

READY TO READ

Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Northern Ireland can read well



READ ON
GET ON

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life. Yet one in five children growing up in Northern Ireland leaves primary school unable to read well, and children experiencing poverty are more likely to fail to meet the expected standards. This helps explain the persistent educational divide in Northern Ireland that, each year, prevents thousands of our poorest children from fulfilling their potential.

Making sure that every child leaves primary school able to read well is a crucial part of efforts to turn this unacceptable situation around – so that every child succeeds, regardless of their background. This is why the *Read On. Get On.* campaign coalition is focused on achieving a historic goal: every child reading well at age 11 by 2025. We're committed to building a national mission to tackle underachievement in reading, drawing in energy and expertise from across society.

EARLY LANGUAGE SKILLS AND THE *READ ON. GET ON.* CAMPAIGN

Learning to read well starts early, and good early language skills are the vital stepping stone. If children do not learn to communicate, speak and listen from an early age, along with developing their understanding of the meaning of words and stories, they will struggle to learn to read well when they get to primary school. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign has therefore set an interim goal that every child in Northern Ireland has good language skills by the time they start school.

This report sets out a review of existing evidence. It explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read, and why poorer children face the greatest risk of falling behind from an early age. It shows that without a step-change in support for children's early language development, particularly for the poorest children, we will never achieve our goal of all children leaving primary school able to read well. Boosting children's early

language skills is therefore critical to narrow the achievement gap and improve the life chances of our poorest children.

There is broad political support in Northern Ireland for acting early to tackle the root causes of social and educational disadvantage – before they have a dramatic effect on the lives of children. This support must be backed up by concrete action and investment.

The focus of this report is on the role of the government in supporting children and parents. But we know this is not something that government alone can fix. *Read On. Get On.* is working with a wide range of partners to develop a major campaign aimed at empowering parents and carers to understand what they can do to support their children's development.

POORER CHILDREN ARE FALLING BEHIND IN LANGUAGE SKILLS ACROSS NORTHERN IRELAND

By the age of five, most children should be able to speak in full sentences and use most of the everyday words that adults use. They should be asking lots of 'why?' questions to understand the world around them, and should be able to talk confidently about the past and the future. Although a minority of children have a disability or impairment that means they will never develop the language skills expected for their age, most children could get there with the right support.

However, the evidence tells us that there is a gap in language skills between poorer children and their better-off peers in Northern Ireland, and children from poor backgrounds are more likely to experience difficulties in language development before they start school.

FALLING BEHIND IN LANGUAGE AT FIVE HAS A HUGE IMPACT ON READING ABILITY AT 11

Falling behind so early in life has profound consequences for a child's ability to get on at school, and the impact of children's early language development can extend far into adulthood.

New analysis for this report demonstrates the crucial role of early language skills in a child's ability to learn to read – particularly for our poorest children:

- A child with weak language skills at the age of five is much less likely to be a strong reader at the age of 11 than a five-year-old with strong language skills.
- Good early language skills are even more important for children growing up in poverty – a child with below average language skills who experienced poverty persistently scored 38% less on reading tests at age seven and 23% less on comprehension tests at age eleven than a child who never experienced poverty and had above average language skills.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS AND THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

Children's genetic inheritance and innate ability have a role in influencing how their early language skills develop. But beyond these initial endowments, we have identified four sets of factors that interact with each other to help shape young children's language skills by the age of five:

1. **Language skills at age three:** children's language skills in the first few years of life have a massive impact on their language skills by the age of five, demonstrating the importance of early action to support young children's language development right from birth.
2. **What parents do:** the bond between parent and child, and the way that parents use language at home, is crucial. Parents also have a vital role in

creating early learning opportunities (like sharing stories, singing rhymes, or playing word games), which can help to compensate for the impact of poverty on a child's language skills.

3. **Poverty:** poverty can leave parents feeling stressed, worried or lacking in confidence, which can make it harder for them to find time to create lots of early learning opportunities. Predicted increases in child poverty will make it much harder – although not impossible – to achieve our goal. More support and information for parents is key.
4. **Early years learning and childcare:** high-quality childcare and pre-school education can be a major benefit, especially for those living in poverty. Pre-school education has the biggest impact on language skills when it is led by a trained teacher or early years graduate.

WHAT SUPPORT DO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CURRENTLY RECEIVE?

Acting early and supporting parents to engage with their child's learning are key to boosting young children's language skills and tackling entrenched underachievement in reading. A range of services is available to support families. In this report we consider in particular the roles of health visiting, speech and language therapists, Sure Start, pre-schools and libraries. We believe there are opportunities to maximise the roles of these services to strengthen children's early language development.

THREE PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

It is vital that we do more to ensure that the vast majority of children develop strong language skills by the age of five. Without increased action, the impact on the learning and life chances of children at risk of falling behind – and on educational inequality across Northern Ireland – is likely to be significant.

Our focus is on what more can be done to support the poorest children, because they face the biggest risk of falling behind in early language and are less likely to catch up. But achieving our campaign goals will require help for every child who needs it, regardless of their background. This will require a mix of universal services that support all children, and extra support for those who face the biggest risk of falling behind.

We have identified three priority areas for the Northern Ireland Executive and for local services, designed to help parents and professionals do even more to support the youngest children – especially those living in poverty.

Invest further in the early years workforce

- Ensure all pre-school settings are led by a graduate with expertise in early childhood studies, by 2020.
- Introduce time-bound commitments to raising the standards of the general early years workforce. An explicit focus on early language development needs to be identified and prioritised.

Strengthen support for parents

- Ensure childcare and early years staff have the necessary skills to support parents with their children's early language development, particularly those parents living in poverty. This can be achieved through establishing a continuing professional development framework for the early years workforce that includes core elements covering how to effectively engage with parents.

Track young children's progress

- Introduce a national child development measure to track young children's progress against agreed milestones and outcomes from birth to starting school. Early language and communication should be a priority area within this measure.

INTRODUCTION

Being a good reader is crucial for every child. It is the key to developing much of their potential. Yet, one in five children in Northern Ireland leaves primary school unable to read well (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, Key Stage 2 results, 2015).

Without being able to read well, children will not be able to benefit from the immeasurable opportunities that reading well and obtaining a good education have to offer. This has clear negative repercussions for the ability of those children to achieve in life. They risk leaving formal education with poor qualifications and struggling in the world of work.

A child who can read well by the end of primary school is able to understand the meaning behind stories and information, and to talk confidently about what they have read. This level of reading is necessary not just to get by, but to get on – giving children the best chance of leaving school with good qualifications.

Recognising the fundamental importance of reading well by age 11, a coalition of organisations in Northern Ireland has come together to promote the *Read On. Get On.* campaign and take action to work towards a historic goal: all children in Northern Ireland reading well at age 11 by 2025.

At the launch of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign, we set out four key drivers leading to children being able to read well:

- supporting children to develop good early language skills before starting school
- providing the right support to primary schools
- supporting parents and carers to help their children's reading
- celebrating the enjoyment of reading for pleasure in every community.

This report focuses on the first driver – supporting children to develop good early language skills from birth. Early language skills – listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary – are the

vital foundation that enable children to learn to read: children first learn to talk and then learn to read. When young children fall behind in language, they are much more likely to struggle to learn to read when they start school. And it is the poorest children who are most at risk of falling behind from an early age.

This is why, as part of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign, we are determined to ensure that every child has a good level of language skills by the age of five. In some of the most disadvantaged communities in Northern Ireland, over 40% of children are arriving at pre-school displaying some evidence of language difficulty or delay (Jordan et al 2013). The evidence demonstrates that this delay persists for years.

This report explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read and why children growing up in poverty face a greater risk of falling behind. It sets out the action that is needed – focusing particularly on the poorest children – to ensure that every child in Northern Ireland gets the best start when it comes to developing their language skills. With levels of child poverty set to rise in the next five years, it is crucial that we act now to ensure that children growing up in poverty have the best early learning opportunities. Without a major step-change in progress, large numbers of poorer children will continue to miss out on the vital early language skills that are the building blocks for learning to read – with potentially damaging consequences for their life chances.

Over recent years, there has been increasing political support for acting early to tackle the root causes of social and educational disadvantage. However, this has not been consistently backed up by concrete action and investment by the Northern Ireland Executive.

It is crucial that our politicians recognise the importance of early language as the gateway to good literacy – and prioritise action accordingly. In the lead up to the formation of a new Assembly, this report argues for a decisive shift towards action and investment to help address one of our most pressing challenges – children falling behind in language development and literacy.

This report begins by setting out the evidence on the impact of poverty on children's early language development. Chapter 2 considers the link between early language development and the ability to read well at age 11. In chapter 3, we explore the factors

that influence young children's language development, highlighting the crucial roles of parents and carers and the impact of poverty. Chapter 4 describes how high-quality services for children and families – including health visiting, pre-school education and libraries – can help overcome the impact of poverty, and explains why this potential is not always fulfilled. Chapter 5 sets out three priorities for meeting the challenge: prioritising investment in the early years workforce; strengthening support for parents; and ensuring that we can track the progress we are making to improve young children's language skills.

I POVERTY AND YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

Growing up in poverty has profound consequences for a child's life and, as this chapter sets out, puts children at significantly higher risk of experiencing a delay in their language development. A child experiencing language delay is more likely to have difficulty in responding to questions from parents or carers and in learning new words than their better-off peers. These difficulties can continue right up until they start school, with some children struggling to talk with and listen to their peers and teachers. This can have major consequences for the development of their early reading skills.

Evidence in this chapter shows that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are much more likely to experience difficulties in language development by the time they start school. Projected increases in the number of children living in poverty will put even more children at risk of experiencing language delays over the next five years.

This chapter begins by setting out the typical language development of a child over the first five years of life. We then present new analysis of young children's achievement in language and communication in Northern Ireland, focusing on inequalities between children growing up in poverty and their better-off peers.

CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OVER THE FIRST FIVE YEARS OF LIFE

The term 'language' covers a range of skills, including the physical ability to speak and hear, the capacity to absorb and understand spoken information, and the ability to express our own feelings and ideas verbally. It also incorporates body language, facial expressions and gestures, as well as the ability to interact with others in a two-way dialogue – reflecting on what others have said and responding appropriately. Our interim goal is to ensure that every child in Northern Ireland has good language skills by age five – so that they have relatively well-developed capacities in each of these areas of language.

A child should be able to talk to and be understood by new people (not just a familiar figure like a parent), use full sentences and ask lots of 'why?' questions. Children should be able to understand and talk about events in the past and future, and use most of the everyday words that an adult uses (I CAN 2009).

The typical development of a child's language is described in more detail in the table below. While all children develop at their own pace, typically, a child should start to utter words at age one, create simple sentences by age two, tell simple stories by age three, and express their thoughts in more complex ways by age four. These are critical steps as they set the foundations for children's later social, emotional and cognitive development. Language development continues throughout the school years as children become increasingly competent communicators.

TYPICAL LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Babies (by 12 months)	Toddlers (by age two)	By the age of four	By the age of five
Understanding of simple words starts to grow	Start to join two or three words together and respond to simple sentences like “Show me your nose.”	Start to learn more complex meanings of words and ask lots of questions about what words mean	Able to understand and talk with new people, using well-formed sentences
Communicates by babbling, playing with sounds, crying and reaching for objects	First words come and a larger vocabulary begins to develop	Express their thoughts and feelings clearly to adults and children	Ask lots of ‘why?’ questions
Period of building the skills they need to speak and understand	Two-year-olds learn two or three new words a day	Make careful choices about the words they are using and conform with grammatical rules on, for example, tenses and plurals	Understand longer and more complicated sentences
May start to use simple words	Start to ask lots of questions that help them learn and remember words	Still find some sounds difficult to use but are understood by most people	Use and understand most everyday words that adults use
Can respond to familiar words like “up” or “bye-bye”	A spike in language skills that is critical to children’s language development	May stumble over words and sentences	Explain what has happened and why in an interesting way

Adapted from: ICAN (2011)

Not all children are able to follow this typical path of language development. A relatively small number of children have language difficulties so serious that they cannot reach the expected standard by the time they start school, or be helped to catch up soon afterwards. The focus of this report is on the group of children who do not have a serious impairment or disability that stops them from developing good language skills but who nevertheless fail to develop the language skills expected of a five-year-old. These children are often described as experiencing ‘language delay’. In most cases, this is due to a combination of environmental factors – such as a lack of early learning opportunities in the home and of good-quality pre-school education.

In this report, we argue that children growing up in poverty are less likely to benefit from early positive experiences of each of these factors – making it more likely that they will fall behind from an early age and less likely that they will catch up. We therefore pay greater attention here to children growing up in poverty. But it is not impossible for the vast majority of young children growing up in poor families to develop good language skills – provided children and parents get the right support. At the same time, some children struggle to develop good language skills even though they do not experience poverty. To achieve our campaign goal, we need to ensure support is available for *all* children.

