

# READY TO READ

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



READ ON  
GET ON



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# FOREWORD

## READ ON. GET ON.

“Reading” is more than looking at a word and being able to say it or write it. Reading means to “understand” and “interpret”. If we do not encourage our children to strive to understand and interpret the world around them from a young age, then we are limiting their future.

I’ve been very lucky in my upbringing; my parents enjoyed reading and enjoyed stories, and sharing these at bed time was very important to us. Our family are also enthusiastic reciters at Eisteddfodau, and reading and understanding a piece of literature was part of my life from a very young age.

Today, in my work as a TV presenter, I receive scripts; the ability to read and understand and to adapt these scripts quickly to my natural language is a skill I would never have mastered were it not for my early experiences of being supported and encouraged to read. Reading develops and encourages a broad vocabulary, giving you the range of language to ensure that what you are trying to say is being understood.

Evil socks that grow into a onesie and swallow you; the world’s best tennis player, who can only play tennis when he sleeps; wild animals taking over a school and eating all the books, these are the kind of stories and characters I’ve encountered when

working with children. In my workshops, the first thing I try to establish is that there are no boundaries on their imagination. It is true that this could take you on a completely crazy path that makes no sense at all but it is important that they get to stretch and flex their imagination, before reason and maturity set in.

After firing the children’s imagination, they are now ready to contribute their ideas, no matter how crazy they are, because nothing is wrong. This is a great experience, getting all of them to communicate. But when it is time to try to organise their thoughts and ideas and focus on expression, a few children become quiet. Sorting out words, thinking about how to get started, even writing any word down, can be very difficult. This is true for all the children in a primary school that I have worked with, and is indeed true for more children than expected in secondary schools. I cannot help but worry about these children’s inability to express themselves in writing. I believe that the main tool we have to improve this is to read... and to read from a young age.

Read this report and consider what you can do to help.

**Anni Llŷn**

Children’s Poet Laureate for Wales

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life. Yet one in four children growing up in poverty in Wales leaves primary school unable to read well, and this gap begins in the early years. This helps explain the persistent educational gap in Wales that each year prevents thousands of our poorest children fulfilling their potential.

Making sure every child leaves primary school able to read well is a critical part of efforts to address educational inequality. Every child deserves an equal chance to succeed, regardless of their background. This is why the *Read On. Get On.* campaign coalition has set the goal of every child in Wales being able to read well by the time they are 11. We are committed to building a national mission to tackle underachievement in reading, drawing in energy, commitment 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 understand words, speak, and listen from an early age, they will struggle to learn to read well when they start school. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign has therefore set an interim goal that every child in Wales has good language skills by the time

they start school. In Wales, we expect to be able to measure children's language skills at age four to five on entry to the foundation phase from September 2015.

This report presents existing evidence that explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read. We also show that children living in poverty are at the greatest risk of falling behind. The evidence shows that without an increased commitment to children's early language development, particularly for the poorest children, we will never achieve our goal of all children leaving primary school being able to read well. Boosting children's early language skills is critical to narrowing the attainment gap and improving the life chances of our poorest children.

Wales has an ambitious and welcome goal for its children: to have a flying start in life. There is broad political support for acting early to tackle the root causes of social and educational disadvantage, before they have a dramatic effect on children's life chances. Progress is being made through concrete action and investment, but not quickly enough. Significant challenges remain. An increased focus on early language skills that reaches all children, particularly those in poverty, is needed.

The focus of this report is on the role of the Welsh government and local services in Wales in providing support to children and parents. However, we know this is not something government alone can fix. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign is working with a wide range of partners to develop a major behavioural change campaign that aims to empower parents to understand what they can do.

## POOR CHILDREN ARE FALLING BEHIND IN LANGUAGE SKILLS ACROSS WALES

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

Yet in Wales, there remains a stubborn gap in language skills between poorer children and their better-off peers. Our new analysis of Millennium Cohort Study data (MCS) for Wales shows that children who live in persistent poverty are twice as likely to score below average for language development at age five. It has also shown 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.

## FALLING BEHIND IN THE EARLY YEARS 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. This disadvantage can extend far into adulthood.

New analysis of Welsh MCS data 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 who has experienced poverty persistently and has below average language skills scores 35% less on reading tests at age seven, and 22% less on comprehension tests at age 11, than a child who has never experienced poverty and has 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 age 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. This demonstrates the importance of early action to support young children’s language development from birth.
2. **What parents do:** the bond between parent and child, and the way parents use language at home, are crucial. Parents also have a vital role in creating early learning opportunities, like sharing stories, singing rhymes, or playing word games.
3. **Poverty:** poverty can leave parents feeling stressed, worried or lacking in confidence, which can make it harder for them to create lots of early learning opportunities. More support and information for parents are key, particularly in the context of stubbornly high child poverty rates in Wales.
4. **Early learning and childcare:** high-quality early learning and childcare can be a major benefit, especially for older pre-school children and for those living in poverty. Early years 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 children’s early learning are key to boosting young children’s language skills and tackling entrenched underachievement in reading. A range of services are available to support families in Wales. In this report we consider in particular the role of health visitors, speech and language therapists, Integrated Children’s Centres, Flying Start, early education, libraries and Families First. The service landscape for parents to access support for their children’s early language development is broad and, in places, diffuse. A significant challenge remains to join



up the efforts of all partners and ensure the children and parents who need additional early language support are able to access it.

## THREE PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

It is vital that, as a nation, we do more to ensure that children develop strong language skills by the time they start school. The impact on the learning and life chances of children at risk of falling behind, and on educational inequality in Wales, is likely to be significant.

Our focus is on what more can be done to support children living in poverty, 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 Welsh government to consider, designed to help parents and professionals do even more to support the youngest children, especially those living in poverty.

### 1. Investing further in the quality of the early education workforce

- a) Ensure staff and parents in all early years settings have access to at least one member of staff with a graduate level qualification, with expertise in early language development, by 2020.

- b) Adopt a robust, systematic and consistent approach to assessing the demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual early years provision. This information should be used to ensure a sufficient supply of provision to meet parental demand. This systematic approach should include assessing whether there are sufficient numbers of staff with the requisite Welsh language skills to meet the needs of families.

### 2. Strengthening support for parents

- a) Ensure 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 and childcare workforce, which includes core elements covering early language development and supporting parents.
- b) Assess how many children are living in poverty but outside of Flying Start areas. Then commit to actions to ensure these children are able to access the quality support they need for good speech and early language development.

### 3. Strong and ambitious leadership for children

- a) Appoint a Children's Minister to provide strong leadership and ensure all children in Wales are able to reach their full potential.



# INTRODUCTION

Being a good reader is crucial for every child. It is the key to developing much of their potential. Not being able to read well means children will not benefit from all the opportunities a good education has to offer. They risk leaving formal education with poor qualifications and struggling in the world of work. Yet, one in four of our poorer children in Wales leave primary school unable to read well.<sup>1</sup>

Making sure every child is able to read well by the age of 11 is crucial to turning this unacceptable situation around, so that every child succeeds regardless of their background. This is the goal of *Read On. Get On.*, a campaign coalition of major literacy and communication charities, libraries, teaching unions and publishers. A child who can read well by the age of 11 will be able to understand the meaning behind stories and information, and be able 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.

When the *Read On. Get On.* campaign launched across the UK, 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 right

from birth. Listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary are the vital foundations 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 our 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 every child has a good level of language skills by the time they start school. In Wales, we expect to be able to measure children's language skills at age four to five on entry to the foundation phase from September 2015. By the age of five, UK figures show that children from the poorest families are 15 months behind children from the richest families when it comes to their vocabulary.

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 bigger risk of falling behind. It sets out the action that is needed to ensure every child in Wales, especially the poorest, gets the best start when it comes to developing their language skills. It is crucial to act now to ensure that young children growing up in poverty have the best early learning opportunities, at home and in early years settings.

In Wales there is an acknowledgement of the importance of these issues and broad political support for acting early to tackle educational disadvantage before it has a dramatic effect on children's lives. There is strong commitment to programmes such as Flying Start, targeted at families with young children in the most disadvantaged areas in Wales, which includes a core element of support for speech, language and communication development. In addition, there is a solid emphasis on improving literacy standards in Wales. Progress is being made, but significant challenges remain. A strong focus on children's early language skills is

<sup>1</sup> Welsh Government *Academic achievement and entitlement to free school meals, 2014*. See Figure 1.2 in this report.

needed to help address one of Wales' most pressing challenges: educational underachievement among our poorest children.

Achieving our goal of every child having good language skills is within our reach, but not without further developing the existing approach and increasing investment. Large gaps in language development open up very early in life between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers. Without a significant acceleration of 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.

Our report begins by setting out the latest data on the challenge we face. In Chapter 1 we examine which children are most at risk of falling behind. Chapter 2 considers the impact of falling behind on being able to read well at 11. Chapter 3 explores the influences on young children's language development, highlighting the crucial role of parents and the impact of poverty. Chapter 4 sets out how high-quality

services and support for families can help overcome the impact of poverty. We highlight the potential for services, including early education programmes, health visiting and libraries, to support young children's language development and we show why this potential is not always fulfilled. Finally we set out our priorities for government: investing further in the quality of the early education workforce; strengthening support for parents; and strong and ambitious leadership for children.

Firm foundations in reading are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality and to improving the wider life chances of the poorest children.

Ensuring all children are reading well by the age of 11 would make a huge contribution to making Wales a more socially mobile and fairer country. As this report explains, this can only be achieved if we commit to boosting the early language skills of our poorest children.

## THE READ ON. GET ON. CAMPAIGN – SUPPORTING PARENTS TO GET CHILDREN READING

The *Read On. Get On.* campaign, launched in October 2014, set out the bold ambition to get every child reading well by age 11 in 2025. Achieving this goal will require us all to play a role: parents, grandparents, businesses, volunteers, teachers and role models, for example, sports people and other public figures. This report focuses on the specific role of national government and local services, but we know the problem is not something that government alone can fix.

Parents of young children also need support and advice when it comes to their child's language development. Building on the work we did around the campaign launch, in the summer of 2015, *Read On. Get On.* began a new activity for parents with young children. To encourage parents to create and tell stories with their child, we provided 'story starters' to inspire and support them. This activity is just the beginning of a longer term campaign that we are developing with partners to support parents, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, in reading with and talking to their young children.

# 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 responding to questions from parents or carers and in learning new words. These difficulties can continue right up to starting school, with some children struggling to talk with and to listen to their peers and teachers. This can have major consequences for their development of early reading skills.

New evidence in this chapter shows that children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are almost twice as likely as their better-off peers 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.

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 attainment in language and communication in Wales, focusing on inequalities between children growing up in poverty and their better-off peers. We also examine how attainment varies for poor children depending on gender and place.

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

Our interim goal is to ensure that every child in Wales has good language skills by the time they start school. In Wales, we expect to be able to measure children's language skills at age four to five on entry to the foundation phase from September 2015.

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. And it includes the ability to interact with others in a two-way dialogue, reflecting on what others have said and responding appropriately.

By age five, children should 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. They 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 set out in more detail in Figure I.1. Typically, a child should start to speak 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 more and more competent communicators.

Not all children are capable of achieving this typical path of language development. The extent of language impairments and disabilities among young children means it is not plausible that every single child in Wales will have a good level of language development by the time they start school. However, it is a relatively small number of children who have language difficulties so serious that they cannot reach the expected standard, or be helped to catch up in primary school.

The focus of this report is on the group of children who do not have an impairment or disability that stops them from developing good language skills, but who nevertheless fail to reach the expected level by the time they start school. These children can be described as experiencing 'language delay'. In most cases, this is due to 'environmental factors' such as the encouragement provided by parents, early learning opportunities in the home, and the impact of formal early education.

In this report, we argue that children growing up in poverty are less likely to benefit from early positive experiences in each of these areas, 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 to children who are growing up in poverty. But poverty does not make it impossible for the vast majority of young children to get on in language, provided there is the right support for parents and children. Even without experiencing poverty, some children will struggle to develop good language skills. To achieve our goal, we need to ensure support is available for these children too.

## INEQUALITIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

In this section we present evidence on the inequalities in language development between children experiencing poverty and their peers. We use new analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) at age five (Figure 1.2) and Welsh government data from the Early Years Foundation Phase Profile assessments at age seven (Figure 1.3) to demonstrate the links between poverty and language development.

