is primarily because professionals rate a child as not ready for school, the premature entry is mainly based on parents' choice.

As it is well known, children from lower SES families still perform worse before starting school ('primary effects', 'cultural reproduction'). According to the theory on the ecology of human development by Bronfenbrenner, the kindergarten is a care institution that fosters the child's development and should level out disadvantages at least to some degrees. Therefore, we investigate whether kindergarten attendance reduces the risk of a delayed entry. In a second step, we focus on early school entry. Here we apply common sociological models on educational choice.

We use yearly information of the SOEP to reconstruct the kindergarten history and the age of school entry. Due to changes in the regularities on school entry, the sample is restricted to children born between 1991 and 1998. Nevertheless, this allows to observe the transition to primary school for more than 1.400 children.

The main results are that children from low educated families profit most by kindergarten attendance, but only if they participate before reaching age four. In this case, the risk of having a delayed entry is as low as of children with highly educated parents. The relationship between SES indicators, kindergarten attendance, and school entry before reaching regular age is weaker. However, there are at least strong income effects indicating that higher income parents try to avoid further payments for kindergarten: they foster a premature entry to elementary schools, because kindergarten fees are income-dependent in some federal states, while primary school is free of charge.