EXPLAINING GOOD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AT FIVE

Good language development means that a child is reaching the communication milestones associated with five-year-olds. It requires that a child reaches the expected level in each of the four domains of language: understanding, use of words and sentences, speech development, and the ability to use appropriate social communication skills.

There are different ways of explaining good language development at five. Here are some simple examples of what children with good language development at age five are able to do.

By the age of five, children will usually be able to:

- understand spoken instructions without stopping what they are doing to look at the speaker
- choose their own friends and play mates
- take turns in longer conversations
- understand more complicated language, such as 'first', 'last', 'might', 'may be', 'above' and 'in between'
- understand words that describe sequences, such as "First we are going to the shop, next we will play in the park"
- use sentences that are well-formed – however, children may still have some difficulties with grammar, for example, saying 'sheeps' instead of 'sheep' or 'goed' instead of 'went'
- think more about the meanings of words, such as describing the meaning of simple words or asking what a new word means
- use most sounds effectively – however, they may have some difficulties with trickier words such as 'scribble' or 'elephant'.

INEQUALITIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

We can get a richer understanding of the relationship between poverty and children's early language development in Northern Ireland by using new analysis of the data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) (see appendix I). The MCS has tracked the progress of a group of children born in 2000 and contains detailed information about their development. The survey measures family income directly and at each stage of a child's life. This enables us to confirm the relationship between poverty and children's language development, and also to consider the different impact of persistent and temporary poverty. Research using MCS has shown that gaps in children's language development open up as early as three years of age (Waldfoegel & Washbrook 2011), and persist through to when children start school and beyond.

Figure I.1 groups children aged five who scored below the average score on a standard vocabulary test, according to whether they experienced poverty between the age of nine months to five years; persistently; intermittently; or not at all. The analysis shows that 65% of children who experienced poverty persistently were below the average, compared with 49% of children who experienced poverty intermittently throughout the early years, and 38% who never experienced poverty.

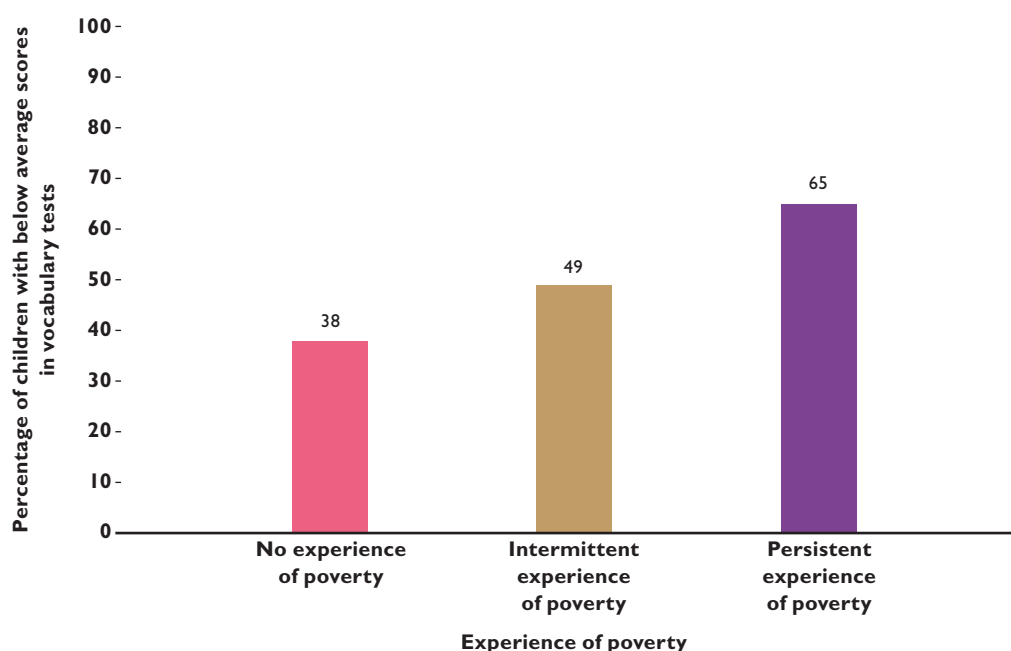
This represents major inequalities in language development between children with different experiences of poverty. In particular, it is clear that children who have experienced poverty persistently throughout their early lives face a high risk of experiencing language delays later in education.

THE LACK OF EVIDENCE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

There is no national tool in Northern Ireland for assessing children's speech, language and communication development. This makes it very difficult to assess patterns and trends in children's language development, as well as to monitor progress and evaluate the impact of interventions. While the data on three- and five-year-olds from the MCS used throughout this report offers valuable information, the results are now more than ten years old. The information gap is exacerbated by a lack of quantitative and qualitative research identifying the prevalence of this issue at a national level.

Evidence gathered through research and programmatic interventions delivered by speech and language therapists (SLTs), Sure Start projects and other programmes partially reveals the scale of the problem in Northern Ireland. The Education and Training Inspectorate has reported that "increasing numbers of pre-school centres report difficulties in children's language and communication upon entry

FIGURE I.1 FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN NORTHERN IRELAND BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY LEVEL, BY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 and 3 by UCL Institute of Education

to pre-school” (ETI 2011). In 2007, 51% of preschool providers surveyed cited speech and language difficulties as the most common challenges evident in children attending pre-school provision (DE 2007).

Reports point to this being a particular problem in areas of high deprivation:

- A prevalence study in the socio-economically deprived Colin area of West Belfast in 2009 highlighted that 41% of children entering primary school had speech, language and communication difficulties (Jourdan et al 2010);
- A similar study in Downpatrick found that 46% of children in that deprived area presented at primary school with a speech and language delay, with 31% of those children requiring speech and language therapy to remediate those difficulties (Jourdan et al 2013).

The available data suggests that there are significant inequalities in early language skills between children experiencing poverty and their peers. The evidence we cite to understand inequalities in young children’s language skills across Northern Ireland is (to our knowledge) the best that is available. However, this evidence is very limited and paints an incomplete picture of the situation at national level. There is a lack of detail regarding the current situation, the scale

and depth of these inequalities and how trends have changed over time. This data is simply not available. Without improved knowledge on the current state of affairs, the ability to monitor and assess the impact of policy and practice in relation to early years language development is severely curtailed.

The earliest available nationwide measure of children’s communication skills is Key Stage 1 results at age seven. Unfortunately, this data is limited, as we do not know the results achieved by particular groups of children – for example, children eligible for free school meals, a common proxy for social deprivation. The earliest national data that tell us how the poorest children are performing are GCSE results at age 15. We know that the gap between poor 15-year-olds and their better-off peers is alarmingly wide: in 2013/2014, only 38.7% of children entitled to free school meals achieved 5 A*–C GCSEs (including English and maths) compared to 65.2% of their better-off peers. Waiting until children are 15 to accurately assess the inequalities in our education system is simply not good enough. We need better, more robust systems of assessment and data collection at every stage of a child’s development and education to ensure that the appropriate action is taken to close this persistent and damaging gap.

CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN THREE AND FIVE: THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

Language skills are dynamic: they develop over the first five years of life and beyond. The findings we have presented so far focus on snapshots of inequalities in children's language skills at ages three and five. Just as crucial, the following evidence (drawing on data from the MCS) shows how children's language develops between the ages of three and five – with big differences between children growing up in poverty and their better-off peers.

Figure 1.2 shows transitions in children's language achievement between the ages of three and five across the UK. It illustrates that poorer children who are performing well at three are more likely than their peers to fall behind by the age of five. Poorer children who did well in their vocabulary test at age three (scoring in the top 40%) were almost twice as likely to fall out of the top 40% by age five than their better-off peers (58% compared to 30%).

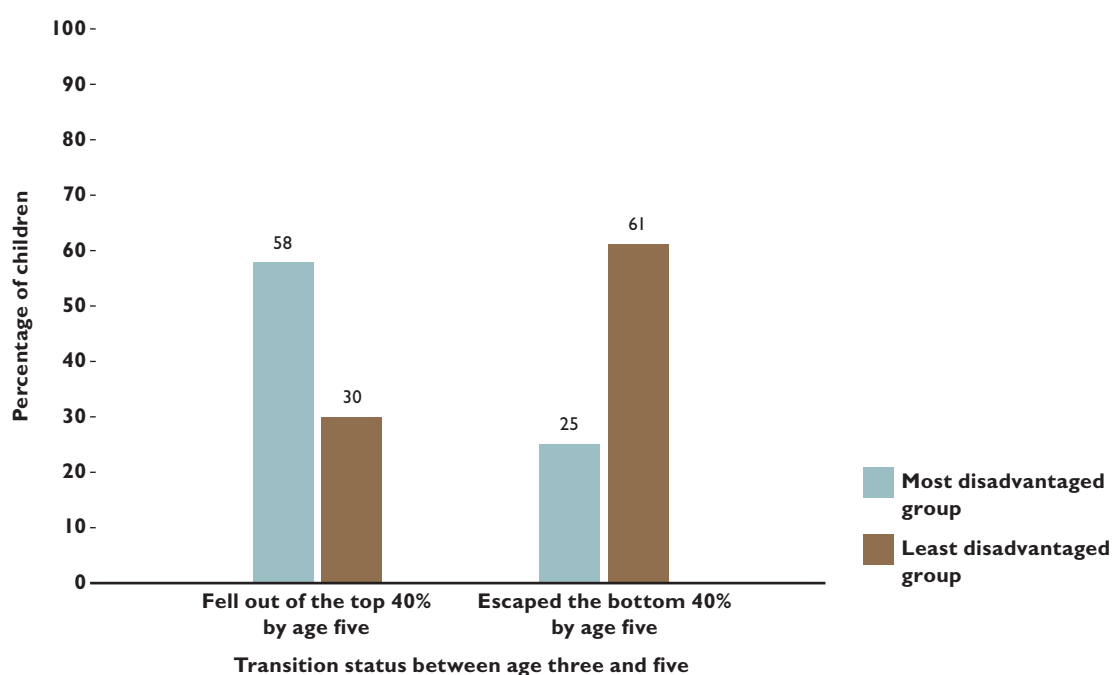
Even more worryingly, if you are a child growing up in poverty with poor language development at age three, you are more likely to continue to

have difficulties and less likely to improve than children from wealthier backgrounds. Figure 1.2 shows that only one in four (25%) children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who scored in the bottom 40% in vocabulary ability at age three escaped the bottom 40% at age five. This is compared to 61% of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds.

The analysis in this section shows that children who experience poverty are much more likely to score below average in vocabulary tests at ages three and five. It also shows that children who experience poverty and have an initially good level of language development at age three are far more likely to fall below the average level by age five than their better-off peers. The poorest children are likely to regress, while the most advantaged children progress.

What is shocking is that these patterns are not new. Research using the 1970 British Cohort Study found that not only was a child growing up in poverty in the 1970s much more likely to be behind their better-off peers in language ability, but even those who had good levels of development at age two were much more likely to fall behind than their comparatively worse-performing but better-off peers (Feinstein 2003).

FIGURE 1.2 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO SCORED IN THE TOP 40% OF VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE THREE WHO FELL OUT OF TOP 40% OF VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE FIVE



Source: Adapted from tables in Dearden et al. 2010.

A GLOBAL ISSUE

Countries across the world are trying to grapple with the challenge that children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk of facing difficulties with the development of their language skills. There is evidence of similar gaps in Canada, Australia, and the USA (Bradbury et al 2012), as well as in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam (Boo 2014).

Researchers have used national surveys in Canada, Australia and the USA to show the same patterns of disadvantage as in the UK between children in

poverty and their better-off peers. Comparative analysis has also shown that the gap between children in poverty and their better-off peers was highest in the USA and the UK and lower in Canada and Australia (Bradbury et al 2012).

While we focus on early language development in Northern Ireland in this report, it is important to recognise that similar patterns of disadvantage exist all over the world, unfairly limiting children's chances in life even before they start school.

THE CHALLENGE OF RISING CHILD POVERTY IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

This chapter has shown that children who grow up in poverty are much more likely to experience language delays than their better-off peers. This evident relationship is why the *Read On. Get On.* campaign focuses on children who are living in poverty. Our campaign goal is made even more challenging in the context of rising child poverty.

One in four children in Northern Ireland is growing up in poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that over the next five years, child poverty levels will increase and, by 2020, 30% of children in Northern Ireland will be living in poverty (IFS 2014).

Without a massive commitment to act to break the link between poverty and children's early development, it is likely that we will see even more children experiencing language delays by 2020.

Many poorer children do well in the early years and at school, and we must continue to have the highest ambitions for all children. But poverty represents a massive obstacle to children's development, making it much harder for them to progress. A two-pronged strategy – tackling the root causes of poverty and also working to close the language development and educational achievement gap – is vital to ensure that every child gets the chance to succeed.