FIGURE 1.1 TYPICAL LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

| <b>Babies<br/>(by 12 months)</b>   | <b>Toddlers<br/>(by two years)</b>   | <b>Nursery age<br/>(by four years)</b>  | <b>School age<br/>(by five years)</b>                                    |
|--|--|---|--|
| Understanding of simple words starts to grow                                   | Start to join 2 or 3 words together and respond to simple sentences like "show me your nose" | Start to learn more complex meaning of words and asks 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 words a day   | Make careful choices about the words they are using and uses grammar like tenses and plurals  | Understand longer and more complicated sentences                         |
| May start to use simple words  | Starts to ask lots of questions to help them learn and remember words                        | Still find some sounds difficult to use but understood by most people                         | Use and understand most everyday words that adults use                   |
| Can respond to familiar words like "up" or "bye bye"                           | Spike in language skills that's critical to children's language                              | May stumble over words and sentences  | Explain what has happened and why in an interesting way                  |

Adapted from: ICAN (2011)

## MILLENNIUM COHORT STUDY DATA

We can get a richer understanding of the relationship between poverty and children's early language development by using data from the MCS. Through examining this data, we can see that this gap in language ability between poorer children and their better-off peers is apparent from a young age, and persists through to when children start school.

The MCS tracks the progress of a group of children born in 2000 and contains detailed information about their development. This data is now over ten years old and provides a useful complement to other data.

The survey measures family income directly, rather than relying on eligibility for free school meals as a proxy, at each stage of a child's life. This enables us to confirm the relationship between poverty and children's language development, and to consider the different impacts of persistent and temporary poverty. A further report based on the MCS, which focuses on children in Wales at age seven, also demonstrates that incomes below the poverty line are predictive of lower reading scores (Welsh Government, 2011).

A new analysis of a Welsh sample of the MCS by UCL Institute of Education shows that children experiencing intermittent or persistent poverty have a much higher risk of scoring below average vocabulary scores, and that these patterns persist. Using the same test of vocabulary, it shows that 34% of children who never experienced poverty scored below average. In comparison, this rose to 57% of

children who experienced poverty intermittently and increased to 67% of children who experienced poverty persistently throughout the early years.

These figures demonstrate the major inequalities in language development between children with different experiences of poverty. It is clear that children who have experienced poverty persistently throughout their early years are at high risk of experiencing language delays later.

This is why this report and the *Read On. Get On.* campaign focus in large part on children who are living in poverty. In Wales this is one in three children. As this data shows, they are more likely to be behind in language ability when they start school. We will demonstrate in chapter 2 that if a child is behind in language ability at age five he or she is considerably more likely to be behind in reading at age 11.

## WELSH GOVERNMENT DATA

Early Years Foundation Phase Profile assessments are completed for all children in Wales, and are carried out by teachers at the end of the Early Years Foundation Phase, when children are seven. They include an assessment of a child's language and communication skills, and focus on listening and attention, understanding and speaking skills.

This data shows that around one in ten children not eligible for free school meals did not reach the expected standard of development in language ability by the age of seven, when assessed in English or

## EXPLAINING GOOD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AT AGE FIVE

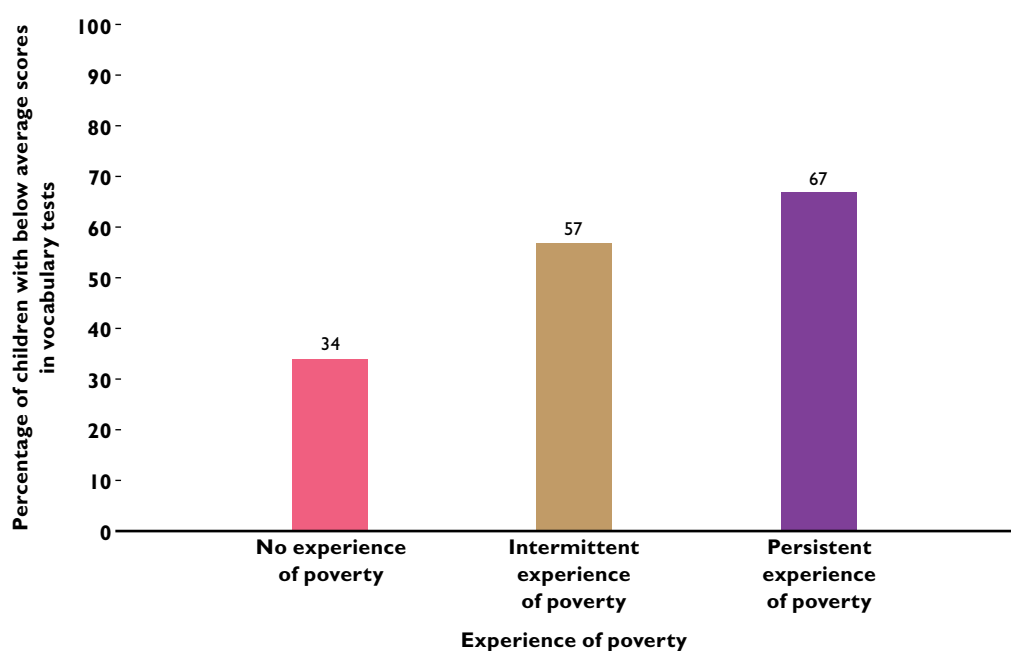
Good language development means that a child is reaching the communication milestones associated with five-year-olds. It requires that a child reaches the expected level in each of the four domains of language: understanding, use of words and sentences, speech development, and the ability to use appropriate social communication skills. To give context to the following analysis, we set out 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 much longer conversations
- understand more complicated language such as 'first', 'last', 'might', 'maybe', '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, they may still have some difficulties with grammar. For example, saying 'sheeps' instead of 'sheep' or 'goed' instead of 'went'
- think more about the meaning of words, such as describing the meaning of simple words or asking what a new word means
- use most sounds effectively. However, children may have some difficulties with more difficult words such as 'scribble' or 'elephant'.

FIGURE 1.2 FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN WALES BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY LEVEL, BY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



Source: Millennium Cohort Study

Welsh. This rises to one in four children eligible for free school meals (see Figure 1.3).

This gap in attainment between poor children and their peers has fallen slightly in Wales, since 2012 (Welsh Government, 2015). However, there have not been the improvements in poor children's language and communication development that we need to see if we are to achieve our goal of all children reading well.

## THE IMPACT OF BILINGUALISM ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

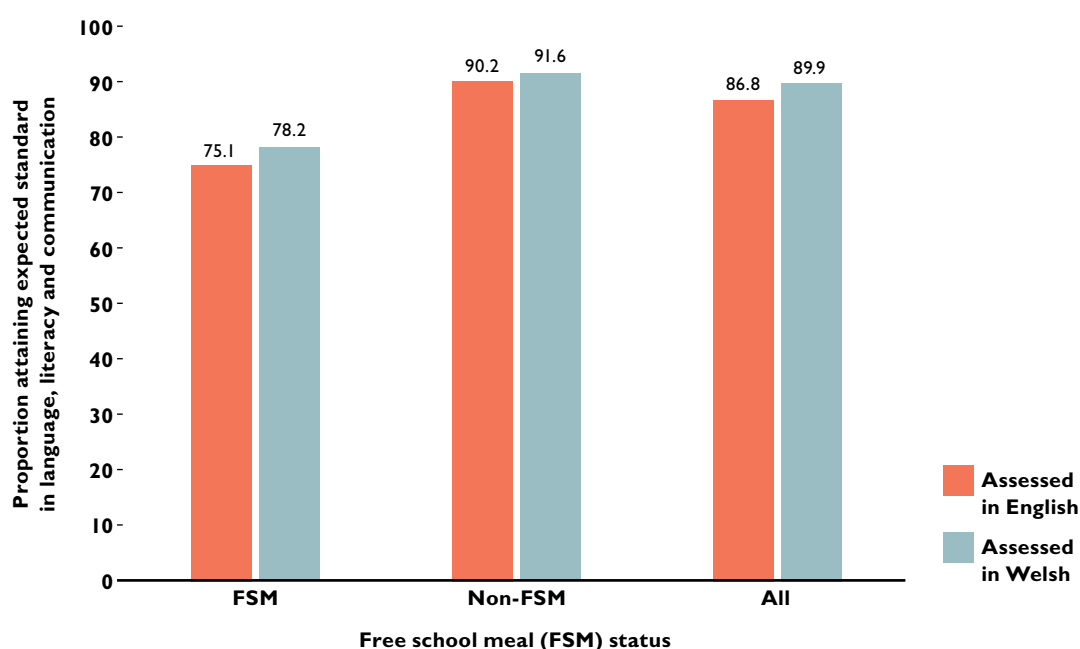
The Welsh government is committed to supporting the promotion of the Welsh language. The Welsh Language Strategy 2012–2017 (Welsh Government, 2012) aims to increase the number of people who both speak and use the language. In Wales, according to the 2014 Annual Population Survey, just over a quarter (27.5%) of the population can speak Welsh (Annual Population Survey, 2014).

Benefits of being bilingual identified in the literature include increased creativity, self-confidence, and planning and problem-solving skills. There is no evidence that bilingualism makes it harder for children with speech problems to develop speech (National Literacy Trust). Furthermore, the evidence shows that bilingual children are more easily able to learn other languages.

However research has also shown that bilingual children may have particular early language needs. One study found that bilingual children who learn two languages simultaneously from birth score lower



FIGURE I.3 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN IN WALES REACHING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE AT AGE SEVEN, BY FSM STATUS (2014)



Source: Welsh Government, *Academic achievement and entitlement to free school meals, 2014*

than monolingual children, who may learn a second language through bilingual education, on measures of vocabulary and sentence repetition (Westman et al, 2008). Many children in Wales learn predominately one language at home and gain skills in a second language through bilingual education.

Those children who live in bilingual families and learn two languages from birth may also have particular early language needs. For example, learning more than one language from birth can affect the age at which children master particular aspects of language. Some children who learn a second language sequentially (that is, they are exposed to an additional language after their home language) can demonstrate a silent receptive period when they first become exposed to the new language.

In Wales, practitioners are encouraged to take a child's home language(s) into account when assessing needs and to understand their abilities in all their languages (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapist guidance, 2006). The Welsh government has recently launched resources for parents that include key messages relating to the benefits of bilingualism.

Local authorities in Wales are required to undertake Childcare Sufficiency Assessments every three years under the Childcare 2006 Act. These assessments consider the supply and demand of appropriate provision, and take into account the views of parents, providers, practitioners and stakeholders. The approaches taken to assessing the demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual provision vary across local authorities in terms of the methods used, the range of data and the frequency of assessments. This means that there are challenges in understanding the extent to which parental demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual childcare is being met.

Differences in parental perceptions and understanding of bilingual childcare also create challenges in interpreting the data collected at local authority level. Further research is required to consider how data can be collected more systematically for assessing the supply and demand of Welsh-medium and bilingual early years provision and for ensuring the workforce has sufficient capacity to meet these needs.



## TWF: SUPPORT FOR RAISING CHILDREN BILINGUALLY

Twf offers free advice and support for parents on raising children in Welsh and English from birth. The Twf website ([www.twfcymru.com](http://www.twfcymru.com)) includes resources aimed at encouraging parents to introduce the Welsh language to their child from birth. Twf promotes the benefits of doing so, including:

- it gives your child a good start to become bilingual
- it helps your child when learning to read and count
- it gives your child a sense of belonging
- it helps your child to make friends and have new experiences

- it becomes easier to learn another language
- it opens doors to other cultures
- it gives children an advantage at work when they're older
- they'll get the best of both worlds.

Twf officers organise local 'Amser Twf' (Twf Time) support groups for parents with babies up to 12 months old. They also work in partnership with other early years partners on Fun Days for the family and promoting 'Cymraeg o'r Crud' (Welsh from Birth) courses for parents. Twf also provides parents with various resources and advice including booklets, newsletters and a CD of Welsh nursery rhymes. They also provide examples of research that demonstrates the benefits of bilingualism to children.

## INEQUALITIES IN CHILDREN'S EARLY LANGUAGE SKILLS BY GENDER AND PLACE

In addition to the inequalities between poor children and their peers, using the Early Years Foundation Phase data we can look in even more detail at inequalities in language development by gender and place.

The statistics for children's assessment in English or Welsh throughout the following section are not an assessment of bilingualism or its impact on children's language development. The statistics for each language are not directly comparable, primarily because they relate to different children. The statistics presented in this section are also rounded to the nearest whole number.

