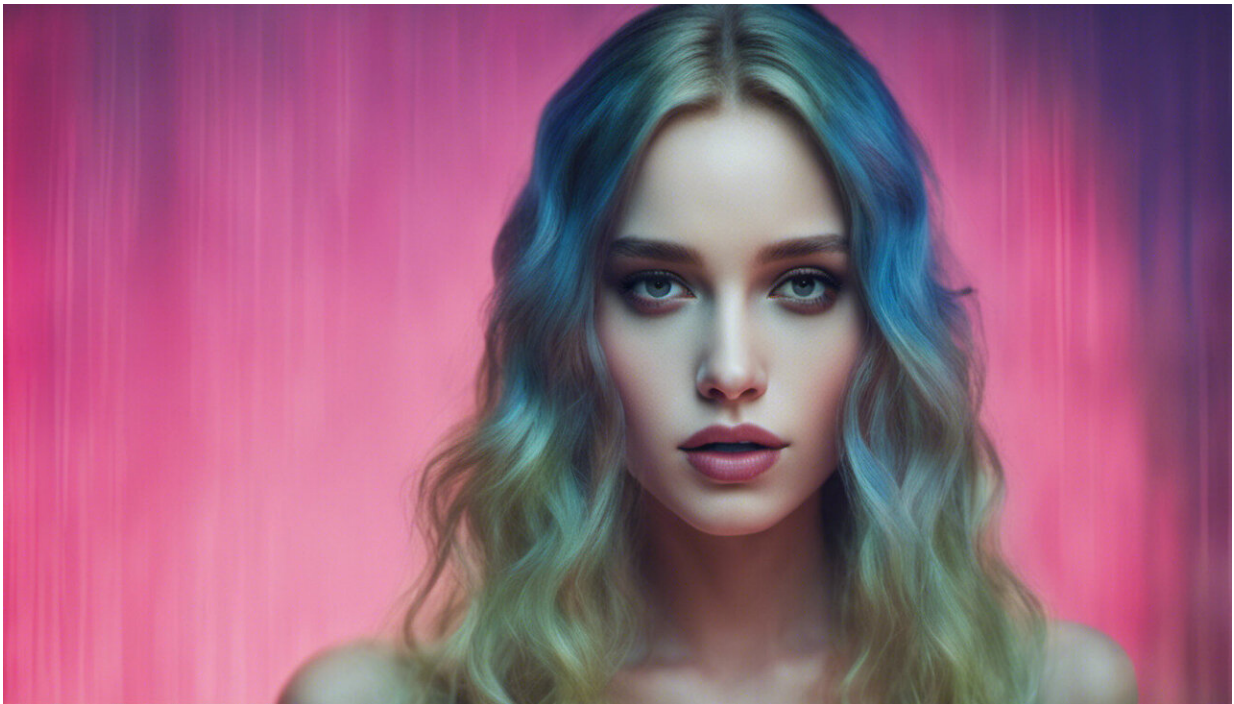


# Even more tests for most tested children in the world

September 5 2019, by Mandy Pierlejewski

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

It's that time of year again when thousands of children start school for the first time. Alongside the new pencil cases, bags and school uniforms, children as young as four will also need to get used to the idea of tests and exams. Because from September this year, a pilot of [new baseline assessment](#) for four-year-olds will be introduced in almost [10,000](#)

[primary schools](#).

This baseline will [test children](#) within the first six weeks of starting [school](#) and will be used to measure the effectiveness of the school by identifying progress made seven years later when the child leaves primary education.

The baseline assessment is not designed to benefit individual children. It is purely to be used for accountability purposes to judge the school's future performance. There will be no incentive for teachers to score children highly on these tests as high results will make progress more difficult to achieve.

The assessment will be [meaningless](#) to teachers, but not to children—because rather than focusing on settling into the early years classroom, attention will instead be focused on the test. Indeed, [a small-scale survey](#) by University College London found 86% of headteachers were negative about the reception baseline assessment.

## Pressure from day one

League tables and performance indicators can make or break a school. So it's maybe no surprise that, despite [outrage from parents, teachers and education experts](#), these baseline assessments are going ahead.

But children in the UK are already some of [the most tested in the world](#). As each child enters school, they are already measured against a set of [age-related norms](#). These measurements continue as the child progresses through school. Data from assessments is entered into [online tracking systems](#), which identify gaps in knowledge, set targets and predict future attainment. This data is used to judge not only the child's performance but the effectiveness of the teacher and the school.

The OECD has [previously warned](#) schools there is too much emphasis on test results in England and that this risks negative consequences. And there have also been [concerns raised](#) that such an emphasis on tests and data in schools is simply producing "[exam robots](#)".

Indeed, [a poll by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers](#) found that almost half of those who responded said pupils in their school had self-harmed—and 89% said testing was the main source of stress. Some staff said they were aware of pupils attempting suicide and that children as young as six are "stressed" about exams and tests.

## **Not good enough**

This focus on data and exam results rather than the child impacts how children see themselves. Prior to coming to school, children's [sense of self](#) is primarily influenced by their relationships with family members. They are not yet aware of educational expectations and how they compare to other children of their age. But as soon as they enter the school system, they begin to be compared with age-related expectations.

They may, for example, have been previously unaware that they should be expected to [count to ten](#) or know the letters of the alphabet. And each time they are asked to do these things in school they see themselves as others see them—in comparison to the age-related expectation. Some will compare well, while others will become increasingly aware of their failures.

This awareness of the self compared to others is like a [mirror](#), which reflects back to the child a new version of themselves based on how they compare to the norm. This leads the child to form a new idea of who they are and, for many, this is a demoralising process which impacts on the child's self-confidence and self-esteem. It's maybe no surprise then that mental health among young people is deteriorating.

Indeed, four-year-olds shouldn't be worrying about tests and exams. In other countries, such as [Finland](#), children don't start school until the age of seven. They spend the first few years at preschool focusing on learning through play—and yet Finland is ranked much higher in international education [league tables](#). The idea that it's better to learn things earlier is not always right. And in the case of four-year-olds, what they really need is play, not tests.

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