2 WHY IS EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT CRUCIAL FOR LEARNING TO READ?

The goal of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is to ensure that all 11-year-olds in Northern Ireland are reading well by 2025. Ensuring all children achieve a good level of language development by age five is a crucial step to meeting this goal.

In this chapter we show why a good level of language development in the early years is a crucial stepping stone to reading well. The chapter starts by explaining how early language influences the development of children's reading skills in primary school.

We then set out new research commissioned by the *Read On. Get On.* campaign from the UCL Institute of Education. This analysis shows the extent to which children's early language skills affect their later ability to read and understand language and words. We also highlight the existing evidence on the long-term impact of a child's language ability on their social, emotional and other educational outcomes.

HOW DOES LANGUAGE ABILITY INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S READING SKILLS?

Children's language ability affects their learning to read in a variety of ways. Children who have difficulties with phonics (recognising the sounds of words) can struggle to 'decode' and understand printed words (Catts 1989). This is particularly clear among children with specific disabilities or impairments (Stackhouse 2000). Young children who experience difficulties understanding the ways that sentences are structured, the meaning of words or the social use of language have also been shown to have difficulties with reading (Nation & Snowling 1998). Evidence is again particularly clear among children with a specific disability or impairment. Many of these difficulties may require diagnosis by a professional and specialist support to overcome.

Language delays – typically experienced by children who do not have a specific disability or impairment – can create practical difficulties for a child trying to learn to read. A limited vocabulary will make it

harder for a child to progress onto more challenging texts. Poor listening skills can make it more difficult for children to concentrate on longer texts or focus on understanding the meaning of more complex texts. Weak communication skills also make it harder for children to understand the 'social rules' of language and the way in which context gives meaning to words. All of these potential problems may mean that, while children can grasp the basics of reading, they lack the concentration and comprehension skills that are critical for developing confidence, fluency and enjoyment of reading.

A NEW ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND READING SKILLS

Children's experiences in the early years are crucial to their later educational achievement. Children's experience of pre-school and the quality of the home learning environment continue to be strongly associated with their attainment at primary school (Melhuish et al. 2010).

The *Read On. Get On.* campaign commissioned the UCL Institute of Education to analyse the specific impact of children's language skills at age five on their reading and language comprehension skills at ages seven and 11. This new analysis uses nationally representative data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), including tests to assess children's early language skills, reading ability and language comprehension (see figure 2.1). Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the results set out in this chapter are Northern Ireland-specific figures.

To date, MCS surveys have been carried out covering the early years (at nine months and three years old), and the start, middle and end of primary school (ages five, seven and 11). Detailed information is collected on children (such as their cognitive and non-cognitive skills), their family characteristics (such as income and parental education), parents' attitudes and behaviours (such as views on parenting and interactions with their child), and even includes information from teachers and older siblings (for more detailed information, see Appendix 1).

This allows the researchers at the UCL Institute of Education to look at how children's early language skills relate to their ability to read or understand words later in childhood. The analysis we present in the following sections uses a multiple regression model, a statistical technique that accounts for factors such as parents' education, income and the quality of a home learning environment. It assesses

how a child's language ability at age five relates to their reading ability at age seven and understanding of words at age 11, when the effect of all of these other factors is also considered.

The analysis tells us how children who scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five did in reading tests at age seven and language comprehension tests at age 11. Figure 2.2 displays information on the children who scored below average in reading at age seven, broken down by their results in vocabulary tests at age five and also by whether they experienced poverty in their early years.

It shows that:

- Three-fifths (61%) of children who had no experience of poverty and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five also scored below the average level of reading skills at age seven.
- This compares to more than *four-fifths* of children who experienced intermittent poverty (85%) and persistent poverty (82%).

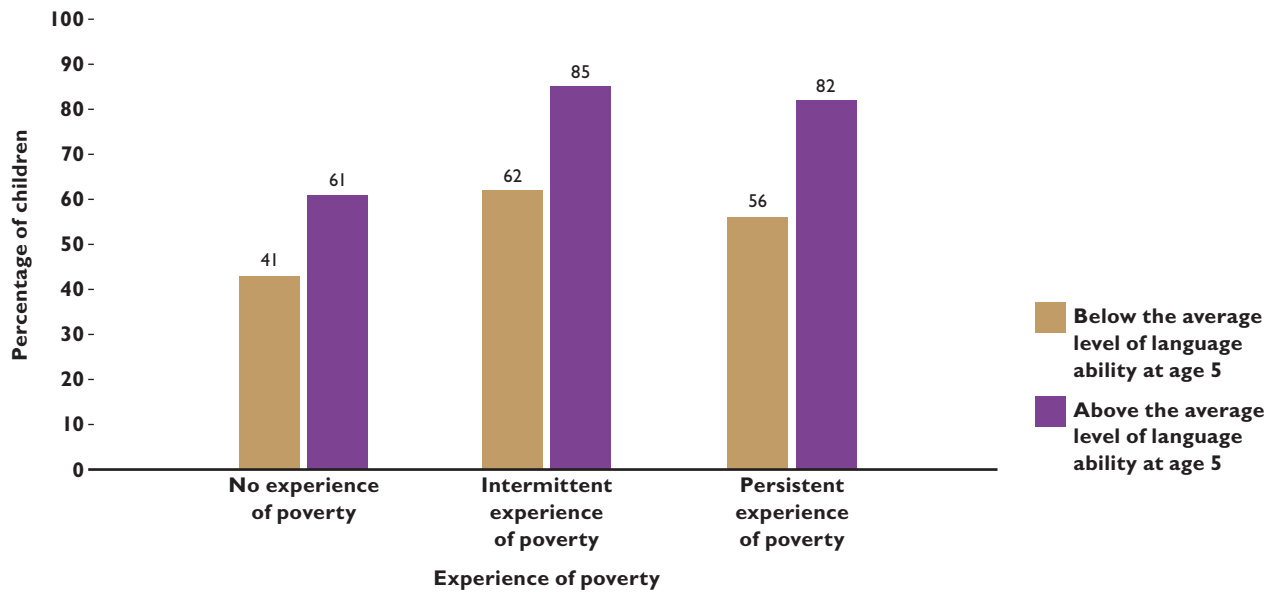
What is most striking is that the proportion of children who had scored *above* the average level of language ability at age five but had experienced intermittent or persistent poverty were almost as likely to score below the average level of reading ability at age seven (56%) as those children who scored below the average level of language ability at age five but had never experienced poverty (61%).

FIGURE 2.1 BRITISH ABILITY SCALES – TESTS OF CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND READING SKILLS IN THE MCS

Test name	Age tested	Description
BAS Naming Vocabulary Test	3 and 5	The child is shown a series of pictures of objects (such as a feather or fountain) and asked to name them – used as a test of children's verbal ability.
BAS Reading Ability Test	7	The child is asked to read a series of words on a card, testing their knowledge of reading.
BAS Verbal Similarities Test	11	The child is read three words and asked to identify how they are similar, testing their verbal reasoning and knowledge.

Source: Adapted from Connelly (2013) and Hansen (2014)

FIGURE 2.2 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BELOW THE AVERAGE LEVEL OF READING ABILITY AT AGE SEVEN BY LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE FIVE AND EARLY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY IN NORTHERN IRELAND

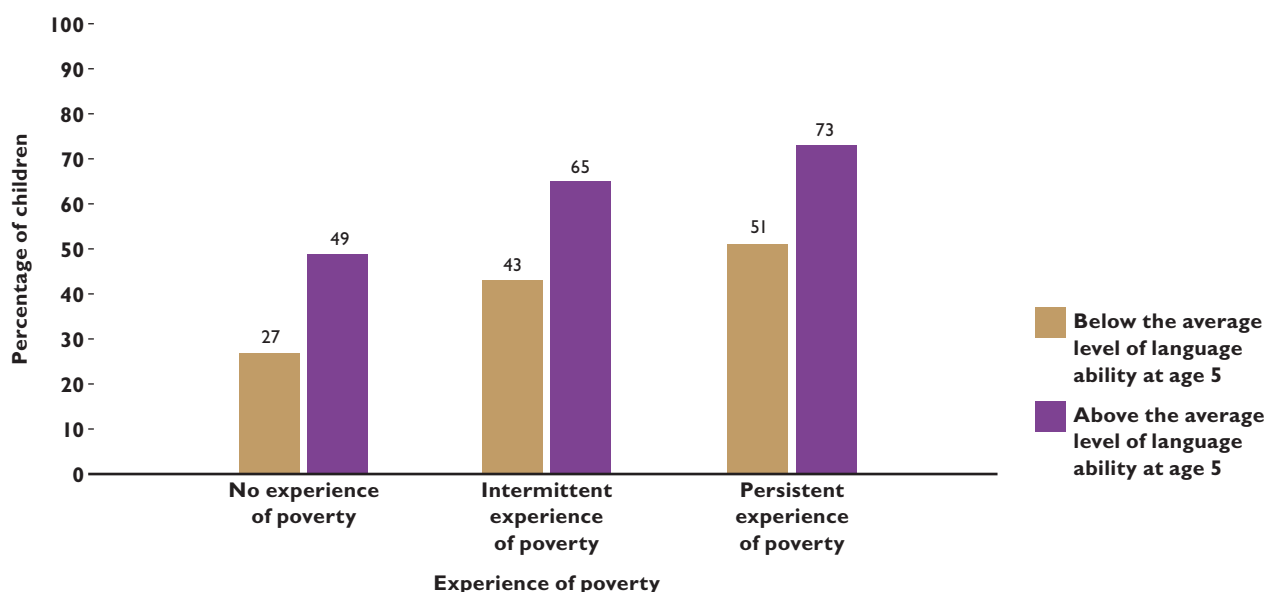


Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 to 4 by UCL Institute of Education

Figure 2.3 shows the same analysis but focuses on language comprehension at age 11. This shows similar patterns as those at seven: children who experienced poverty and had below-average vocabulary scores at age five were much more likely to be below the average level of language comprehension at age 11 than their better-off peers. It also shows

that children who had an above average level of vocabulary ability, but experienced poverty, were almost as likely to score below the average level of comprehension at age 11 as children who had a below average level of vocabulary ability at age five, but had never experienced poverty.

FIGURE 2.3 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BELOW THE AVERAGE LEVEL OF LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION ABILITY AT AGE 11 BY LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE FIVE IN NORTHERN IRELAND



Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 1 and 5 by UCL Institute of Education

The analysis next looks further at these patterns to see how strongly children's vocabulary at age five predicts their reading and language comprehension at ages seven and 11.

The analysis uses a statistical technique called multiple regression analysis. This assesses the strength of association between a child's scores in the British Ability Scales (BAS) Naming Vocabulary Test at age five with their scores in the BAS Reading Ability Test at age seven and in the BAS Verbal Similarities Test at age 11. The BAS has long been established as a leading standardised battery in the UK for assessing a child's cognitive ability and educational achievement across a wide age range.

This analysis takes into account a range of different factors including:

- Language ability at age five
- Experience of poverty throughout childhood
- Gender
- Parental education
- Home learning environment

We particularly focus here on the impact of vocabulary scores at age five and children's experience of poverty. More details of the effect of other factors are included in the full regression tables in Appendix 2.

The analysis of children's vocabulary ability and reading ability finds that a child's vocabulary at age five is strongly associated with their reading ability at age seven, even when family background is taken into account.

This means that when compared to a child who scored above the average level in the vocabulary test at age five, a child who scored below the average level was much less likely to do as well in reading tests at age seven.

The analysis also shows that a child's experience of poverty was strongly associated with their reading ability at age seven. In particular, it shows that children who experienced poverty persistently throughout the early years were much less likely to do as well as other children in reading at age seven, independently of other factors.

Looking at the combined association of children's vocabulary ability at age five and experience of poverty on their scores in reading at age seven, the analysis shows that:

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had above-average scores in vocabulary tests at age five scored, on average, 17% higher than a child who also had above average scores, but had experienced persistent poverty.
- A child who had no experience of poverty and had below average scores at age five scored, on average, 19% higher than a child who also had below average scores but experienced persistent poverty.
- A child who scored above average at age five and had no experience of poverty scored, on average, 38% higher than a child who scored below average at age five and had experienced persistent poverty.

The analysis also assesses how children's language ability at age five is associated with their comprehension of language at age 11.

While this comprehension test does not directly assess a child's ability to read, it does test their comprehension and understanding of language, which, as we have highlighted throughout this report, are crucial skills if a child is going to be able to read well.

Controlling for a range of factors, the analysis finds that children's vocabulary ability at age five is still strongly associated with their comprehension skills at age 11.

This means that a child who had below average scores in vocabulary tests at age five was much less likely to do as well in a test of their comprehension skills, at age 11, as a child who had above average scores at age five.