### GENDER

The data echoes a finding also demonstrated in our *Read On. Get On.* launch report: boys are performing less well than girls. In this instance, it is in their

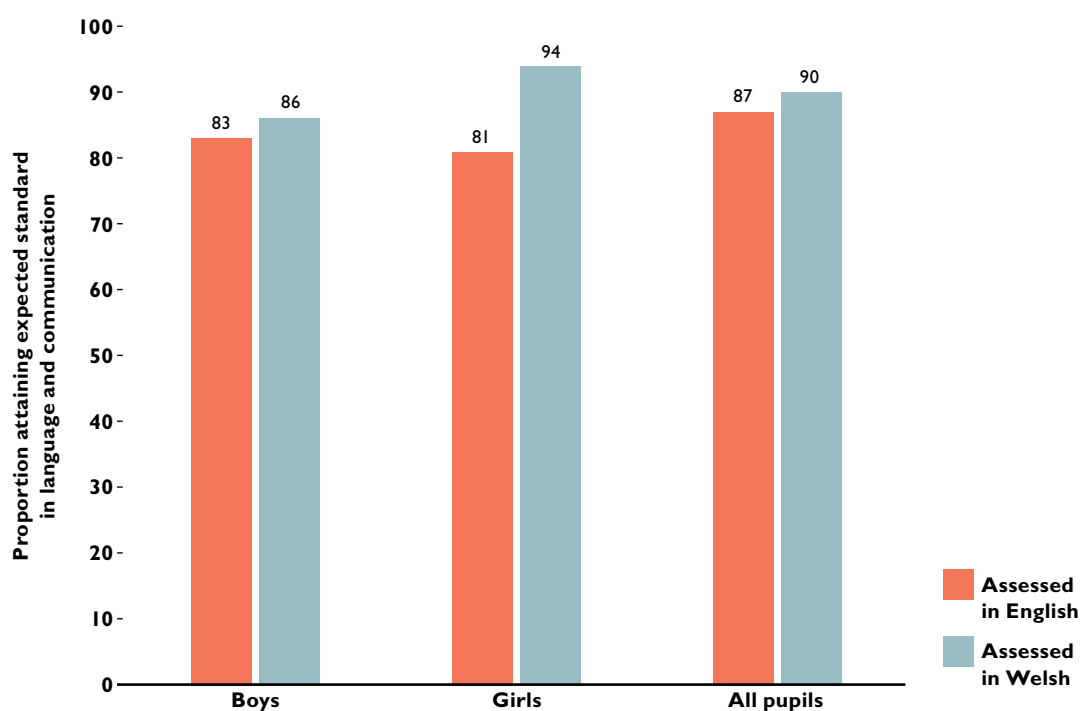
language ability at age seven, but we also know that this is true with reading well at age 11.

The data shows a difference in language skills at seven years old between boys and girls. 83% of boys who were assessed in English reached the expected level compared with 91% per cent of girls. Similarly, 86% of boys who were assessed in Welsh reached the expected level compared with 94% of girls (see Figure 1.4).

### REGIONS

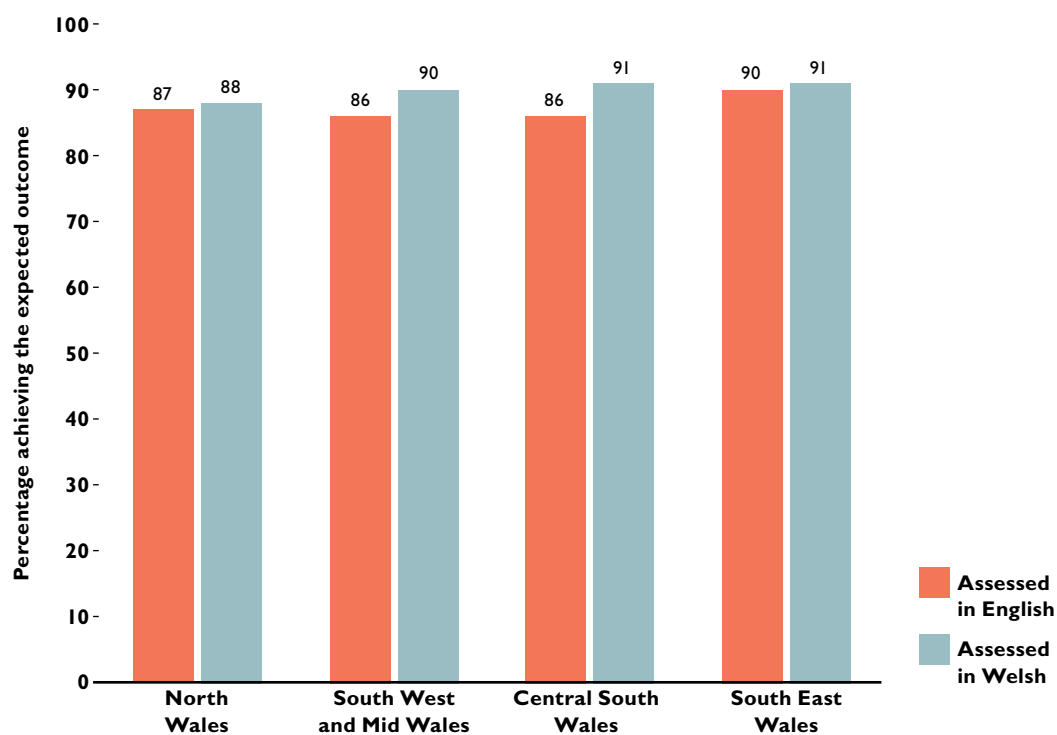
This data also showed a small difference in children's language skills at age seven years old across the different regions of Wales. The percentage of children reaching the expected level in English language, literacy and communication skills ranged from 86% in Central South Wales to 90% in South East Wales. Similarly, the percentage of children reaching the expected level in Welsh language, literacy and communication skills ranged from 88% in North Wales to 91% in Central South Wales (see Figure 1.5).

FIGURE I.4 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN IN WALES REACHING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION AT AGE SEVEN



Source: Welsh government

FIGURE I.5 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN IN WALES REACHING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION (2014) AT AGE SEVEN BY REGION



Source: Welsh government

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

As we set out at the beginning of this chapter, language skills are dynamic. They develop over the first years of life, and beyond. The findings we have presented so far give snapshots of inequalities in children's language skills. The following evidence, drawing again 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 1.6 shows transitions in children's language attainment between the ages of three and five across the UK. It shows that 58% of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who were in the top 40% in vocabulary ability at age three, then fell out of the top 40% by age five. This is compared to 30% of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds. This demonstrates that poor children who are performing well at age three are more likely than their peers to lose that advantage and fall behind by the age of five.

Even more worryingly, if you are performing poorly at age three you're more likely to continue to do so than children from wealthier backgrounds. Figure 1.7 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 almost two in three (61%) of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds. This demonstrates that poor children are much less likely to make up lost ground in vocabulary ability than their better-off peers by the age of five.

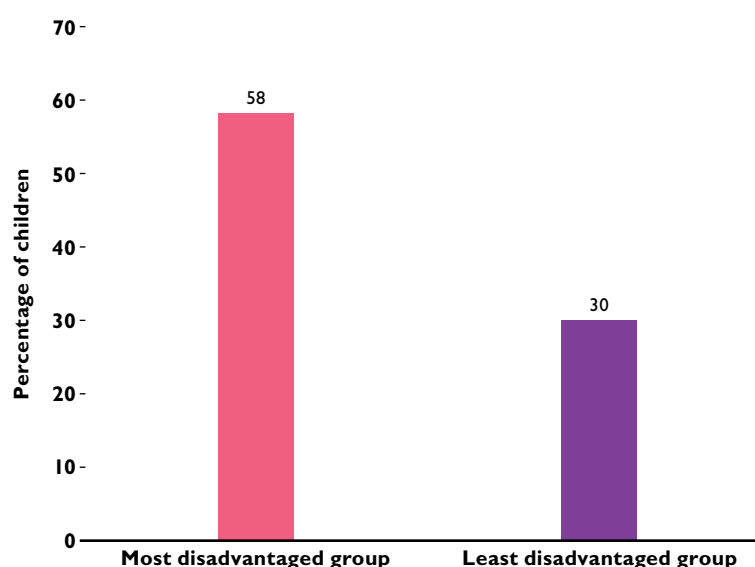
What is shocking is that these patterns are not new. Research using the 1970 British Cohort Study found that a child growing up in poverty in the 1970s was much more likely to be behind their better-off peers in terms of language ability. But even those who had good levels of development at age two,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

## THE CHALLENGE OF PERSISTENT CHILD POVERTY

This chapter has shown that a child who grows up in poverty is much more likely to experience language delays than their better-off peers. This inequality is why the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is focused on children living in poverty.

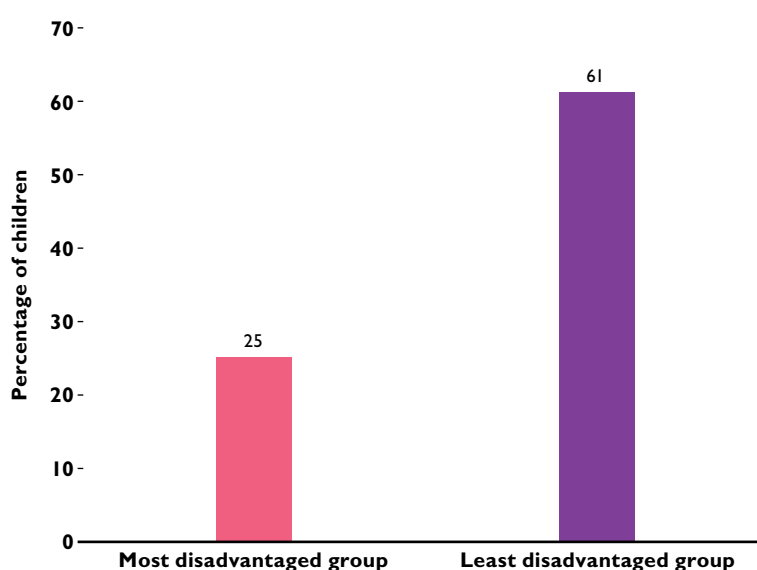
Our campaign goal is made even more challenging in the context of a stubbornly high child poverty rate in Wales. The Save the Children report *A Fair Start for Every Child* (2014) describes how families face a 'triple whammy' of years of flat wage growth,

FIGURE 1.6 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO SCORED IN THE TOP 40% OF VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE THREE WHO FELL OUT OF THE TOP 40% OF VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE FIVE



Source: Adapted from tables in Dearden et al. 2011

FIGURE I.7 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN WHO ESCAPED THE BOTTOM 40% OF VOCABULARY ABILITY BY AGE FIVE



Source: Adapted from tables in Dearden et al (2011)

recent pressure on social security spending and a rising cost of living including a 'poverty premium'. 59% of people who took part in the National Survey for Wales (Welsh Government, June 2015) thought that the gap between rich and poor will be larger in 25 years' time. With high numbers of children living in poverty in Wales, it is likely that we will continue to see children experiencing language delays unless there is a massive commitment from across society to break the link between poverty and children's early development.

The evidence in this chapter shows that two-thirds of children growing up in persistent poverty in Wales scored below average in vocabulary tests at the

age of five. High numbers of children experiencing poverty could mean even more children are put at risk of language delays. If we are to meet our goal of all children achieving a good level of language development, we must do much more.

Many poor 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 for children, making it much harder for them to progress. A two-pronged strategy, which tackles the root causes of poverty and at the same time improves poor children's educational outcomes, is vital to ensure every child gets the chance to succeed.

## A GLOBAL ISSUE

Countries across the world are grappling with the higher risk that children who grow up in poverty face with the development of their language skills. There is evidence of similar gaps in Canada, Australia, US (Bradbury et al 2011), Ireland (Williams et al 2013), and in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam (Boo 2014).

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

in poverty and their better-off peers. The gap between children in poverty and their better off peers was highest in the USA and in the UK, and lowest in Canada and Australia (Bradbury et al 2011).

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

## 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 Wales are reading well by 2025. In this chapter we show why ensuring all children achieve a good level of language development by the time they start school is a crucial step to meeting this goal.

We start 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. 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 'phonological' difficulties (difficulties 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 professional identification and support to overcome.

Language delays, typically experienced by children who do not have a specific disability or impairment, can also 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 to 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 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 attainment. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in England has shown that children's experience of childcare and the quality of the home learning environment continue to be strongly associated with their attainment at primary school (Sammons et al, 2008).

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 MCS, including tests to assess children's early language skills, reading ability and language comprehension. This is set out in more detail in Figure 2.1.

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's physical development (such as their height and weight measurements), 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 on the MCS, see Appendix I.

Researchers at the UCL Institute of Education looked at how children's early language skills affect their ability to read or understand words later in childhood. The analysis we present in the following sections uses a statistical technique that accounts for factors such as parents' education, income and the quality of a home learning environment. It assesses whether a child's language ability at age five affects their reading ability at age seven and understanding of words at age 11 when all these other factors are also considered.

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   | Three and five | The child is shown a series of pictures of objects (such as a feather, or fountain) and is asked to name them – used as a test of their verbal ability. |
| BAS Reading Ability Test     | Seven          | 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.                                 |

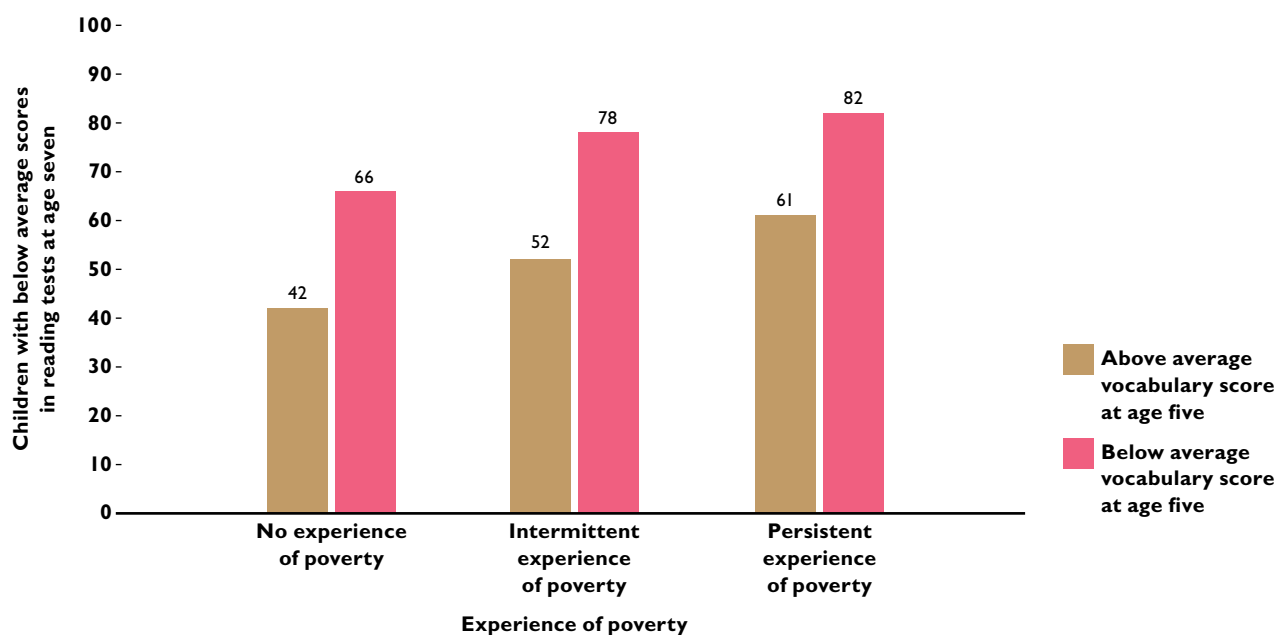
Source: Adapted from Connelly (2013) and Hansen (2014)

The analysis first shows that children who scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five did likewise in reading tests at age seven and language comprehension tests at age 11.

Figure 2.2 compares how many children in Wales who scored above and below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five scored below the average level of reading at age seven by their experience of poverty. It shows that:

- 78% of children who experienced **intermittent poverty** and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five also scored below the average level of reading ability at age seven.
- 82% of those who experienced **persistent poverty** and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five also scored below the average level of reading ability at age seven.
- Crucially, it also shows us that children with good language skills at age five and persistent experiences of poverty have similar chances of being behind at age seven to those children who have below average language skills and no experience of poverty: 61% and 66% respectively.

FIGURE 2.2 TRANSITIONS IN ABILITY BETWEEN FIVE AND SEVEN: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH BELOW AVERAGE READING SCORES AT AGE SEVEN BY VOCABULARY SCORE AT AGE FIVE AND EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY IN WALES



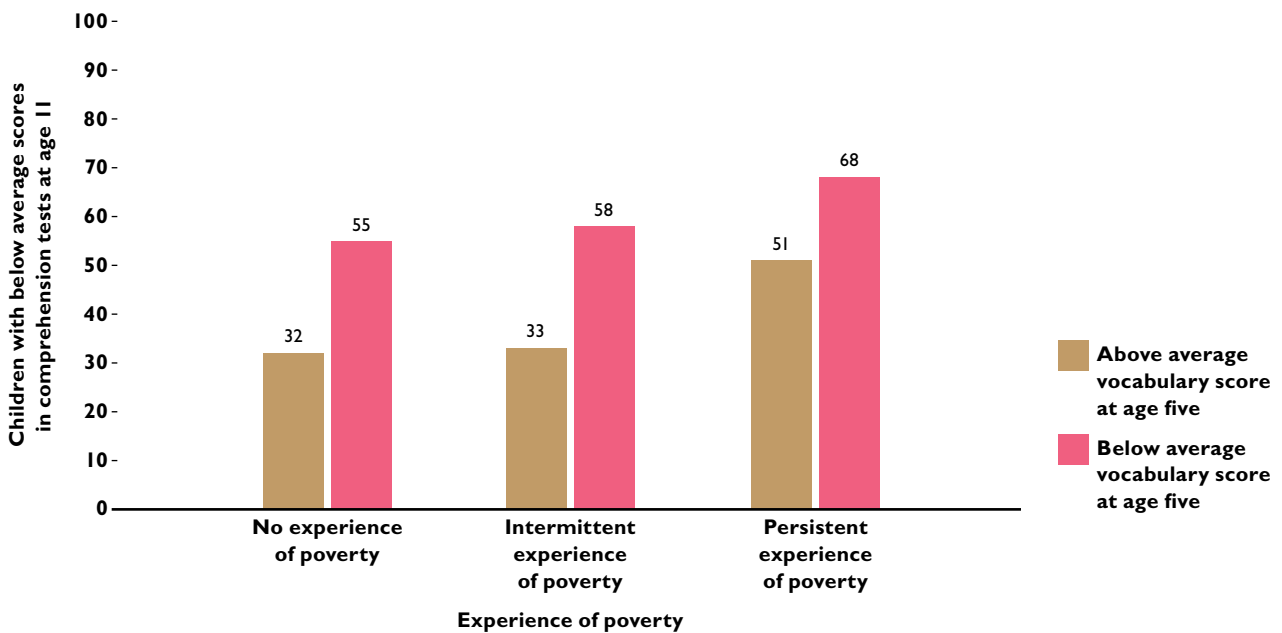
Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 3 and 4 by UCL Institute of Education



Figure 2.3 shows the same analysis but focuses on language comprehension at age 11. This shows similar patterns to those at seven by experience of poverty:

- Children who had below average vocabulary scores at age five and experienced poverty were much more likely to be below the average level of language comprehension at age 11 than their better-off peers.
- In a similar picture to that which we saw at age seven, this also shows us that children with good language skills at age five and persistent experiences of poverty have similar chances of being behind at age 11 to those children who have below average language skills and no experience of poverty: 51% and 55% respectively.

**FIGURE 2.3 TRANSITIONS IN ABILITY BETWEEN AGES FIVE AND 11: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH BELOW AVERAGE COMPREHENSION SCORES AT AGE 11 BY VOCABULARY SCORE AT AGE FIVE AND EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY IN WALES**



Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 3 and 4 by UCL Institute of Education

The analysis next looks further at these patterns to see how children's vocabulary ability and experience of poverty predict 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 influences on a child's reading ability at age seven and comprehension ability at age 11. 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 pay particular attention to 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.

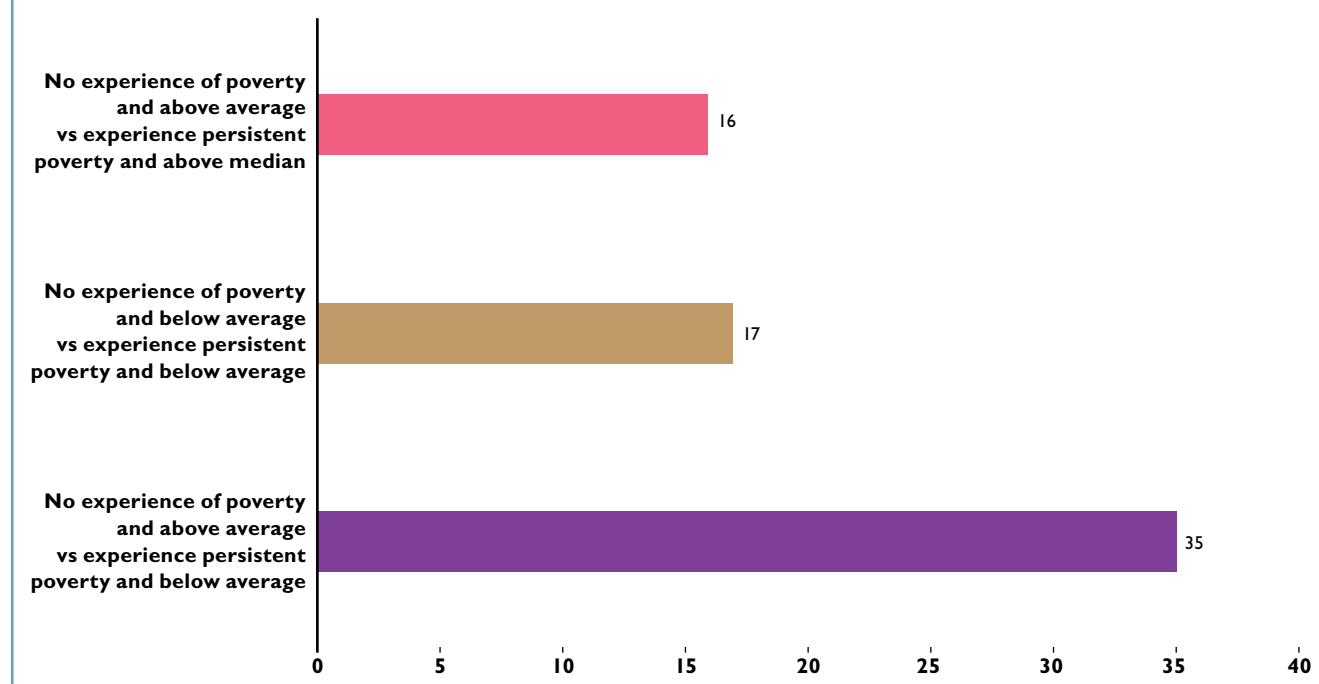
Across the UK, the analysis shows a child's vocabulary ability at age five is very strongly associated with their reading skills at age seven. Even when a range of different factors is taken into account, a child who scored below the average level of vocabulary ability was significantly less likely to score well in reading ability 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 in reading as other children at age seven.

Figure 2.4 looks at these findings in more detail by showing the combined association of children's vocabulary ability and experience of poverty on their scores in reading at age seven. It shows that:

- A child who had above average language scores in vocabulary tests at age five and no experience of poverty scored on average 16% higher than a child who also had above average scores, but had experienced persistent poverty.
- A child who had below average language scores at age five and no experience of poverty scored on average 17% 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 35% higher than a child who scored below average at age five and had experienced persistent poverty.

**FIGURE 2.4 LANGUAGE AT AGE 5, POVERTY, AND READING AT AGE SEVEN IN WALES**



Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 3 and 4 by UCL Institute of Education

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, are crucial skills if a child is going to be able to read well.