As with the findings for reading, the analysis shows that a child who experienced poverty persistently is even less likely to do as well in a test of their comprehension skills at age 11 as a child who had never experienced poverty.

When we combine the effect of a child's language ability at age five with their experience of poverty, the analysis shows that:

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had above average scores in vocabulary at age five scored, on average, 8% higher than a child who also had above average scores at age five but who had experienced poverty persistently.
- A child who had no experience of poverty but below average scores in vocabulary at age five scored, on average, 13% higher than a child who also had below average scores at age five but who had experienced poverty persistently.
- A child who had no experience of poverty and above average scores in vocabulary at age five scored, on average, 23% higher than a child who had below average scores at age five and who had experienced poverty persistently.

Finally, the analysis also looks at variations by gender. This analysis presents findings for the UK rather than Northern Ireland, as the sample size becomes too small at a national level when broken down by poverty and gender to remain statistically robust for the regression analysis. However, while these are UK findings, we can be relatively confident that they indicate the situation for boys and girls in Northern Ireland.

When we compare boys to other boys, or girls to other girls, the analysis finds very little variation between the effect of poverty and vocabulary scores on boys' and girls' reading and comprehension ability. For example, the analysis shows that:

- When tested at age seven, girls who had experienced persistent poverty and had below average scores in vocabulary at age five were 35% more likely to be behind their peers who had never experienced poverty and had above average vocabulary scores, compared to 32% of boys
- When tested at age 11, both boys and girls who had experienced persistent poverty and had below average scores in vocabulary ability at age five were 20% more likely to be behind their peers who had never experienced poverty and had above average scores in vocabulary ability

These figures show very little variation between boys and girls on the relationship between poverty and language ability on their reading and comprehension.

THE WIDER BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN OF GOOD LANGUAGE ABILITY IN THE EARLY YEARS

Our interim goal is for all children to achieve a good level of language development at age five to support our overall campaign goal of all children reading well at age 11. The ability to communicate well with others through spoken language is a fundamental part of everyday life. The evidence shows that good language skills not only benefit children's reading, but also have a wide range of positive benefits for children throughout life.

Children's early language development continues to affect their overall education outcomes throughout primary school (Snowling et al 2011). A study in England found that young adults who lacked strong language skills in early childhood run an increased risk of being out of education, employment and training between the ages of 16 and 18 (ICAN 2006). A child's early language ability is also a good indicator of their literacy as adults. Research using data from the 1970 British Cohort Study has shown that children's vocabulary scores at age five are associated with their literacy at age 34 (Schoon et al 2010a).

Research using the 1970 British Cohort Study has also shown that children's language ability is strongly associated with other outcomes. Researchers investigating mental health outcomes at age 34 found that children who have difficulties with language at age five were at higher risk of experiencing mental health problems (Schoon 2010b). Researchers have also found that children with good language ability at age five were more likely to have both higher qualifications and to be in employment in adulthood compared to their peers (Feinstein 2006). This clearly illustrates the powerful impact good language skills have on a wide range of areas of development in children; you need good language to be able to read, but also to interact, develop emotional skills and to learn.

There are many factors throughout a child's life that can affect their educational achievement, their mental health or their employment outcomes. But this evidence shows that helping all children get a good start with language skills is a vital part of improving children's life chances – especially for those growing up in poverty.

3 WHAT INFLUENCES YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

Very young children need support to develop their language skills – long before school and particularly before age three, when their development is most critical. This chapter sets out the key influences on children's language development in the years before they start school, focusing on the crucial role of parents and the impact of poverty. Whenever we refer to parents throughout this report, we are also referring to carers and/or those in a parenting role.

Strong language skills develop best when children experience nurturing, stimulating, language-rich environments both at home and in the wider community. Simple activities such as reading, talking and playing make all the difference. These experiences can help to shield children from the impact of poverty and have the potential to help transform their chances in life. But parents struggling on a low income often find it much harder to offer these experiences, and may need extra support.

For a child, the most important and intensive relationship in the first few years of life is with their parents or primary carers. Children's lives also include relatives, siblings, peers, doctors, health visitors, early learning and childcare staff, and a myriad of other people they come into contact with. All of these relationships take place in different environments: on the street, in the park, in the doctor's office, with childminders, in playgroups, and many other places. The most important environment is the home.

A child's language skills develop through interacting with all of the people they come into contact with and in the environments in which these interactions take place. Of particular importance are nurturing and stable relationships with adult carers (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). In this chapter, we examine the key influences on

children's language development up to the age of five, focusing on:

- the importance of children's prior ability in determining their language skills – highlighting the importance of supporting children's language development from birth
- the crucial role of parents – showing that it is what parents do with their children that really matters
- the impact of poverty – demonstrating that poverty makes it harder for parents to support their child's early learning, highlighting the need for high-quality family services
- the role of early education – outlining the role of high-quality pre-school education in complementing the influence of parents, especially for the poorest children.

GENES AND INNATE ABILITY

Genetic factors and a child's innate ability can have a significant influence on the language development of some children, but rarely will they entirely determine a child's language skills.

For all children, even those with the most serious disabilities, language skills are shaped by both inherited and environmental factors. Language skills are the product of ongoing interactions between

children's early experiences and innate abilities throughout their early years (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). While a child's innate ability may influence certain aspects of their language development, where this is potentially negative it can be ameliorated through positive parenting or high-quality early education (Heckman 2011).

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIOR ABILITY

One of the biggest influences on children's language skills at the age of five is their language skills at earlier ages (Dearden et al 2011). This demonstrates the vital importance of acting early – to support children's early language development, to identify problems and to ensure children who need extra support get the right help. Waiting until a child turns four and starts school is leaving it too late.

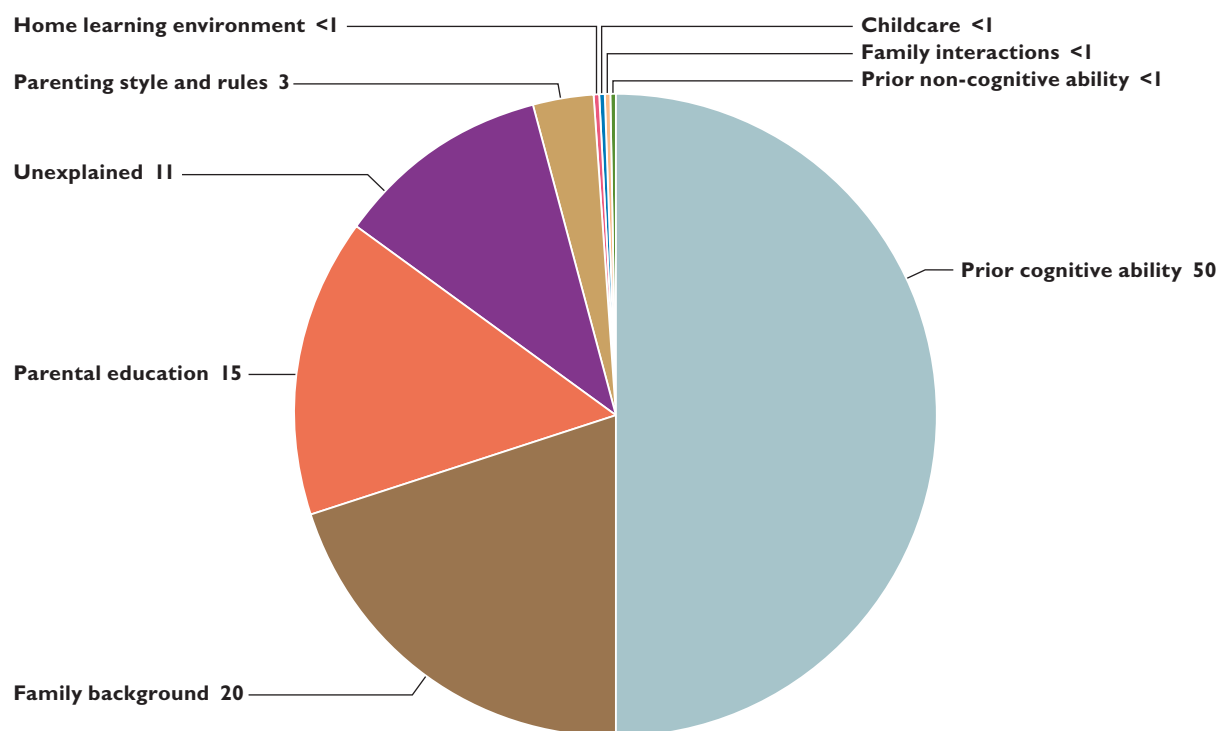
In fact, waiting until a child starts pre-school education at age three is too late to start focusing on children's language skills. Babies are born ready to learn language and need stimulation and encouragement to develop their language and communication skills from birth. Talking, reading, playing and singing with even the youngest child can have a huge impact on their early language development, and therefore on their ability to learn when they enter pre-school education and then primary school.

If we compare figure 3.1 with figure 3.2, we can see the relative importance of different drivers of early language once prior ability is stripped out.

About 40% of the difference in language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest families is explained by structural factors, such as family background, parents' education and the mother's age at birth. Some of these structural factors are very difficult or impossible to change; this analysis highlights the importance of tackling the root causes of child poverty in order to improve children's early learning.

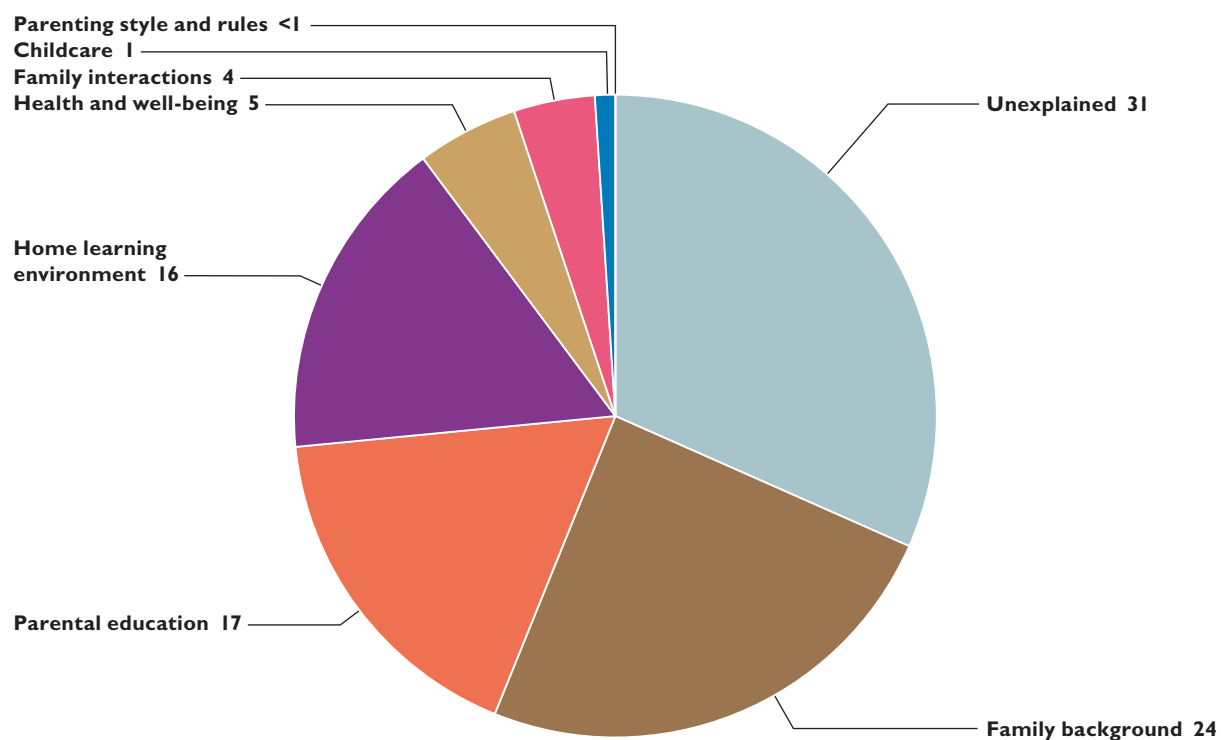
However, figure 3.2 shows that around one quarter of the difference in language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest families is accounted for by differences in parents' behaviour, health, the home learning environment and attendance at childcare. Alongside tackling the root causes of poverty, this is where policy-makers and professionals can have the biggest impact on young children's life chances. In the rest of this chapter, we set out how these factors affect young children's learning – highlighting the implications for policy-makers, professionals and parents.

FIGURE 3.1 INFLUENCES ON LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE FIVE (%)



Source: Adapted from tables in Dearden et al. 2010.

FIGURE 3.2: INFLUENCES ON LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE THREE (%)



Source: Adapted from tables in Dearden et al. 2010.

THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF PARENTS, CARERS AND THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The strongest influence on the language skills of young children (beyond their prior ability) is their parents or carers. This influence operates in two ways:

1. Indirectly, through the everyday behaviour of parents and carers – the way that key adults interact with a child, such as how often they talk with a child or how they set boundaries on a child's behaviour
2. Directly, through the home learning environment – the engagement of parents in their child's early learning and the quality of learning opportunities in the home, including access to toys and books.

Parents' behaviour and the home learning environment are particularly important influences on the youngest children, who are not yet attending formal pre-school education.

PARENTING STYLES AND BEHAVIOUR

The relationship between a parent or carer and a young child is one of the most important influences on early language development. When children have secure relationships with the adults in their lives, they are more likely to develop good language and communication skills. A strong, affective attachment with a parent or carer gives young children the confidence and motivation to explore the world around them – including the use of language (van Ijzendoorn et al 2006).

The first few years of a child's life are incredibly important for laying the foundations of their future learning. A child's brain doubles in size in the first year and, by age three, it has reached around 80% of its adult volume (Rakic 2006). The way that children's brains develop in these first few years, including their capacity for language, is strongly influenced by the strength of attachment between parent and child (Field 2010). The strength of this attachment is crucial – the 'serve and return' interaction between a parent and baby (ie, the back and forth exchange of facial expressions, gestures, babbling, etc.) builds and strengthens a child's brain architecture and nurtures a child's development in stable relationships (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). Growing up without a secure attachment can have devastating long-term impacts on a child's life. Growing up with an insecure attachment can affect

not only a child's language development, but also his or her later physical and mental health, behaviour and education and employment prospects (APPG 2015).

The way in which a parent uses language around their young child can also have a major influence on their child's language skills. For example, it can have a significant impact on the size of a child's vocabulary and their understanding of grammar (Huttenlocher et al 1991, Naigles and Hoff-Ginsberg 1998). The use of positive and encouraging language can give children the confidence to engage in conversations and to try out new words or phrases (Hart and Risley 1995). Asking open questions and leaving time for children to think and respond can encourage children to experiment with ways of expressing themselves. In contrast, excessive use of negative language, closed questions or short instructions can limit children's confidence in developing more complex language skills.

Similarly, providing children with the opportunity for play promotes opportunities for children to develop language and become literate. Play supports the development of creativity, imagination, self-confidence and self-efficacy, as well as social, cognitive and emotional strength and skills. The key characteristics of play – defined as any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves and taking place whenever and wherever opportunities arise – are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity (CRC/C/GC/17). Play supports language and literacy development in many ways – for example, the language demands of pretend play appear to prepare the way for the language skills needed in reading and learning to read (Christie & Roskos 2015).

THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As well as the direct influence of parents' behaviour, parents have a major role in creating the home learning environment for very young children. There is no fixed recipe for creating a positive home learning environment, but typical ingredients include:

- reading regularly with a child
- playing with a child
- helping a child to read letters or numbers
- teaching a child songs, poems or nursery rhymes
- helping a child to paint, draw or engage in other craft activities
- having access to a range of books and toys
- taking trips to the public library.

The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) study highlighted the powerful influence of the home learning environment on children's early learning (Melhuish et al 2010). The study, alongside its sister study undertaken in England (EPPE), demonstrated that young children made stronger progress in their early language development compared to their peers when parents read to them every day, regularly took them to a library, or encouraged them to learn songs and nursery rhymes. Conversely, children made weaker progress if they spent long periods playing with other children their own age – interactions with adults, as well as peer interaction, were crucial for stimulating children's language development (Sammons et al 2002).

Several studies from the USA add further weight to the importance of the home learning environment for the youngest children. Rodriguez et al (2009) found that children's experience of language and literacy activities from just 14 months old had a measurable impact on their language ability at age three. They also found that each aspect of early language activities made a unique contribution, including the frequency of a child's participation in an activity, the quality of parents' engagement with their child, and the availability of physical resources. This suggests that different activities, put in place from a very early age, reinforce one another over time to boost children's early language skills.

Early education can also play an important role (which is explored in more detail later in this chapter) in supporting parents and carers, bridging the gap between the home and early years settings.

However, although starting as early as possible is important, studies also show that changes to the home learning environment can have an impact on children's early learning, even if introduced after the first year or two (Son and Morrison 2010). This means that it is never too late for parents to start engaging more with their child's learning.

Importantly, researchers have demonstrated that the influence of the home learning environment operates independently of a family's income or social class, to some extent (Sammons et al 2002, Roulstone et al 2010). In fact, a good home learning environment was found to be more important in determining how well young children's language developed than social class or parents' education (Melhuish et al 2010). This suggests that a positive home learning environment has the potential to help children overcome some of the disadvantages of growing up in poverty. However, as we set out in the next section, some parents struggling on a low income can find it harder to offer the same level of engagement in their child's early learning as better-off parents.

WHAT PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

It is crucial that every adult in a child's life understands that, by taking the time to talk to or listen to children, they're contributing to their early language development. Simple actions such as reading, singing, playing and talking with young children can make all the difference – particularly for children living in poverty.

Baby talk: Using an animated, high-pitched and exaggerated voice when talking to very young children can help them learn words faster, by stressing vowels and important syllables. Research shows that the style of speech can have as important an impact on young children's language development as the volume of words they hear (Hart & Risley 1995).

Letter naming: Learning the sounds that different letters make helps children to understand how words work (Bond and Dyksta 1967). Playing games to recognise letters and giving children explicit instructions for how to spot letters in the alphabet are all activities that can improve children's letter naming abilities before they start school.

Conversation: Two-way dialogue, where an adult gives a child undivided attention, gives young children the confidence to talk, respond and ask or answer questions. One-to-one communication between adult and child appears to speed up language development compared to group discussion, when children are very young. Shared reading facilitates this kind of interaction (Burnet, Daniels and Bailey 2014).

Play, songs and games: Songs, rhymes and simple word games can help young children break down sounds and words, and understand patterns of language (Modean, Bryant and Bralley 1987). Play can help prompt children's use of words to communicate and explore ideas (O'Brien and Nagle 1987).

Storytelling and interactive reading: Regularly reading with young children is vital for developing both their reading and language skills. Regular reading to very young children helps them learn how to say words out loud and then to build their vocabulary (Bus et al 1995). Interactive reading and storytelling can encourage children to discuss what they have read or heard and then use this information to help them predict what might happen next (Sénéchal et al 1995). Programmes like Rhythm and Rhyme can support parents to share books in an interactive way so that children get the most out of reading.

A rich knowledge of the world, from conversations, books and television: For children over the age of two, watching high-quality, age-appropriate children's television can support their language development. But long hours in front of general programmes could be detrimental, because there are few opportunities for meaningful interaction (NLT 2004). One particular study demonstrated that the amount of time television (adult and child programmes) was on in the home when child was under two predicted achievement at school entry – as the amount of television time increased, the child's score at school entry decreased (Roulstone et al 2011).

Digital technology: Over 90% of children aged three to five have access to touchscreen technology at home, according to recent research from the National Literacy Trust in partnership with Pearson (Formby 2014). Technology can support children's early learning – for example, through interactive games and apps that build vocabulary or comprehension. More research is needed to understand how access to digital technology is shaping young children's language development and how it can best be harnessed to support children's learning (Levy et al 2014).

THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The evidence is clear that parents play a pivotal role in relation to their child's early development. However, poverty can have a huge impact on children's early development by influencing what parents do and how they do it.

It is well established that poverty affects children's learning independently of other influences, and primarily through two routes (Cooper and Stewart 2013). First, and probably most importantly, struggling on a low income creates stress and anxiety, and often leaves parents feeling frustrated, isolated, helpless and depressed (Magnusson and Duncan 2002). This can make it harder for parents to show consistently positive behaviour and to stay engaged with their children's learning. For example, excessive stress and anxiety may lead to parents responding to their children in a critical or punitive way, which can shut down children's attempts to experiment with language (Webster-Stratton 1990).

Experiencing poverty is also associated with a higher risk of mental ill health. Depression among mothers is linked to poorer cognitive development among young children (Lucchese et al 2007). Depression may reduce a parent's sensitivity to their child's early language needs and significantly reduce the capacity of a parent to get involved in early learning activities with their child.

Second, getting by on a low income can also limit the material resources available to parents to support their children's early learning – such as books or toys. Children from low-income families are less likely to have access to age-appropriate books or toys than their better-off peers. Families may also struggle to afford new experiences like visits to the zoo or museum, which can be excellent opportunities to encourage young children to explore new words and conversations (Roseberry-McKibbin 2001).

Higher levels of stress and lack of access to material resources may be compounded by differences in the ability of parents to access information about how best to support their child's early learning.

Parents in the most deprived neighbourhoods are much less likely to seek information about play and learning activities from a wide range of individuals and organisations, compared to parents living in better-off neighbourhoods (Huskinson et al 2014). In particular, parents living in deprived neighbourhoods are more likely to rely on friends and family, whereas better-off parents are more likely to turn to professionals and local services for advice.

Differences in access to information may mean that some low-income parents lack all the support they need to do the best for their child from an early age. For example, one study found that mothers from low-income backgrounds are less likely than their better-off peers to be aware of the importance of regularly talking to their baby. Though they are less likely to seek support, when asked, parents from low-income backgrounds are more likely to say that they need more information and advice about how best to support their child's early learning (Hunt et al 2011).

Some research has indicated that there are only small differences in the use of language-based activities – such as singing songs and telling stories – between parents living in poverty and those not in poverty (Hartas 2011). However, the research demonstrated relatively *large* differences around reading to young children – which may suggest a particularly important role for regular reading.

Nevertheless, this research suggests that parents living in poverty typically do at least some of the same learning activities with their children as better-off parents – but their children are still more likely to experience language delay. This may be because the impact of differences in parenting styles and behaviour (beyond engagement in specific early learning activities) is large and has a big influence on children growing up in poverty. There may also be complex aspects of parents' behaviour or the home learning environment that academic studies cannot account for. But this evidence could also imply that poverty influences children's early language development independently from its impact on parents' behaviour and the home learning environment – in ways that we don't fully understand. More research would be useful to understand the precise mechanisms at play here.

Independent of family income, parents' education also has a large impact on children's early language development, which poses an extra challenge for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Analysis of data from the MCS finds that a fifth of the difference in early language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest households can be explained by differences in parents' education (Dearden et al 2011). A child who has a parent with a university degree is much more likely to have a good standard of language development by the age of five than a child whose parents have lower-level qualifications (Cullis and Hansen 2008).

The impact of parents' education often occurs through the quality of the home learning environment. For example, a child with a parent with a university degree is more likely to have access to books, computers or musical instruments, which can in turn stimulate early language development (Carneiro et al 2012). Parents with particularly low levels of formal education may struggle with language or literacy themselves, which could undermine their confidence in supporting their own child's language development, both through being less likely to be able to access services and physical resources and being less able to model the language and communication skills from which children can learn.

BOOKSTART: A VITAL PART OF GOOD EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Between 1999 and 2015, the Bookstart scheme encouraged parents to read more to their children and worked to embed a love of books and reading at the earliest stage possible.

Under the scheme, every baby and pre-school child in Northern Ireland received a Bookstart pack containing two books and tips for parents on sharing stories with children. Approximately 50,000 packs – a total of 100,000 books – were gifted annually through the programme, managed by the charity Book Trust. For many families, the Bookstart pack introduced the first baby books into the home and served as crucial early encouragement for parents to read with their child.

As set out in *Healthy Child, Healthy Future*, Northern Ireland's universal public health programme for children, parents were presented with their Bookstart pack in their baby's first year, usually by the health visitor at the six-to-nine-month check. The health visitor used the pack as

a basis for discussing with parents the importance of stories, rhymes and songs in nurturing a child's language development.

Families received a second pack – the Bookstart Treasure Pack – from their playgroup or other early years setting when their child was three to four years old. The optimum delivery of these packs included pre-school practitioners inviting parents into a setting and modelling good reading practice for parents. Research undertaken by Queen's University Belfast on the Bookstart Treasure programme revealed strong feedback from practitioners that the intervention was having a positive effect on a wide range of family reading outcomes: 86.4% of pre-school staff thought the programme helped promote equality of access to reading. Parents with lower levels of education reported enjoying and using the packs more than those with higher levels of education (O'Hare and Connolly, 2015).

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND OTHER EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Throughout this chapter we have focused mainly on the influence that parents and the home learning environment have on children's language development. However, parents do not operate in a vacuum, and often rely on support and information from a host of early years services.

There is substantial evidence from the UK and internationally showing that early years education and childcare can have a positive impact on children's vocabulary and literacy development, particularly for children from low-income families and for boys (Havnes and Mogstad 2009, Sylva et al 2010, Felfe and Lalive 2013). But these benefits are only present if early education and childcare are of good quality.