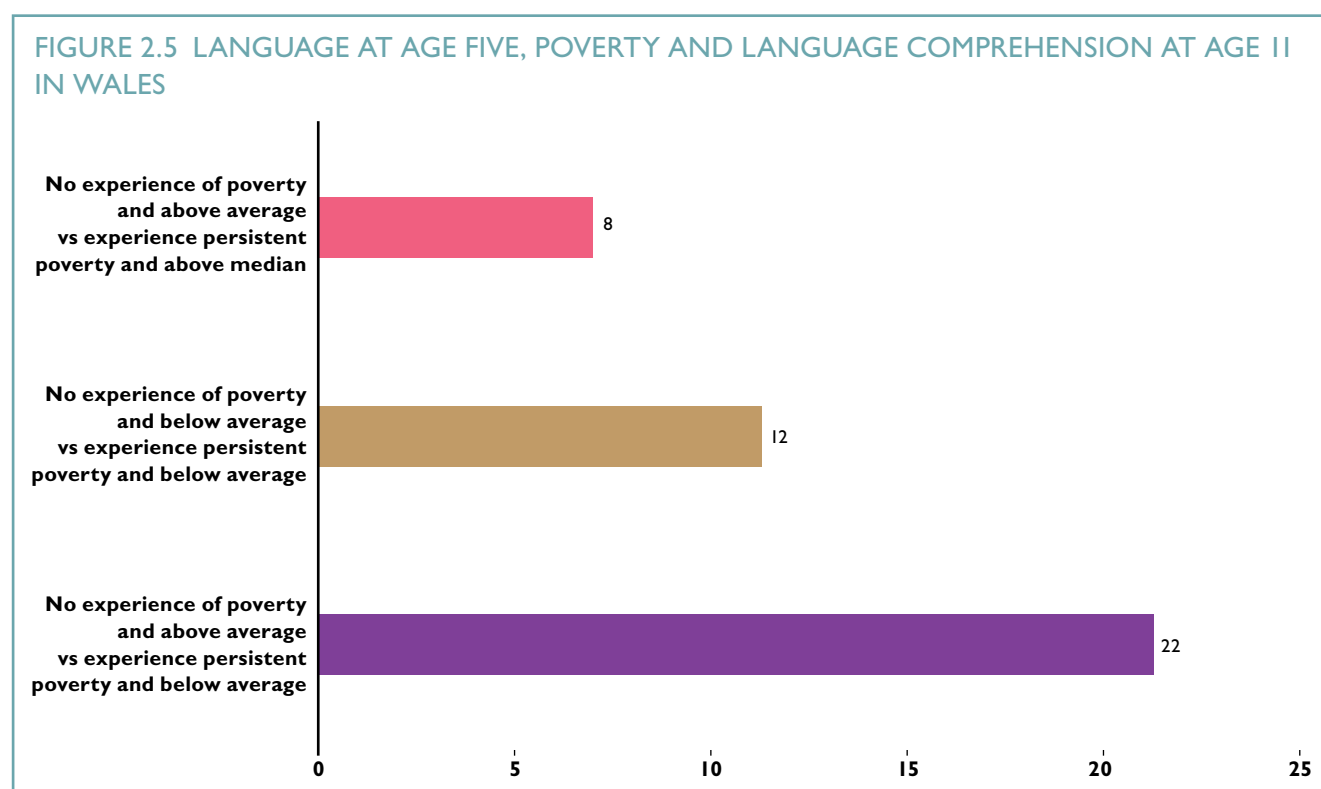
Controlling for a range of factors, the analysis finds that children's vocabulary ability at age five is still strongly associated with their comprehension skills at age 11.

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, compared to 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 well in a test of their comprehension skills at age 11 as a child who had never experienced poverty.

Figure 2.5 looks in more detail at this by combining the effect of a child's language ability with their experience of poverty. It shows that:

- A child who had above average scores in vocabulary at age five and had no experience of poverty 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 below average scores in vocabulary and no experience of poverty at age five scored on average 12% higher than a child who also had below average scores at age five but who had experienced poverty persistently.
- A child who had above average scores in vocabulary at age five and no experience of poverty scored on average 22% higher than a child who had below average scores at age five and who had experienced poverty persistently.



Source: Analysis of Millennium Cohort Study waves 3 and 4 by UCL Institute of Education

Finally, the analysis also looks at variations by gender. This analysis presents findings for the UK rather than Wales, 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 they indicate the situation for boys and girls in Wales.

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:

- 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.
- 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 by the time they start school, in order 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 wider 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 right through primary school (Snowling et al, 2011). 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 as adults at age 34 (Schoon, 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 a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues (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).

There are many factors throughout a child's life that can affect their educational attainment, their mental health or their employment outcomes. But this evidence shows that helping all children get a good start when it comes to their 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 starting 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.

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 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, nursery staff and a myriad of other people. All of these relationships take place in different environments. The most important is the home, but children's relationships also take place on the street, in the park, in the doctor's surgery, in nurseries, with childminders, in playgroups and in many other places.

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 early language development, focusing on:

- the importance of children's early development in determining their language skills, highlighting the importance of supporting children's language development right from birth
- the crucial role of parents, showing that it's what parents do that really matters, not who they are or how much money they have
- the impact of poverty, demonstrating that poverty makes it harder for parents to support their child's early learning and highlighting the need for high-quality family services
- the role of early education, outlining the role of high-quality early 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 language development, but they rarely entirely determine children'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

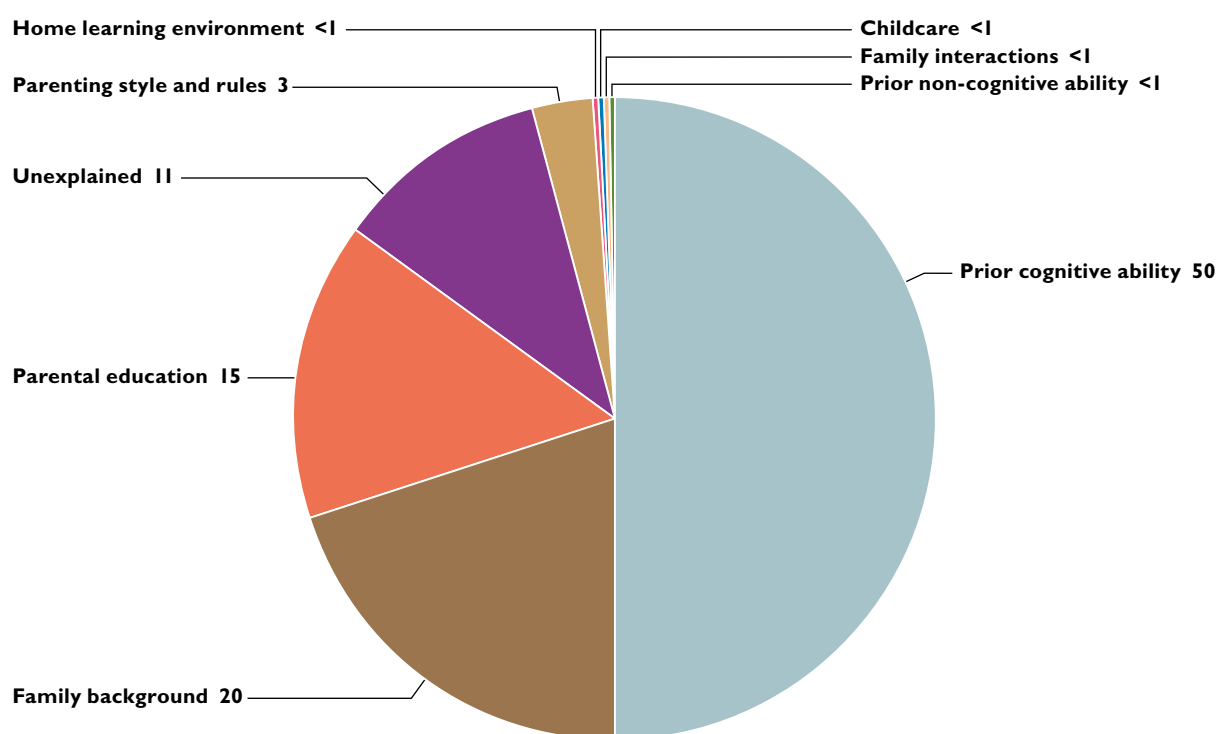
children's early experiences and innate abilities throughout their early years (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). While a child's innate ability may influence certain aspects of their language development, where this is potentially negative it can be ameliorated through positive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

## THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Analysis of MCS data shows that a child's language skills at age three account for half of the difference in children's language skills at age five between children from the richest and poorest families (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 that children who need extra support get the right help. Waiting until a child starts school is leaving it too late.

In fact, waiting until a child starts early education at age three is also 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 skills, right 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 arrive at nursery and then at primary school.

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



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 happens in two ways:

1. Indirectly, through the everyday behaviour of parents and carers: the way 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.

These are particularly important influences for the youngest children, who are not yet attending formal nursery education. The quality of parents' behaviour and the home learning environment have a particularly strong impact on children's language development at the age of three and this is crucial for determining children's language skills at five.

### 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 a secure relationship with the adults in their lives, they are more likely to develop good language skills. A strong bond with a parent or carer gives young children the confidence and motivation to

explore the world around them – including the use of language (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 (White, Field and Weedon, 2013). There is some evidence that 'closeness' between mother and child is typically weaker among children growing up in poverty, which could have implications for their early language development (Dearden et al, 2010).

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.

## WELSH GOVERNMENT'S EDUCATION BEGINS AT HOME CAMPAIGN

This campaign, launched in April 2014, aims to help parents support their children with tips and activities to encourage children's learning in the home. It is intended to complement other parental campaign work undertaken by the Department for Education and Skills on literacy and numeracy, including 'Make time to read' and 'What you say counts'.

Specifically, the campaign targets parents and carers in Communities First areas, a programme supporting the most disadvantaged people in the most deprived areas of Wales. The campaign aims to help alleviate persistent poverty with the message that parents can support their children in

important ways. Things such as getting children to bed on time, helping with reading, reminding them to do their homework and giving them confidence to do well, can have a massive impact on their child's chances at school.

The campaign uses a range of techniques and communication channels to engage with parents. Initial 'Education Begins at Home' roadshows were held in Wrexham and Caerphilly in early 2015, and almost 2,000 people took part. Following on from this success and working with Communities First, 16 further events took place at supermarkets across Wales during March and April 2015.

A bilingual radio campaign was run on local radio stations. Facebook, Twitter and World Book Day activities have also been used to share the message across Wales.



## THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

As well as the direct influence of parents' behaviour, parents also 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:

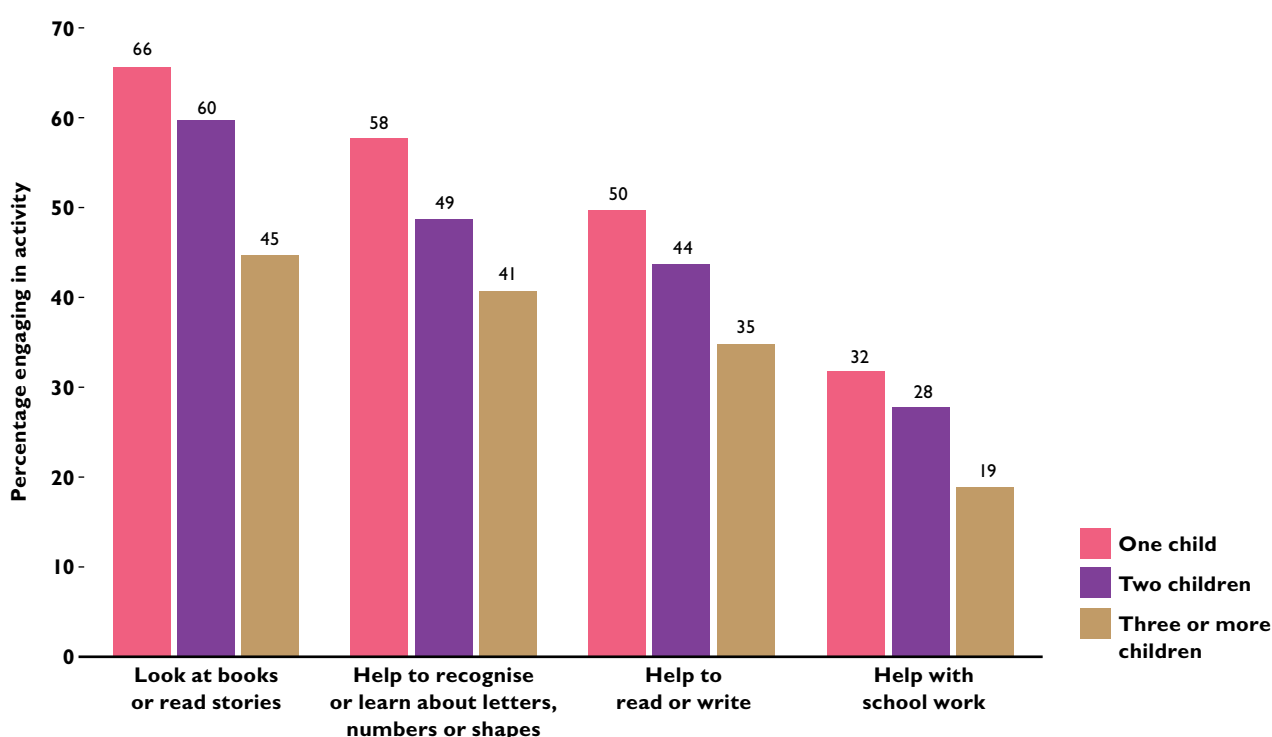
- reading regularly with a child
- playing with a child
- helping a child to read letters or numbers
- teaching a child songs, poems or nursery rhymes
- helping a child to paint, draw or engage in other craft activities
- having access to a range of books and toys
- taking a child to the library.

The EPPE study in England highlighted the powerful influence of the home learning environment on children's early learning (Sammons et al, 2002). 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 were crucial for stimulating children's language development.

Several studies from the US 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.

The annual National Survey for Wales collects evidence about the frequency with which parents engage with their children by looking at books, helping with letters, numbers and shapes, and helping them to read or write. Figure 3.2 illustrates the engagement of parents in activities with their children. The data shows that a higher percentage of parents look at books or read stories to their child every day than help to read or write or with school work every day. In each of the four activities, the percentage of parents who help a child every day with an activity decreases as the number of children in the household increases.

**FIGURE 3.2 ACTIVITIES PARENTS ENGAGED IN WITH THEIR CHILD AGED THREE TO SEVEN EVERY DAY, ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD**



Source: Welsh government 2014

## 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:** Stressing vowels and important syllables, and using an animated, high-pitched and exaggerated voice when talking to very young children can help them learn words faster. 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 on how to spot letters in the alphabet are 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 (Burnett, 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 use this information to help them predict what might happen next (Senechal et al, 1995).

**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). Research has found that the amount of time a television (adult and child programmes) was on in the home when a child was under two predicted achievement at school entry: as the amount of 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 touch-screen 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, 2014).

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). Families that created a positive home learning environment helped to boost their child's early language development, even if they were living

## SIGN AND RHYME

Sign and Rhyme is an innovative activity taking place in the County Library in Barry. A group of about 20 adults and their children aged between six months and two years attend regular sessions, designed to enable children and parents to communicate before the children can talk. The sessions include rhymes and songs accompanied by a range of signs, such as those for 'more', 'hurt',

'milk' and 'stop'. The activities give children a head start in language development, and help to reduce frustration and strengthen the bond between parent and child. Parents and other family members are encouraged to use the signs at home. Parents report that their babies are better able to concentrate and are more confident in interacting with other children as a result of attending the sessions.

in poverty. 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.

## THE IMPACT OF POVERTY ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

The evidence is clear that it is what parents do that matters most for children's early development, not who they are or how much money they have. However, poverty can have a huge impact on children's early development by influencing what parents can 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, 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, 2007).

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, 2010). Depression may reduce a parent's sensitivity to their child's early language needs and may significantly reduce the capacity of a parent to get involved in early learning activities with their child.

## ELKLAN: LET'S TALK WITH UNDER 5s

The Elklan course Let's Talk with Under 5s is a speech and language course delivered across the UK. It is delivered in a number of local authorities in Wales as part of the Flying Start programme. It is delivered to parents and carers by speech and language therapists or experienced teachers, and is designed to improve parents' knowledge and skills in dealing with children's early language development. It gives practical advice and strategies that are also suitable for children with English as an additional language. Examples of the topics covered

in the course include the following:

- normal communication development
- causes of speech and language difficulties
- adult-child interaction
- the importance of play for language development
- understanding language
- using words and sentences
- asking questions and sharing books
- helping children with unclear speech.

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). Although in Wales entrance to museums is free, families may struggle with the additional cost of travelling to a museum.

Higher levels of stress and lack of access to material resources may be compounded by differences in how parents 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. Parents from more deprived backgrounds are also 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).

However, there is also some evidence that parents living in poverty are not less likely to engage in some of the key aspects of children's early learning. Hartas (2011) found only small differences in the use of language-based activities like singing songs and telling stories between parents living in poverty and those not in poverty. However, there were 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 through its impact on parents' behaviour and the home learning environment in ways we don't fully understand. More research is needed to understand the precise mechanisms at play.

Independent of family income, parents' education also has a large impact on children's early language development. This poses an extra challenge for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Analysis of data from the MCS found 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 et al, 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 children's early language development (Carnerio 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. This could be due to their being less likely to access services or to model the language and communication skills from which children can learn.

### POVERTY VERSUS BEHAVIOUR: WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT?

Overall, analysis of MCS data has found that 'structural factors' can have a relatively large influence on children's early language development (Dearden et al, 2011). About 40% of the difference in language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest families is explained by these structural factors, which include family income, parents' education and a mother's age at birth. This analysis highlights the important role of tackling the root causes of child poverty in contributing

to language delay among poor children. Some of these structural influences on children's language development are difficult, or impossible, to change.

However, Dearden et al (2011) also found 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 policymakers and professionals can have the biggest impact on young children's life chances.

## EARLY EDUCATION AND OTHER EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Throughout this chapter we have focused on the influence parents and the home have on children's language development. However, parents do not

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

Strong evidence on the benefits of good quality early education comes from the EPPE study, which has tracked the progress of more than 3,000 children in England since the late 1990s (Sylva et al, 2004). The latest evidence from EPPE shows that attending a high-quality pre-school setting can have positive educational benefits that last through to secondary school, compared to children who do not attend any early years setting at all (Sylva et al, 2014). Earlier

## BOOKSTART: SUPPORTING THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Universal gifting programmes, such as Book Trust Cymru's Bookstart, are designed to address the issue of a lack of resources by supplying age-appropriate books and guidance materials. These programmes are coordinated by local library services, in partnership with health visitors, and often involve other early years settings. A review of book gifting programmes indicates they also influence parental attitudes to sharing books with children; children's enthusiasm for looking at books; the frequency and extent of book sharing; book ownership; library membership; and children's long-term literacy attainment (Burnett et al, 2014).

The quality of resources in the home learning environment is vital to literacy development. Book selection by expert panels, such as those involved in Book Trust Cymru programmes, ensures books suited to the specific needs of children are available to families, including Welsh-language provision. For example, Bookstart provides packs designed for deaf children; blind or partially sighted children; those with disabilities affecting fine motor skills; and dual-language books. An expert review of Bookstart materials (Centre for

Education and Inclusion Research, 2012) found that packs provide excellent coverage of language and literacy; phonological awareness; and physical and sensory experience.

Bookstart also provides guides and information for the parent or carer, designed to enhance their skills and confidence (Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, 2012). They can also provide a route through to further support. A study commissioned by Book Trust (Wylie, 2014) found that parents involved in the Bookstart Corner targeted intervention (England and Northern Ireland at present) were more confident and knowledgeable about reading with their child, and 66% of parents reported engagement in at least one local service as a result of the programme, for example, seeking help with their own literacy or joining the library.

Book Trust Cymru's Superbox programme supplies a wide range of early years workers with multiple copies of the Bookstart books to use in settings, along with training in book sharing and how to support and encourage parents and carers to read with their children. Superbox aims to increase parental confidence in using the Bookstart books and reading regularly with their children. It also links key Bookstart messages about shared reading to other wider early years interventions.



conclusions from EPPE found that for children aged three and five, attending a good-quality full or part-time preschool was substantially beneficial for both cognitive and behavioural achievement. It also had a 'protective' effect, offsetting to some extent the effect of a child attending a less effective primary school in terms of reading and writing outcomes. Another important finding was that full-time care had no more positive effects than part-time care. The EPPE study also found that early years settings play an important role in supporting parents and carers to develop the home learning environment.

International evidence also shows that high-quality childcare settings have a positive, lasting effect on children's 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 quality 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 early education, high-quality provision and children's language development is compelling and comes from several studies. Evidence has shown that 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 how to create an environment where children are involved, stimulated and interact positively with staff and other children; and that fully integrates care and education (OECD, 2012). The *Independent Review of the Regulation and Inspection of Early Childhood Care and Education* (Welsh Government, 2014) recommended that "We should be working towards a situation in Wales where group-based ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] for young children are all led by a teacher or graduate-level practitioner".

Most of the evidence about the impact of services on children's early language development relates to formal early education and childcare. There is 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 tested.

However, in the following chapter, we argue that wider early years services have the potential to have 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.

## EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN FLYING START

A recent review of practice in relation to early language development (ELD) in Flying Start areas (Welsh Government, 2014) considered how local authorities engaged families in ELD activities and how barriers to engagement are addressed by practitioners. The review identified several approaches that practitioners considered effective in engaging parents:

- **Multi-disciplinary approaches:** relationships built by health visitors and family support workers were considered vital in building trust between practitioners and parents, enabling a less formal approach to delivering targeted and specialist ELD services;
- **Cross-cutting approaches:** delivering ELD activities as part of, or alongside, other services that were not specifically ELD settings (eg, language and play groups delivered in health visitor waiting rooms or childcare settings);
- **Earlier engagement:** many staff proposed that engagement in ELD activity should begin earlier, ideally at the antenatal stage in order to build awareness and encourage participation in ELD. This was considered to be effective in those areas that had taken this approach;
- **Clear referral procedures:** ensuring that all staff (for example, childcare workers, health visitors, and family support workers) understand key developmental milestones and can refer cases appropriately to speech and language therapists or other professionals such as advisory teachers.

# 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, parents and carers are a major influence on children in the early years and throughout their lives. This is why a major part of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is speaking directly to parents. However, alongside this, 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 early education, services and programmes 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 Wales is supported by early years services, particularly national initiatives and programmes. It looks at the progress that has been made and the remaining challenges in the service landscape to ensure all children in Wales are able to develop good language skills in their early years.

## EARLY YEARS SERVICES: FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL

In Wales, there is a range of early years services available to children. In order to understand how early years services might strengthen support for children's language development, we need to first understand what services are on offer to parents and children, especially those in poverty.

- **Universal services:** these services are provided to all children and seek to support language-rich environments that promote all children's language development (this includes home learning environments). 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 services:** in addition to universal services, some children may require additional targeted support in relation to their language development. Targeted support is provided to children who are not (or are at risk of not) achieving expected levels of progress in the development of their communication skills. In Wales, a Flying Start entitlement is targeted at those children living in areas of high deprivation. Children requiring relatively straightforward interventions or opportunities to practice and consolidate skills have targeted support delivered by early years practitioners and parents. Where appropriate, speech and language therapists often provide specialist assessment, advice and written strategies to support each child'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 is provided to early years practitioners and parents on specific areas of language development, including 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 that play a key role in early language development, and that are typically available to families with young children. 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 reviewing and supporting young children's development. Key services include midwives and health visitors. Health visitors take over responsibility for a child's care from a midwife two weeks after birth, and support families until the child is five years old.

Health visitors and midwives perform an important role in supporting families and their children during the early stages of development. They are often the main source of support and engagement with public services that families with very young children have, and come directly into the home, so build up trusting relationships with parents. They work with parents to review children's progress and provide support, including referring families to specialist services where needed, which include support for children's early language development.

Health visitors in Wales conduct reviews of children's development at key stages. In the first months of a child's life, these are focused on the child's physical development. The Schedule of Growing Skills (SoGS) tool is used across Wales to measure children's development at ages two and three years old. In some areas, it is used with younger children to identify emerging needs early. It is a standardised screening tool used to assess children's development across nine key areas. Three of these developmental areas are related to early language development: hearing and language; speech and language; and interactive social skills.

Although SoGS is not a specialist tool for assessing speech and language development, a recent review into the implementation of the early language

development element within Flying Start (Welsh Government, 2014c) reported that staff value the SoGS assessments. The review recommended "all staff using screening and assessment tools should receive training on the implementation of these tools".

Enhanced access to health visitors is a core feature of the Flying Start offer in Wales, available to children and families living in areas of high deprivation. The National Evaluation of Flying Start in Wales (Welsh Government, 2013b) found a key part of the health visitor's role was to persuade parents of the benefits of these services and help them overcome any reluctance to use them. Health visitors will also play a key role in disseminating the recently launched Flying Start speech, language and communication resources to parents by the Welsh government (May 2015).

## SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) play an important role in the design and delivery of early years services aimed at optimising all children's speech, language and communication skills. SLTs assess, diagnose and develop programmes of care. In some settings, such as Flying Start, this includes training the wider workforce and parents and carers to improve children's language development.

A significant focus for SLTs is the provision of support for babies and young children born with medical conditions that 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, but any parent can refer their child to an SLT if they have concerns.

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.