Strong evidence on the benefits of good-quality pre-school education comes from the EPPNI study, which has tracked the progress of more than 800 children in Northern Ireland since the late 1990s (Melhuish et al 2006). For children aged three and five, attending a good-quality full- or part-time pre-school was substantially beneficial for both cognitive and behavioural achievement. Full-time care had no more positive effects than part-time care. The latest evidence from the study's sister-project in England shows that attending a high-quality pre-school setting can have positive educational benefits that last through to secondary school, compared with children who do not attend any early years setting at all (Sylva et al 2014).

International evidence also shows the importance of providing high-quality experiences in both pre-school education and childcare for children's long-term development. Research in Germany has found that childcare attendance was particularly beneficial for boys, children from disadvantaged backgrounds and children with low birth-weights

(Felfe and Lalive 2013); research from Norway showed that attendance at good-quality early education and childcare settings had long-lasting positive effects on children's educational attainment and labour market participation (Havnes and Mogstad 2009).

The relationship between graduate-led pre-school education, high-quality provision and children's language development is compelling and comes from several studies. Evidence has shown that those professionals with higher levels of qualifications are better able to create a high-quality learning environment. It is this environment that makes the biggest difference for children. Professionals with these skills know to create an environment where children are involved and stimulated, and where they interact positively with staff and other children; an environment that fully integrates care and education and uses scaffolding strategies (OECD 2012).

Most of the evidence about the impact of services on children's early language development relates to formal pre-school education. However, there is little evidence on the impact of early learning and childcare for children under three. The evidence that does exist shows mixed results and is inconclusive (Siraj 2015). There is also comparatively little evidence about the impact of other early years services, such as health services, on young children's language. This is likely to be because these services are not designed primarily to support children's early language development, so this impact is rarely monitored or tested.

In the following chapter, we argue that wider early years services have the potential for considerable impact on children's early language skills – especially in supporting parents to engage more actively in their child's early learning. The biggest impact could be for the youngest children, especially those living in poverty.

4 WHAT SUPPORT DO PARENTS AND CHILDREN CURRENTLY RECEIVE?

When children are young, there are a number of different factors that influence their language development, including their parents, their home and community environment, and the services that they and their parents come into contact with.

As identified in chapter 3, a major influence on children in the early years and throughout their lives are their parents and carers. However, we also need to understand the role services can play in supporting parents and helping foster and develop children's language skills.

The right support from good-quality education, services and programmes in the early years can help parents to have the resources and information they need to help their children develop good language ability. This chapter considers how children's early language development in Northern Ireland is supported by early years services. It looks at the progress that has been made, and at the remaining challenges in the service landscape, to ensure all children in Northern Ireland are able to develop good language skills in their early years.

EARLY YEARS SERVICES: FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL

In order to understand how early years services might strengthen support for children's language development, we need to understand what services are on offer to parents and children – especially for children at risk of or experiencing poverty. There are different levels of services on offer to children in Northern Ireland:

- **Universal (or core) services:** these services are provided to all children and seek to support language-rich environments that promote all

children's language development. Examples include health visiting and pre-school provision. As part of universal support, children's language development may be monitored to ensure appropriate levels of progress. Where children are not achieving the expected level, this is addressed through targeted interventions and may include referral to targeted and specialist services.

- **Targeted (or additional) services:** targeted support is provided to children who are at risk of not achieving expected levels of progress in the development of their communication skills. In Northern Ireland, the Sure Start programme is targeted at children growing up in the 20–25% of wards identified as the most disadvantaged. Children requiring relatively straightforward interventions or opportunities to practise and consolidate skills have targeted support delivered by early years practitioners and parents, guided by speech and language therapy services. Where appropriate, speech and language therapists often provide specialist assessment, advice and written strategies to support children's language development.
- **Specialist services:** children who have severe and complex needs over and above those that can be met via universal and targeted provision receive specialist support. This includes additional highly personalised interventions delivered as appropriate to meet the needs of each child. As part of this, specialist advice and training are provided by speech and language therapists to early years practitioners and parents on

specific areas of language development, and may include the use of alternative and augmentative communication systems where a child's language skills are limited.

In the rest of this chapter, we set out the broad pattern of services typically available to families with young children that have a key role in early language development. We highlight recent developments and provide some analysis of progress and remaining challenges.

PUBLIC HEALTH, INCLUDING HEALTH VISITING

Public health services play a major role in supporting and reviewing young children's development. Key services include midwives and health visitors. Health visitors take over responsibility for a child's care from a midwife approximately ten days after birth and provide key support for children and families in a child's early years. They are often the main source of support and engagement with public services that families with very young children have. They work with parents to review children's progress and provide support in key areas such as children's early language development, including referring families to specialist services where needed.

Health visitors' assessments are a crucial component of ensuring all children are progressing with their speech and language development. Under *Healthy Child, Healthy Future*, training is provided for health visitors in the identification of speech and language difficulties. Health visitors conduct reviews of children's development at key stages, providing an opportunity for every child's language development to be checked, and for professionals to identify problems early and refer families to appropriate support. Under the current universal health programme, speech and language development should be checked at age one, and again when a child is between two and two and a half years old.

Healthy Child, Healthy Futures suggests visits should take place in the home – thus providing an ideal opportunity for the health visitor to engage parents in their child's early language development, while also assessing and influencing the child's home environment. However, a shortage of trained health visitors in certain Health and Social Care Trusts has

resulted in the pivotal check between two and two and a half frequently taking place several months late, and often in a location other than the home – for example, in a GP's clinic. Delays in the provision of this check can result in a missed opportunity to identify and tackle issues with a child's language development at the earliest possible opportunity, losing valuable time. Moreover, undertaking the check outside the home environment runs the risk of reducing the health visitor's ability to positively impact on a child's learning experiences in the home.

The Review of Health Visiting and School Nursing identified the need to increase the capacity of the existing workforce in order to meet increased demand (DHSSPS 2009), and a recent increase in the numbers of health visitors undergoing training means that service provision is expected to stabilise. However, it is important to recognise the need to continuously *improve* on the provision of this vital service. The appropriate training and provision of health visitors must be prioritised to ensure that every family, particularly those experiencing poverty, has access to checks at the appropriate stage and in the home environment.

Health visitors play a critically important early intervention and prevention role. They do this through their role as a point of entry for families to the whole public health system; in screening early in cases of any developmental delay and in supporting families in understanding the normal development of young children. It is critical that we invest in the core universal services that provide support to all children and families. It is imperative that these services are adequately funded, planned and rolled-out across Northern Ireland, ensuring that this key support for families is maximised.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) are vital in the design and delivery of early years services aimed at optimising all children's speech, language and communication development. Services operate at all three levels – universal, targeted and specialist – and are delivered to young children and their parents in a variety of settings. At the universal level, SLTs provide training and support to parents, carers and the early years workforce (including prenatal and antenatal support) on early language

and communication development: how to spot when a child (and/or parent) might have a speech, language or communication need and when to refer a child for specialist support. Providing this kind of early intervention support can prevent difficulties with speech, language and communication from developing.

Speech and language therapists also assess, diagnose and develop programmes of targeted support, to provide 'enhanced' environments to better support and stimulate children's language development. A significant focus for SLTs is the provision of support for babies and young children born with medical conditions who require extra support with speech and language. For example, SLTs often provide communication support for babies with hearing impairment, cleft lip and palate and learning disabilities. Pregnant women and young children are often referred to an SLT by their health visitor or GP. Any parent can contact the speech and language therapy service if they are concerned about their child's speech and language development, though for children with less acute difficulties, the minimum age limit for referral is 18 months.

The delivery of this valuable service is variable across the five Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. Depending on where they live, a parent can find themselves faced with a long waiting list for their child to see an SLT. Varied means of access in each Trust can make it difficult for parents to understand what support is available to them and how to access that support. This complexity can serve as a barrier for parents wishing to access support for their children's early language development.

Once a child has been identified as having a specific speech or language need, SLTs provide tailored specialist support to young children with severe and complex speech, language and communication needs. They design personalised strategies to help meet the communication needs of each child and, where appropriate, provide children with additional tools to help them communicate. Strategies may focus on developing parent-child interaction, vocabulary and sentence development (using spoken language or augmentative communication aids), or speech sound difficulties and fluency.

Speech and language therapists are also involved in supporting early interventions for children in the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland through

the Sure Start programme, providing support to vulnerable families and working to promote good parent-child interactions.

SURE START

The Sure Start programme is aimed at addressing the needs of children in socially deprived communities across Northern Ireland. Learning to Learn, the Department of Education's Early Years Framework, acknowledges the importance of pre-school experiences for social, emotional and cognitive development and later success at school, and notes that Sure Start is an important element of the strategy (DE 2012).

The Sure Start programme is universally available to families with children aged up to four living in the 20% most disadvantaged wards, with expansion currently underway to reach the 25% most disadvantaged. It is of concern that this welcome expansion is taking place at a time when Sure Start funding is being reduced by £1 million (Northern Ireland Executive, Budget 2015–16). Families are made aware of Sure Start services in their area through health professionals such as midwives, health visitors and GPs. Sure Start services include:

- antenatal and postnatal support
- family support and parenting programmes
- speech, language and communication services
- the Developmental Programme for 2–3 Year Olds.

Speech and language therapists work through Sure Start to promote children's communication skills by providing support to families and other professionals in their own community. They provide training, deliver and support programmes, and design specific programmes for children with additional needs. Any Sure Start staff member who has a concern about a child's language development can refer a child to the Sure Start SLT.

A key aspect of Sure Start provision in relation to speech, language and communication is the Developmental Programme for 2–3 Year Olds. This programme was developed in response to research findings that children from disadvantaged areas benefited from high-quality pre-school education and care. This programme places emphasis on parental involvement and includes home visits, workshops for parents and speech and language assessment made

by SLTs and Sure Start staff. It is currently delivered to over 1,702 children in 38 of the 39 Sure Start projects across Northern Ireland and is heavily over-subscribed.

Previous funding arrangements for professional staff input into Sure Start projects resulted in inconsistencies in access to speech and language services in different Sure Start areas. The Department of Education, the Public Health Agency and the Health and Social Care Board recently completed a review of speech and language services within Sure Start and designed a new model for delivery. The new model – involving direct commissioning of therapists from the Trusts – seeks to reduce inequalities in the provision of speech and language therapy in Sure Start projects. Initial implementation of the model began in 2015, but progress has been slow, and at the time of writing a number of Sure Start projects are without a speech and language therapist while awaiting recruitment by the Trusts.

Under the plans, all Sure Start staff will complete a universal training programme on children's speech, language and communication needs and the links with all other areas of child development. Key staff will complete more advanced training and at least one staff member in each project will be trained to become a speech and language therapy assistant. Ensuring that Sure Start projects have ring-fenced training budgets will allow centres to implement this ambitious plan to best effect.

Qualitative evidence and case studies gathered by Sure Start staff demonstrate positive change in relation to parents' approaches to children's learning and also to changes in children's development, confidence and communication skills. The independent review of the Sure Start programme commissioned by the Department of Education highlighted that the speech and language support provided by Sure Start projects is having a significant impact in terms of early identification of support needs (DE 2015). The majority of the 50 schools and pre-schools interviewed as part of the review asserted that Sure Start had a considerable impact on children's language development, especially those who took part in the Developmental Programme for 2–3 Year Olds.

Measuring progress in children's development, in language as well as in their social, emotional and

cognitive development, is crucial to demonstrating the impact and value of the Sure Start programme. To date, there has been no consistent collection of data or evidence on outcomes for children across Sure Start projects, though an outcomes framework has recently been developed. This would be a valuable area for further research.

Many families in need live outside the designated Sure Start areas, and children are losing out as a result. Indeed, children can be living in poverty just one street beyond the designated area and be rendered ineligible for accessing pivotal Sure Start services. Children growing up in poverty outside the most disadvantaged wards are at risk of 'invisibility': going undetected by services and not receiving the support they need to thrive.

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

Access to good-quality early years education has been shown to be one important route through which young children's early language development can be strengthened.

Learning to Learn explicitly recognises the distinctive contribution of high-quality pre-school education in helping to reduce underachievement throughout education, especially in literacy. Under the framework, the government is committed to providing a minimum of 12.5 hours a week of funded pre-school education, for 38 weeks of the year. The Pre School Education Programme is open to all children in the year immediately before they begin compulsory education at age four.

The Department of Education, through the Pre-School Expansion Programme (PSEP), has focused on expanding the provision of funded pre-school places, and the number of funded places has grown considerably in recent years. Approximately 91% of three year olds in Northern Ireland attended funded pre-school education in 2014/2015. The accessibility of funded places is subject to some criticism, with reports of parents being offered a place for their child at a considerable distance from their home, making it difficult, and sometimes impossible, for some parents to take up the place they are offered. Though priority for placement is given to children whose parents are in receipt of key benefits, accessibility remains a particular problem for families on a low income, with transport costs

and logistics presenting a major obstacle. This problem is compounded for families living in rural areas, where public transport is limited.