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists in Wales has established a Clinical Excellence Network, which includes SLTs based in Flying Start areas. The network provides a forum for discussing and disseminating good practice in the delivery of targeted speech, language and communication services to families.

The Welsh government has increasingly placed speech and language therapists at the heart of the universal and targeted services delivered through the Flying Start programme, as evidenced by the newly developed guidance and resources discussed in chapter 3. This follows a recent review of the Flying Start early language development entitlement, which recommended that “All local authorities should employ SLTs as part of their core teams, with a particular focus on the ELD entitlement” (Welsh Government, 2014c). At the time of writing, the majority (19 out of 22) of local authorities in Wales employ an SLT as part of their Flying Start teams.

The review also made recommendations on the role of SLTs in supporting the training of universal and targeted staff. It recommended that “all Flying Start staff should receive a minimum level of training relating to ELD norms and good practice in adult-child interaction. This training should be overseen by a SLT.”

## INTEGRATED CHILDREN'S CENTRES

Integrated Children's Centres (ICC) are based on the concept of providing an integrated service to secure good outcomes for children and their parents and thus ensure the best start in life. They act as a community hub where statutory, voluntary and private organisations deliver activities for children and families, and they seek to build positive links between different services for young children and their families. ICCs have a number of core elements, which include early years education, childcare, training and family support and open access play. In some areas, the universal Family Information Services, which provide free advice and information in all local authorities on a wide range of childcare options and activities for children aged 0–20, are available in ICCs.

In 2008, the Big Lottery Fund commissioned the National Foundation for Education Research's Welsh Unit to evaluate the impact of four ICCs in Wales. One of the key findings from this research was that ICCs have a positive impact on children's skills and

development (NfER, 2010). The research also found that sustainability is a key concern for the ICCs, as reduced funding from central and local sources has increased financial pressures and increased demand for services they provide.

## FLYING START

The Welsh government launched the Flying Start programme in 2006/2007. It targets the most disadvantaged communities in Wales and is a key component of the Welsh government's strategies to alleviate the effects of poverty. Flying Start provides targeted support to children and families in the most deprived areas of Wales in order to make a “decisive difference to the lives of children”.

Flying Start is administered as a grant to local authorities to fund provision for children and their families within targeted areas. Core elements of the programme are:

- free quality, part-time childcare for two-to-three-year-olds
- an enhanced health visiting service
- access to parenting programmes
- speech, language and communication.

These entitlements are universally available to families with children aged from nought to four in Flying Start areas. 12.5 hours of free childcare is provided for eligible two and three year olds as part of the programme, which has recently expanded to cover around a quarter of all children aged under four in Wales. In addition to these core entitlements, tailored support depending on individual families' needs is also an important element of the programme. Flying Start includes an element of outreach work, requiring local authorities to identify families living outside Flying Start areas who would benefit from Flying Start services.

The speech, language and communication component of Flying Start is Language and Play (LAP). LAP is offered across all local authorities in Wales, but the delivery often varies. LAP provision is sometimes delivered as group sessions, in childcare or community settings, and sometimes delivered as one-to-one sessions, in centres or the family home. These LAP sessions are either delivered in 'drop-in' sessions or as a course within a programme.

SLTs, assistant SLTs, advisory teachers and other staff are often involved in delivering LAP. These staff present activities to parents either verbally

or through written materials, and encourage them to try these activities with their children. These activities may include creating simple toys or different play strategies to encourage early language development.

Until April 2015, local authorities received a Flying Start grant, part of which was used to fund LAP in Flying Start areas, and a separate universal LAP grant to deliver universal LAP. From April 2015 the LAP grant received by each local authority across Wales

was integrated into the Flying Start grant, and so the delivery of the LAP programme would sit under the outreach element of Flying Start. This is intended to enable families most in need, both within and outside of Flying Start areas, to access the LAP programmes. As yet, we do not have any evidence on the impact of this change for children and families. This would be a valuable area for further research.

The early language development element of Flying Start also includes more targeted programmes for

## FLYING START RESOURCES TO IMPROVE YOUNG CHILDREN'S SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The Welsh government has published Flying Start guidance on Speech, Language and Communication (June 2015). The guidance is aimed at Flying Start staff working to support speech and language development, but is equally applicable to any practitioners working with children in the early years, education and health sectors. It includes principles and expectations that the Welsh government expects should underpin all speech and language support delivered through the Flying Start programme and beyond. It provides advice to practitioners for working with parents and identifying the language needs of children.

The Welsh government has also developed resources for parents and practitioners, in response to the reviews of the early language development support entitlement of Flying Start undertaken in 2014 (Welsh Government, 2014c). These evidence-informed resources have been developed following advice from an expert working group that included Flying Start health visitors and speech and language therapists. Workshops were also held with parents to develop effective and compelling messages.

These resources promote ways of encouraging speech, language and communication skills in children, such as singing to babies, turning TVs off when talking to babies and children, talking when playing, and the importance of reading to youngsters. The resources also promote the benefits of bilingualism. The resources aim to promote a set of clear and consistent messages to

parents and practitioners on the development of children's speech, language and communication.

The resources are:

- **Speech and language development wheel: A guide from birth to five years**

These wheels are for use by all Flying Start health visitors. The tool presents key milestones during a child's speech and language development, and includes ideas for professionals to offer parents to encourage language development.

- **Stages of speech and language development poster**

These posters include similar messages to those included in the development wheel and are intended to be displayed in a prominent position in each Flying Start setting.

- **“Learning to Talk”: A Flying Start pack for parents**

This bilingual pack includes a series of cards which share key messages and ideas to encourage parents to talk, sing and play with their child, beginning from when they are still in the womb. The pack is divided into three sections and is given out at different stages of a child's life:

- Part 1 is to be given to parents by their midwife or health visitor at the 25-week antenatal appointment. It contains key introductory messages and a CD of bilingual nursery rhymes.
- Part 2 is given to parents by the health visitor shortly after birth. It contains key messages and ideas from birth to age two.
- Part 3 is given to parents when a child turns two. It contains further messages and ideas for continued language development.

children who are identified as having additional needs in this area. These programmes often consist of tailored interventions planned by SLTs and other professionals. Additionally, local authorities use a range of speech and language programmes which are offered as part of the parenting support element of Flying Start. Examples of these programmes include Elklan, a programme that includes training for practitioners and parents of children under five, and Hanen Early Language Programme, which is used in a number of countries.

## EARLY EDUCATION

In 2008, the Welsh government launched the Foundation Phase, a Framework for Children's learning for three- to seven-year-olds in Wales (Welsh Government, 2008). The Foundation Phase is the statutory curriculum for all three- to seven-year-olds in Wales, in both maintained and non-maintained settings. It aims to encourage children to be creative and imaginative, and to make learning more enjoyable and more effective.

The Foundation Phase has seven Areas of Learning, which are delivered through practical activities and active learning experiences both indoors and outdoors:

- personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity
- language, literacy and communication skills
- mathematical development
- Welsh language development
- knowledge and understanding of the world
- physical development
- creative development.

In Wales, a minimum of ten hours a week of free education is provided for three- and four-year-olds as part of the Foundation Phase. Some local authorities provide more than the statutory minimum. Despite significant cuts to some budgets affecting families with young children, early education has been an area of expansion in Wales over the last five years and looks set to experience further growth. In 2012, just over 4,380 childcare settings were registered with the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales. Around 17,500 people worked with our youngest children in childcare.

As set out in chapter 3, free early education can have a significant impact on children's outcomes, especially for our poorest children, but only if it is

good quality, ideally, led by a trained teacher or early years graduate. The Welsh government has set out its proposals to improve the quality of early years education in the draft consultation for the early years, childcare and play workforce in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014h) under three themes: leadership; attracting high-quality new entrants; and raising skills and standards in the existing workforce. The proposals include:

- development of early years learning hubs to support collaboration and staff development
- a progression route through the sector up to Level 6 (degree level equivalent) qualifications
- changing the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Child Care to reflect Level 3 as the required standard for practitioners
- a 'stepped approach' to up-skilling through qualifications and an ongoing record of continuous professional learning.

The Early Years and Childcare Plan states that when childcare settings view educational and social development as complementary and of equal importance, children tend to make better progress, particularly where staff (including some trained teachers) have higher qualifications. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities or special educational needs (SEN) also benefit from attending a high-quality setting. The plan notes that the number of children at risk of SEN can be reduced to one in five, from one in three, through good pre-school education.

There is currently a wide variation in the qualification levels of the workforce in the childcare sector in Wales (Figure 4.1). The Welsh government acknowledges the challenge in raising the status and value placed on the caring and teaching of young children. Despite positive progress to build workforce capacity and skills, significant barriers still need to be overcome, including the cost, availability and accessibility of training.

There have been significant improvements in qualification levels and professional practice among the childcare workforce over the last 20 years. The vast majority of staff delivering free nursery education now have, as a minimum, an intermediate-level qualification in a relevant subject (equivalent to A levels). However, the number of staff with a relevant degree remains far too low. In 2012, just 4% of staff in full day care nurseries in Wales had a degree (see Figure 4.1).

FIGURE 4.1 QUALIFICATION LEVELS HELD BY CATEGORY OF CHILDCARE PROVIDER (ALL STAFF)

| Provider                | Qualification level |         |         |         |        |
|-------------------------|---------------------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
|                         | No qualification    | Level 2 | Level 3 | Level 5 | Degree |
| Full day care provider  | 15%                 | 10%     | 64%     | 6%      | 4%     |
| Sessional day care      | 18%                 | 15%     | 62%     | 4%      | 1%     |
| Childminder             | 72%                 | 3%      | 23%     | 2%      | 0%     |
| Out-of-school childcare | 17%                 | 25%     | 54%     | 3%      | 1%     |

Source: 2012 Melyn Report for the Care Council for Wales

## LIBRARIES

In Wales, libraries have been identified as making an important contribution to improving literacy, especially for children (Public Health Wales, 2012). They are based in many local communities and are free to access for all families. They offer access to free books and run a wide range of programmes for preschool children focused on language development, including reading, singing and nursery rhyme groups.

Libraries in Wales already work with health visitors to provide families with a free Bookstart bag at the nine-month health check and an early years satchel at the two-year health check. Libraries often have partnerships with early years and health services to offer early language support and guidance to families in prenatal and postnatal groups. They provide safe child-friendly spaces where families can spend time out of the home environment, which can be important for relationships and reducing isolation without spending money.

The strategy for Welsh libraries (Libraries Inspire, Welsh Government, 2012) highlights a range of activities and work programmes to build on this. Public libraries also hold reading groups, story times, baby bounce and rhyme times, homework clubs and arts groups, as well as health and well-being projects. Libraries also work with local schools in relation to information, research and homework and out-of-school activities such as the Summer Reading Challenge. The pioneering Every Child a Library Member, being rolled out across Wales for year 4 pupils from 2014–16, is to be welcomed. Provision for children's services and activities in libraries, including spend on materials, is also part of the Welsh Public Library standards 2014–17.

There is evidence that having access to books in the community can help to boost children's early language skills. A study where 330 preschools in England 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 children play (Neuman, 1999). The proximity of children 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).

The inquiry by the Communities, Equalities and Local Government Committee into Public Libraries in Wales (2014) notes the valuable contribution grant funding from the Welsh government's Community Learning Library programme has made to modernising libraries, particularly increases in children's use of the modernised libraries. However, funding for libraries is not ring-fenced. The *Expert Review of Public Libraries in Wales* (Welsh Government, 2014b) confirmed the budgetary pressures facing libraries in Wales, and there is no room for complacency as local authorities make increasingly difficult budget choices.



## FAMILIES FIRST

Families First is a targeted Welsh government programme that aims to improve the design and delivery of the services local authority areas provide to families. In particular, it aims to improve families' experiences through offering support that meets the needs of whole families: a Team Around the Family approach, which co-ordinates the support families receive from different agencies.

Families First is delivered in every local authority in Wales. The service delivery varies in each area, as the programme gives local authorities flexibility and responsibility to determine how to implement each of these elements locally. In some areas of Wales, local authorities have commissioned targeted early language support through their Families First programmes.

The service landscape for parents to access support for their children's early language development is broad, and in places diffuse. There are a range of contact points for parents to access support, and this report has presented a number of best practice examples of collaboration between partners to reach families during the early years. However, a significant challenge remains to join up the efforts of all partners and ensure the children and parents who need additional early language support are able to access it. We consider solutions to this issue in the following chapter.

# 5 THREE PRIORITIES FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGES

This report has set out why all children 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.