Pre-school places are currently evenly spread across statutory provision – nursery schools or nursery units attached to a primary school, led by a teacher – and voluntary and private sector provision. The focus on expanding the number of pre-school places under PSEP has resulted in new voluntary and private settings entering the programme every year. The mixture of statutory and private/voluntary sector provision has led to unequal funding levels across types of provision, as well as to different requirements around staff qualifications, staff to child ratios and types of inspection.

Free pre-school education can have a significant impact on children's outcomes, especially for our poorest children, but only if it is of good quality. The provision of high-quality pre-school education depends on a highly qualified, valued and respected workforce, with children's outcomes strongly linked to staff qualifications and training.

While inspections indicate that the overall quality of provision across all sectors is increasing, the latest report by the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate states that quality continues to be consistently higher in statutory settings. According to the Chief Inspector, the “majority of leaders within the private and voluntary settings inspected did not have qualifications at a high enough level to provide them with the specific skills required for strategic leadership and management” (ETI 2014). Under the Minimum Standards for Day Care and Childminding for Children Under Age 12, the leader of a voluntary or private pre-school setting must possess a QCF level 5 qualification, equivalent to a foundation degree, or be in the process of completing this qualification by April 2016.

Leaders are also required to arrange support from a teacher or a suitably qualified Early Years Specialist (EYS) as set out in the Department of Education's guidelines – holding, for example, a degree in early childhood studies. The specialist role is valued by early years staff, particularly for the provision of up-to-date information, guidance and staff training, including in areas such as speech and language development. However, the current structure is not optimised to consistently support high-quality provision in settings. The recent review of the role

by the Education and Training Inspectorate cited the high turnover of both pre-school staff and EYSs, and the heavy workload of the specialists, as particular issues in this regard. The average ratio is one EYS to 11 pre-school settings and, as a result, the trend is now to bring staff from different settings together for training, etc., rather than to hold monthly on-site visits as set out in the original guidance. While the latter set-up may serve to provide adequate support for centres with longstanding experience in delivering pre-school, staff in new centres would greatly benefit from on-site visits and more focused support from the EYS. There is an urgent need for the Department of Education guidance on this role to be updated.

The introduction of the current minimum qualification standards was a significant progression – prior to 2012, leaders were only required to hold a level 3 qualification. However, if we are to be ambitious about the delivery of pre-school education, the drive to increase standards across *all* types of setting, including statutory, must continue. We recommend that the Northern Ireland Executive continue to be ambitious for leadership and quality improvement within pre-school settings, and increase standards to ensure all settings are led by a graduate with expertise in early childhood studies (that is, equivalent to QCF Level 6). Raising these minimum standards and upskilling the current workforce will require robust investment from government.

Strong leadership will need to be supported by a skilled and valued workforce. There is currently a wide variation in the qualification levels of pre-school staff in Northern Ireland. Under the Minimum Standards for Day Care and Childminding for Children Under Age 12, at least 50% of all staff in early years settings (including those delivering pre-school education) should have a minimum level qualification at QCF Level 2 Diploma – equivalent to GCSE level. Other staff “should be in the process of gaining this qualification within a reasonable time” (DHSSPS 2012). There are no available records showing the percentage of staff who have achieved this standard.

An evaluation of children's language development in funded pre-school settings undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate across all types of setting determined that there are “too few opportunities in most settings for children to develop their learning through music-making, singing, rhyme and rhythm”. These are all recognised as “pre-requisite skills for the early development of

literacy and language”. Quality was found to be consistently higher in nursery schools – with 53% recorded as outstanding in relation to the promotion of language and communication – than in voluntary or private sector settings, of which 12.5% were evaluated as outstanding in this area (ETI 2011).

Opportunities for staff to access ongoing professional development, in particular around the enhancement of children’s language and communication skills, were found to be “very variable” (ETI 2011). Reported barriers to satisfactory training experiences include a lack of specific language-related training courses; high staff turnover; and poor dissemination from leadership throughout the team. The Chief Inspector recommends the up-skilling of staff to more effectively implement important curriculum areas such as language and literacy. We echo this call: the evidence is clear on the difference that can be made through the appropriate training and development of the early years workforce. Significant barriers need to be overcome, such as cost, availability and accessibility of training, but rising to the challenge of raising the status and value placed on the caring and teaching of young children is crucial.

This drive to build the strength of the workforce must be complemented by the introduction of consistent standards across all settings in Northern Ireland. A consistent and equal approach to qualifications, ratios, regulation and funding for pre-school provision should be introduced. A regulatory body for the early years workforce in Northern Ireland – similar to that existing for social care workers – could serve to ensure the workforce is appropriately registered and supported to meet the required standards through ongoing training opportunities and the development of a continuing professional development framework.

LIBRARIES

Public libraries greatly support young children’s language skills. They offer access to free books and they run a range of programmes in partnership with other organisations for children. These include Rhythm and Rhyme, which brings parents and children under four years old together to enjoy rhymes, stories and song. Libraries provide safe, child-friendly spaces where families can spend time out of the home environment. This can be important for relationships and for increasing integration without spending money.

There is evidence that having access to books in the community can help to boost children’s early language skills. The EPPE project found that parents taking their children to the library has a positive effect on their development (Sylva 2004). A study in England where 330 preschools were given increased access to books through local libraries improved children’s scores on a range of measures of early language (Roulstone et al. 2011). A study of 500 libraries found that children’s interactions with stories increased after books were placed directly within the spaces where children play (Neuman 1999). Proximity to books – particularly when these are set out at eye-level – has been shown to influence children’s participation in activities that help early language and literacy (Neuman 1999). The quality of the spaces where children read and play is also linked to increasing children’s learning. Creating ‘nooks and corners’ for reading and play in public libraries improves the richness and regularity of children’s language interactions (Morrow 1998). In addition, those living in deprived areas are more likely to say libraries are important to them (Carnegie & SLIC 2015).

Libraries in Northern Ireland support early language development significantly, as they are based in every local community, with a network of 96 public libraries and 16 mobile libraries across Northern Ireland. These welcoming spaces are at the heart of local communities and offer areas for parents and carers to meet together and take part in the activities that libraries have to offer.

Rhythm and Rhyme sessions have been a particular success for libraries over the last five years. These sessions allow parents to engage with their child’s early language development through rhythm, rhyme and song, with the use of puppets and musical instruments adding another dimension, ensuring there is fun as well as learning involved. These sessions are growing in popularity: 71,604 children under four engaged in a total of 4,431 Rhythm and Rhyme sessions in 2013/2014, a 26% increase in the number of participants from the previous year.

Storytelling sessions, which promote literacy and a love of reading and model good reading practice for parents, are available for children aged four and over. Storytelling often provides essential support for parents who may have poor literacy skills and lack confidence to read to their children.

FOUNDATION STAGE

This report is primarily focused on the years before a child begins school. However, it is important to note that children in Northern Ireland begin their compulsory schooling at age four. The first years of school – the Foundation Stage – are very important in ensuring that all children have good early language development at age five.

The statutory curriculum in the Foundation Stage is set out under six Areas of Learning, including Language and Literacy. Under this Area of Learning, teachers focus on talking, listening, reading and writing. The revised curriculum attaches priority to progression in literacy, and school practice is guided by Count, Read: Succeed, the Department of Education's strategy to improve outcomes in literacy and numeracy.

There is no standardised assessment of children's language ability upon entering primary school. Some schools have introduced specialist tools for assessing speech and language development, e.g. the WellComm toolkit, which uses a traffic light system to identify children who demonstrate potential language difficulties or require immediate intervention.

EDUCATION WORKS

The Department of Education has run a marketing campaign since 2012 called Education Works, aimed at encouraging parents, carers and grandparents to play, talk and read with their children or grandchildren every day. Through advertising and online information, the campaign promotes the positive benefits that this engagement can have for children's learning, and provides useful activities and tips for families that can help to stimulate play and conversation at home.

We welcome this campaign, which has the potential to reach a large number of families with positive messages on the educational benefits of play, talking and reading. Until earlier this year, the Bookstart Treasure packs contained an Education Works leaflet, ensuring information went directly into the home. We encourage building on Education Works with concrete actions, ensuring the vital messaging is reaching the families most in need of this information and support.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF EARLY YEARS SERVICES

The fragmentation of early years services in Northern Ireland has been a longstanding issue. Services are provided by different departments and public bodies and joined-up, integrated working across services is rare. The services families have access to – and the quality of those services – often depends on what is commissioned by their local Trust, and the funding allocated to that service. This leads to an inequality of provision across Northern Ireland and our children are losing out as a result.

The service landscape for parents to access support for their children's early language development is broad and, in places, diffuse. There is a range of contact points for parents to access support, and a significant challenge remains to join up the efforts of all partners, to make key support equally available to *all* children in poverty, and to ensure the children and parents who need additional early language support are able to access it.

This fragmentation also means it is difficult to assess and extract learning from initiatives and programmes delivered at the local level. While there is evidence indicating the success of different interventions, the variability of provision within Trusts makes it difficult to analyse the extent of each programme's impact and to demonstrate the need to mainstream successful initiatives.

Efforts are underway to reduce the impact of the fragmentation of services in Northern Ireland. Much of this work is taking place under the Delivering Social Change framework, set up by the Northern Ireland Executive to tackle poverty and social exclusion. One output of the framework is the Family Support Hubs – multi-agency networks of statutory, community and voluntary organisations that either provide early intervention services or work with families who need early intervention services. The hubs, which have been established across Northern Ireland, are designed to improve awareness of, access to and coordination of early intervention family support (for families with children aged 0–18), including parenting support.

In recognition of the particular fragmentation of early years services, the Northern Ireland Executive has launched the three-year Early Intervention Transformation Programme. As part of this

Programme, a new integrated child development review will be piloted for 2,000 children during their funded pre-school year in identified sites across Northern Ireland. The three-year pilot will involve input from health visitors, preschool education practitioners and parents, and is in the initial stages.

This pilot demonstrates a joined-up approach across health and education and aims to provide a holistic review of the child's developmental progress, and

identify and deal with any additional needs. The pilot will be used to record data that could help to inform the development and delivery of services in order to improve outcomes. Though this data will be limited by the number of children enrolled in the pilot, it has the potential to begin to fill the striking gap in our understanding of the national picture in relation to children's language development in the early years.

5 THREE PRIORITIES FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGE

This report has set out why all children in Northern Ireland need good language skills by the time they start school. We have also set out why early action is crucial. The words that children hear when they are young become the words that children learn to speak and then learn to read.

Achieving the *Read On. Get On.* campaign goal on early language is crucial if we are to meet our objective of all children reading well at age 11 by 2025. Firm foundations in early language and in reading are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality – and to improving the life chances of the poorest children.

THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY

This report aims to set out an approach to ensuring all children are supported to develop good early language skills. It has also set out the challenge – too many children experiencing poverty are behind in language skills when they start school. And with the projected rise in child poverty in the next five years – to almost 30% of children in Northern Ireland living in relative poverty (IFS 2014) – much more needs to be done to ensure all children have firm foundations in early language skills.

Therefore our policy proposals are mindful of the wider context of tackling child poverty. It is vital that the Northern Ireland Executive sets out a clear plan for tackling child poverty in Northern Ireland. In the current difficult economic climate, it is highly likely that public services will continue to operate under stretched capacity. While we recognise the challenges faced by government, we are concerned about the potential impact of recent reductions in spending to key programmes such as Sure Start as well as the termination of funding to the Bookstart scheme. In a time of financial constraints, the Northern Ireland Executive must prioritise the key actions that will make the biggest difference to tackling child poverty. We recommend that policy, service and budget decisions affecting children and their families in the early years are ‘poverty-proofed’ to assess the potential impact on children living in

poverty, particularly as they relate to children’s early language development.

AREAS FOR ACTION

We have identified three areas we believe will help to make a sustainable shift towards meeting the *Read On. Get On.* goal of all children having good early language skills by the time they start school. We believe action in these three priority areas will help the Northern Ireland Executive achieve one of its key priorities: to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

1. INVEST FURTHER IN THE EARLY YEARS EDUCATION WORKFORCE

Key recommendation

The evidence set out in this report demonstrates the vital role of early years services in complementing the efforts of parents to support their children’s early language development. Our ambition should be that the entire early years workforce is of a standard that best supports the development of all children, but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This means prioritising investment in a highly qualified leadership and continued training and support for all staff.

We ask the Northern Ireland Executive to commit to the following actions:

a) Ensure all pre-school settings are led by a graduate with expertise in early childhood studies.

Pre-school education provides a strong foundation for creating a world-class system capable of ensuring that all children have good early language. The vast majority of young children in Northern Ireland now attend pre-school before they start full-time school. This creates a massive opportunity to influence the early language of large numbers of children. To capitalise on this foundation, the government must continue to develop the workforce, so that every child gets the best early learning experiences – especially those growing up in poverty.

There is a robust evidence base for what action is needed to improve the quality of early years services and the impact this can have on children experiencing poverty. Pre-school education led by a suitably qualified graduate can have a positive impact on young children's language development. This impact is typically stronger for children growing up in poverty. This is why we attach such priority to improving the quality of these services to help meet our campaign goals.

Currently, the leader of a private or voluntary setting delivering pre-school must possess a foundation level degree or equivalent. We strongly urge the Northern Ireland Executive to commit to further investment in this area, enabling settings to support leaders to obtain further qualifications. The next government should have an ambition that by 2020, every child in Northern Ireland attends a pre-school led by a graduate, educated to degree level (equivalent to QCF Level 6), and with expertise in early childhood studies.

b) Introduce time-bound commitments to raising the standards of the early years workforce. Identify and prioritise an explicit focus on early language development.

We urge the Northern Ireland Executive to set time-bound commitments to continue to drive up the quality of the broader early years workforce, ensuring standards are in place that best support the development of all children, but particularly those growing up in poverty.

We echo the call of the Education and Training Inspectorate for the Department of Education and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to introduce a more joined-up and consistent approach to the regulation, training and support of early years workers to benefit all those employed in early years care and education. We would welcome a more robust and consistent approach to the required standards for early years staff – eg, through the introduction of a regulatory body for the early years workforce in Northern Ireland. This could serve to improve consistency of standards and provide support to early years workers through the development of a continuing professional development framework, including core elements such as early language development.

As recognised under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, work with young children “should be socially valued and properly paid, in order to attract a highly qualified workforce” (CRC 2006). Investing in ensuring that *all* staff working with children and young people in a care or education setting possess a minimum qualification would build on the existing strengths of the workforce and demonstrate that children, and the staff who work with them, are valued.

The draft Ten Year Strategy for Affordable and Integrated Childcare, which is currently being developed as a Programme for Government commitment and a significant element of the Northern Ireland Executive's Delivering Social Change framework, provides a welcome opportunity to introduce change in this sector. We welcome the recognition that the quality of the workforce is a major determinant of the quality of childcare services and we urge the Northern Ireland Executive to be ambitious in funding and implementing the forthcoming Strategy.

2. STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Our goal of all children having strong early language skills by the time they start school can only be met if proposals for the early years workforce set out in this report are combined with action to support parents to recognise the importance of early language development.

Northern Ireland's family and parenting strategy
Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland

gives priority to prevention and early intervention services to meet the needs of all families, across all ages and stages. A major challenge in improving children's language development lies in the complexity and fragmentation of services on offer to young children and their families. Currently, services supporting parents across Northern Ireland are funded, commissioned and delivered by different parts of government. In some areas, services are working well together, and initiatives in early language development are integrated and successful. In other areas, however, services are disjointed. We must ensure that families are not subject to a 'postcode lottery'; where families live should not determine the quality of the services they can access.

Heightened pressure on health visiting has seen this core universal service increasingly stretched in recent years, while the termination of all funding to the Bookstart programme provides a clear indication that the government is not cognisant of the imperative to prioritise support for parents in understanding early language development.

The recent expansion of the Sure Start programme into the top 25% of wards is welcomed; however, funding for current service provision is not secure. Moreover, there are many more children in Northern Ireland disadvantaged by poverty who are not able to access the support of Sure Start services. For these children, who cannot access formal early learning opportunities until they are three, other services are integral in providing support for the home learning environment. The scale of this need must be investigated and understood, and strategic action taken to make the best use of community resources to ensure parents understand how best to support their child's early language skills.

We ask the Northern Ireland Executive to:

- **Ensure childcare and early years staff have the necessary skills to support parents with their children's early language development, particularly those parents living in poverty. This can be achieved through establishing a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework for the early years workforce that includes core elements covering supporting and effectively engaging with parents.**

Professional training on early language should include the importance of early language development,

typical developmental milestones up to age five, and how to identify needs and to respond effectively. Training in supporting parents should address the particular challenges faced by families living in poverty and cover evidence-based means of engaging and supporting parents to develop their child's early language skills in the home.

3. TRACK YOUNG CHILDREN'S PROGRESS

We are concerned at the lack of a single, widely agreed and easily understood method of measuring children's outcomes in the early years. We are not currently able to measure or track progress on any aspect of early learning, including young children's language development. While we know that a worrying number of children – and particularly poorer children – are arriving at pre-school and/or formal education with poor language development, we do not have adequate information on the scale of the problem or on the demographics of the children affected. Without better information, we cannot know if we are making progress, or clearly present the case as to what works to improve children's outcomes and why.

The information presented in this report points to a worrying variance of service delivery and accessibility across the five Health and Social Care Trusts, leaving families vulnerable to a so-called 'postcode lottery'. Improved data collection, and the standardisation of monitoring and evaluation of interventions, would enable evidence-based planning and commissioning of services, ensuring all children are accessing the right support at the right time.

Tracking young children's progress across Northern Ireland is important for three reasons. First, it enables us to understand the impact of early years services on supporting children's early language development and other outcomes. Second, it would support an analysis of trends for different populations of children – for example, children living in poverty. Third, this improved understanding would allow policy and service developments to be based on children's identified level of need, and on a more in-depth understanding of where children are making progress and where there may be gaps. Without such a measure, it will be difficult to assess whether policy or programmatic interventions in the early years are actually delivering improvements in the lives of our young children.

We identify one area that will help progress:

- **Introduce a national child development measure to track young children's progress against agreed milestones and outcomes from birth to starting school.**

Early language and communication should be a priority area within this measure. The measure should be designed to enable reporting on the progress of different populations of children – for example, children experiencing poverty.

CONCLUSION

Too many children, especially those from families experiencing poverty, are behind in their language ability when they start school. This report has set out the challenges we face and why improving children's early language development is imperative for reaching our goal of all children reading well by age 11 by 2025. Children's communication and language ability is the stepping stone to being able to start school ready to read. The evidence tells us that the behaviour of parents and carers can have a big impact on children's early language development. But poverty can make things harder for parents to provide the environment children need to thrive.

This is why all parents, but especially those who are experiencing poverty or who are at risk of poverty, need support from good-quality services and programmes to help them access the resources and information they need to help their children develop good language ability. Children are learning language from birth, so making sure parents have support from the start is vital. In addition to supporting parents to create the strongest possible home learning environment, services for children are decisive. The services that are provided to children need to be led by qualified professionals and integrated around the needs of the family, not fragmented along service lines. Good-quality childcare and pre-school education can compensate where the home learning environment is not strong, which is why we need to make sure every setting and professional is offering the best early language support, especially those working with families living in poverty.

Firm foundations in reading are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality and to improving the wider life chances of the poorest and most disadvantaged children. Ensuring all children have strong early language skills would put us in a strong position to reach our goal of all children reading well by the age of 11: a game-changing contribution towards making Northern Ireland a fair place in which to grow up.

APPENDIX I: THE MILLENNIUM COHORT STUDY

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) is the fourth of Britain's world-renowned national longitudinal birth cohort studies. It provides detailed information on approximately 19,000 children born at the start of the new century and on their families, across the United Kingdom. The cohort members were born, in England and Wales, over the 12-month period starting September 2000; in Scotland and Northern Ireland they were born over 13½ months from November 2000. The sample design allowed for disproportionate representation of families living in areas of child poverty, and in areas of England with high ethnic minority populations. Information was first collected from parents, through a home-based survey, when the cohort members were aged nine months. This first survey recorded, amongst other things, the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as those of the early months of life, and the social and economic background of the children's families.

These multidisciplinary baseline data reveal the diversity of starting points from which the 'Children of the New Century' set out. Subsequent surveys have taken place at ages 3, 5, 7, 11 and 14 (ongoing at time of writing). These surveys coincide with important moments in children's lives, including the preschool period (age 3), and the start, middle and end of primary school (ages 5, 7, 11 respectively). From age 3 onwards, measured physical development

and objective cognitive assessments have been carried out with children; surveys also include interviews with both parents (where co-resident), and, increasingly since age 7, with the cohort member.

A real strength of the study is the objective measurement of different aspects of cognitive development throughout childhood, via tests administered by trained interviewers to the cohort members. Of particular interest for this report are the measures of language and verbal development, which have been collected at ages 3, 5, 7 and 11 (and 14, in field), and are described next.

At ages 3 and 5 of the MCS, we measure expressive verbal ability using the "naming vocabulary" subscale of the British Ability Scales (BAS). At age 7, English reading ability is measured using a subscale of the BAS. The child is asked to read a series of words presented on a card; the assessment consists of 90 words in total; the words are organised into nine blocks of ten words in ascending order of difficulty. At age 11, the "verbal similarities" subscale from the BAS was administered to children. The child was read a set of words and was asked how the words were related. This assessment measures knowledge of words, alongside skills in reasoning and in expressing ideas. Further details of the tests are provided in Johnson (2012).

APPENDIX 2: FULL REGRESSION TABLES FOR CHAPTER 2

AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE

	Baseline model	Full model
< median age 5 test	-0.571** (0.0202)	-0.449** (0.0194)
Age S4	0.318** (0.0447)	0.347** (0.0447)
Wales		-0.278** (0.055)
Scotland		-0.0916* (0.0383)
Northern Ireland		-0.287** (0.0437)
Intermittent poverty		-0.179** (0.0278)
Persistent poverty		-0.276** (0.046)
Female		0.114** (0.0204)
Cohabiting		-0.0113 (0.0268)
Single parent		0.0162 (0.0406)
Rented housing		-0.0838** (0.0257)
Other language spoken		0.217** (0.0475)
Home learning environment		0.0118** (0.00136)
Overseas qualifications		0.129 (0.104)
NVQI		-0.0828 (0.0667)

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AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

	Baseline model	Full model
NVQ2		0.0735 (0.0541)
NVQ3		0.0942+ (0.0551)
NVQ4+ (Degree)		0.296** (0.0519)
Birth weight		0.0557* (0.0215)
Other ethnicity		0.236** (0.0461)
Gestation		0.00125 (0.000902)
Long-standing illness		-0.00381 (0.0308)
Long-standing limit illness		-0.118+ (0.0634)
Observations		9,713
R-squared		0.193
Mean outcome		108.5
SD outcome		30.02

Notes:

- Standard errors are shown under each coefficient estimate, as the second row of each variable, in parentheses.
- **, *, + denotes statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, 10% levels respectively.
- Model controls for an array of background characteristics, as listed in the left hand column of the table.

AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE

	Baseline model	Sig
< median age 5	-0.570** (0.0259)	-0.440** (0.0237)
Age S5	0.0844* (0.0361)	0.133** (0.0341)
Wales		0.138* (0.0552)
Scotland		-0.0214 (0.055)
Northern Ireland		0.180** (0.0456)
Intermittent poverty		-0.114** (0.0274)
Persistent poverty		-0.294** (0.0523)
Female		-0.0995** (0.0197)
Cohabiting		0.0281 (0.0287)
Single parent		0.0906* (0.0385)
Rented housing		-0.102** (0.0311)
Other language spoken		0.0157 (0.0523)
Home learning environment		0.00940** (0.00172)
Overseas qualifications		0.183* (0.088)
NVQ1		0.0209 (0.0757)
NVQ2		0.0893 (0.0596)
NVQ3		0.178** (0.0687)
NVQ4+ (Degree)		0.302** (0.0644)
Birth weight		0.0440* (0.022)

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AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

	Baseline model	Sig
Other ethnicity		0.245** (0.0461)
Gestation		-0.000634 (0.00104)
Long-standing illness		-0.0533+ (0.0317)
Long-standing limit illness		-0.0785 (0.0866)
Observations		9,713
R-squared		0.159
Mean outcome		121.7
SD outcome		16.24

Notes:

- Standard errors are shown under each coefficient estimate, as the second row of each variable, in parentheses.
- **, *, + denotes statistical significance at the 1%, 5%, 10% levels respectively.
- Model controls for an array of background characteristics, as listed in the left hand column of the table.

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READY TO READ

Closing the gap in language skills so that every child in Northern Ireland can read well

COVER PHOTO: ELIZABETH DALZIEL/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Ensuring that all children are reading well by the age of 11 would make a game-changing contribution to creating a fairer country.

As *Ready to Read* explains, this can only be achieved if we commit to boosting the early language skills of our poorest children. Firm foundations in early language skills are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality – and to improving the wider life chances of the poorest children.

The report sets out how high-quality services and support for families can help overcome the impact of poverty, highlighting the potential for services – including early learning and childcare, health visiting and libraries – to support young children's language development. And it explains why this potential is not always fulfilled.

Ready to Read argues for a decisive shift towards early action and investment.

Helping children read