We've set out the challenges we face. Too many children experiencing poverty are behind in language skills when they start school. Poverty can make it harder for parents to provide the environment children need to thrive. Early years services have a crucial role to play in supporting parents to develop their children's language skills, as well as direct support in early years settings.

This section of the report examines a number of recent positive developments in the Welsh policy context, and the progress we are making. It also highlights future opportunities to find solutions to the challenges we need to overcome in order to ensure all children have good early language skills by the time they start school.

## POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### THE EARLY YEARS

The Welsh government made explicit in its Programme for Government a commitment to give all children in Wales the best possible start. Central to this approach is recognition of the importance of the early years for children's future development and the detrimental effect of living in poverty on children's life chances.

The government's commitment to doubling the number of children in Wales benefiting from Flying Start, from 18,000 to 36,000, was one of the Welsh government's flagship 'Five for a Fairer Future' commitments. This goal was met and exceeded by June 2015.

Alongside the Flying Start programme, the Welsh government also developed Building a Brighter Future: early years and childcare plan. With a clear focus on tackling poverty, this cross-governmental ten-year plan identifies five strategic priorities to improve early years provision:

- children's health and well-being
- supporting families and parents
- high-quality early education and childcare
- effective primary education
- raising standards.

The Welsh government's vision and ambition for long-term transformative change for the early years is to be commended. There are a number of programmes within the plan which, if implemented effectively and with a focus on quality, stand to make a substantial difference to children's early language development and future life chances.

An Early Years Partnership Board has been established to advise ministers, in order to deliver key elements of Building a Brighter Future. This board has brought together representatives from a range of public bodies, academic institutions, third sector organisations and professional membership bodies to pool expertise and experience. The cross-departmental nature of the plans is a further positive indication of the desire to support joined-up working and to increase the coherence of a complex policy, service and practice landscape.



In particular, the early years outcomes framework and ten-year plan for the early years, childcare and play workforce in Wales stand to make a significant contribution to improving the quality of early years provision in Wales. At the time of writing, both initiatives are to be published and implemented in 2015, and draft versions issued for consultation recognise the importance of early language and literacy skills. As we will discuss later in this chapter, we believe there is a strong rationale for making the early language commitments in these initiatives more ambitious, because of the difference they can make to children's outcomes.

## EDUCATION

In February 2015, Professor Graham Donaldson published the evidence and recommendations from his fundamental review of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, commissioned by the Welsh government. The review considered education arrangements from the Foundation Phase (up to age three) to Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16) in Wales. In July 2015, the Minister for Education and Skills announced he accepted and would be implementing all the recommendations.

The Donaldson recommendations will fundamentally overhaul the structure of curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales and will inform how education is conceived, delivered and evaluated. The report recommends moving away from a subject-based curriculum to an 'Areas of Learning and Experience' approach, as adopted in the Foundation phase. One of the six proposed Areas of Learning and Experience is language, literacy and communication; this is further supported by the recognition that literacy is one of three cross-curriculum responsibilities for all teachers and people who work with children and young people. There is positive endorsement of the approach set out in the National Literacy and Numeracy Framework, which is being expanded to support early skills development for three and four-year-olds.

The Donaldson review sets out a vision for reform that will take years to implement; however, the direction of travel has been set, and broadly endorsed. We must ensure that early education becomes a coherent part of these changes so children are ready and able to learn when they start school. Rewriting the Future: raising ambition and attainment in Welsh Schools (Welsh Government,

June 2014) recognises that "early investment and support needs to continue from one stage of learning and development to the next so that the early benefits are built upon and the cumulative impact of deprivation is mitigated".

Encouragingly, the Welsh government is trialling how the Foundation Phase Profile, a new assessment tool that aligns assessment at the beginning and the end of the Foundation Phase, can 'map' to the Schedule of Growing Skills (as part of a wider Early Years Development and Assessment Framework) for nought to seven-year-olds across all sectors. This is very welcome news, and a national picture of children's language skills at age four to five on entry to the foundation phase will be an important indicator of the progress we are making in this area.

However, there is much more to do to ensure all children in Wales enter school with the language skills they need to engage, communicate and learn. The challenge is to determine the key steps we need to take to ensure all children are able to access the early language support they need to enter school ready to thrive.

## 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 Welsh government achieve its top priority for education: tackling the impact of poverty on educational attainment.

### 1. INVESTING FURTHER IN THE QUALITY OF THE EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

The evidence set out in this report demonstrates the vital role of early education in complementing the efforts of parents to support their children's early language development. Early education has enormous potential to boost the early language skills of Wales' poorest children:

- First, the vast majority of young children in Wales, including most of those living in poverty, now attend an early years service before they start full-time school. This creates a massive opportunity to influence the early language learning of large numbers of poor children.

- Second, there is a very robust evidence base about what action is needed to improve the quality of early education and the impact this can have on children experiencing poverty.

This is why we attach such priority to improving the quality of early education to help meet our campaign goals and is why we ask the Welsh government to commit to the following actions in key areas:

**a) Ensure staff and parents in all early year settings have access to at least one member of staff with a graduate level qualification, with expertise in early language development, by 2020.**

This report has set out evidence that nursery education led by a graduate can have a measurable impact on young children's language development. This impact is typically stronger for children growing up in poverty. In 2012, just 4% of staff in full day care nurseries in Wales had a degree (Figure 4.1). This figure is too low, and without targeted effort the availability of and access to quality early language development expertise outside Flying Start settings will not improve.

There is a major opportunity to build on the success of Flying Start and work with other providers to ensure all settings have access to this much-needed expertise. At the time of writing, 19 out of 22 local authorities in Wales have a speech and language therapist employed as part of their Flying Start teams. The Welsh government's expansion of the Flying Start programme is to be commended; however, there are many more children in Wales disadvantaged by poverty who are not able to access the support they need. Having met the Flying Start expansion target a year early, the time is right to turn our attention to the quality of provision for other children, especially those living in poverty and outside Flying Start areas.

The Welsh government has prioritised driving up the quality of the early years and childcare workforce. The commitment to ensure all staff have at least a Level 3 qualification in early years by 2025 is welcome, and in particular the recognition that early language development should be a focus for practitioners. Intermediate-level training in young children's speech, language and communication among non-graduate staff is important for helping to identify children at risk of language delay.

But we must not rest our ambitions here. To ensure our workforce is of a standard that best supports the

development of all children, and to ensure that those children who need extra support receive it early enough, we must ensure that the wider workforce has consistent access to expert speech and language training, oversight and advice. The proposal in the draft Early Years, Childcare and Play Workforce in Wales plan to introduce a progression route through the sector up to Level 6 (degree level equivalent) is welcome; however, this will not provide the urgent need for expertise many settings do not currently have access to and we risk missing the opportunity to give a generation of children the early language skills they need to thrive.

The current Welsh government guidance on the early years pupil deprivation grant for three- and four-year-olds recognises the importance of early language, and provides information on where early years practitioners can access evidence-based interventions for children with speech, language and communication needs. However, this report makes clear the importance of having expert oversight of speech and language development to ensure the quality of support. We suggest settings could be incentivised, through the regional Education Consortia, to work collaboratively and use the early years pupil deprivation grant towards funding access to a graduate with early language expertise. This would ensure the pupil deprivation grant is used to drive up the quality of support for poorer children.

The UK government's manifesto commitment to offer 30 hours' free childcare for three- and four-year-old children is likely to result in consequential funding for Wales (at the time of writing the exact figures have not been announced). It is critical that the opportunity to focus on quality, as well as quantity, is not lost. This is especially true for our youngest children growing up in poverty.

**b) Adopt a robust, systematic and consistent approach to assessing the demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual early years provision. This information should be used to ensure a sufficient supply of provision to meet parental demand. This systematic approach should include assessing whether there are sufficient numbers of staff with the requisite Welsh language skills to meet the needs of families.**

This report has set out evidence that there is variation in the methods and frequency of local authority assessments of the demand for childcare, and in particular Welsh-medium and bilingual

provision. Issues regarding parental perceptions and understanding of bilingual childcare create additional challenges in interpreting local authority data. This report has suggested that further research would be valuable in considering how data can be collected more systematically.

The variation and inconsistencies in data mean it is difficult to be clear about the scale and nature of the need for provision in the Welsh language. Without a clear understanding of demand, it is impossible to judge to what extent an effective service response is in place.

In Wales, according to the 2014 Annual Population Survey, just over one quarter (27.5%) of the population can speak Welsh (Annual Population Survey, 2014). The Welsh government is committed to supporting the promotion of the Welsh language. Its Welsh Language Strategy 2012–2017 (Welsh Government, 2012) outlines the aim to increase the number of people who both speak and use the language. In order to ensure that those families who wish to raise their children bilingually have access to the right childcare and early education, it is vital we establish a more robust and systematic approach to understand the scale and nature of demand, so that provision is better placed to respond to this intelligence.

Professor Donaldson's review *Successful Futures* recognised the importance of early language skills, and recommended "strengthening the language in primary schools in order to create solid foundations for learning in Welsh and other languages in secondary school" (Recommendation 25). If we are to ensure that children in primary school are in a strong position to learn to speak and use Welsh, we must ensure that firm foundations are put in place in the early years.

## 2. STRENGTHENING 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 education workforce set out in this report are combined with action to support parents to recognise the importance of early language development.

This is crucial because children's language skills in their early years have an enormous impact on their reading and literacy in later years, and this is strongly influenced by the environment they grow up in. This is why we attach such priority to improving the quality of support for parents to help meet our campaign goals.

Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (Welsh Government, 2013) recognises the importance of supporting parents and families to do their best for their children's development. It includes a specific commitment to help parents engage in their child's learning. The Welsh government has taken forward key activities to achieve this, such as the recent Family and Engagement Toolkit for schools in Wales.

However, there are further opportunities to increase the quality of support parents and children receive from the early years workforce; we ask the Welsh government to commit to the following actions in key areas:

**a) Ensure 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 framework for the early years and childcare workforce that includes core elements covering early language development and supporting parents.**

The forthcoming ten-year plan for the early years, childcare and play workforce in Wales stands to make a significant difference to driving up the overall quality of the workforce. The proposal to ensure all members of the workforce are qualified to Level 3 by 2025 is a critical opportunity to develop a Continuous Professional Development Framework that equips the workforce with quality assured training in early language and in supporting parents.

Early language training should include the importance of early language development, normal developmental milestones and how to identify needs, and how to respond effectively. Training should address the particular challenges faced by families living in poverty, and evidence-based means of engaging and supporting parents to develop their child's early language skills in the home.

**b) Assess how many children are living in poverty but outside Flying Start areas. Then commit to actions to ensure these children are able to access the quality support they need for good speech and early language development.**

Children and parents in Flying Start areas are able to access early speech, language and communication

information and advice from birth throughout all elements of the Flying Start programme, including language and play.

However, many other children growing up in Wales do not access formal early learning opportunities until they are three. For these children in particular, other services potentially have a critical role in supporting their early language development. We believe the scale and nature of this need should be fully understood. Strategic action should then be taken to make the best use of community resources, to ensure that parents receive the support they need, and that their children have good early language skills by the time they reach school.

### 3. STRONG AND AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR CHILDREN

Since devolution there has been a strong tradition of child-centred policy-making in Wales. Wales adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis of all policies for children and young people. Despite this, there remains fragmented governance on issues affecting children, at national and local levels, which we believe jeopardises children and young people's outcomes.

At present, children's education and early years policy is split across two ministerial portfolios. This has a knock-on effect on the coordination of services at a local level, specifically children's readiness for school and transition from early years services. We believe there is a strong case for consolidating governance on children's early years and education policy and practice for two key reasons:

- Early years provision and early education need to be a coherent part of the reforms taken forward following the Donaldson review, to ensure children are equipped with the early language skills they need to thrive when they begin school.
- Clearer national governance arrangements would support those working with families to take earlier action when problems arise, and to secure better outcomes for children, as they would be supported by a joined-up policy framework. Locally, early years and education services might not be integrated, to ensure the best possible

service for parents and children. This is often due to the fact that services are funded, commissioned and delivered by different parts of government, as set out in chapter 4. In some local areas, services will work well together, with good integration between health visitors, Flying Start, Families First and nurseries, for example. However, the reliability of this is patchy, and services in some areas are disjointed.

To ensure an effective practice framework is supported by coherent policy-making, we ask the First Minister to:

#### **a) Appoint a Children's Minister to provide strong leadership and ensure all children in Wales are able to reach their full potential.**

Recent and ongoing reforms, particularly in early years and education, present an opportunity to join up the objectives and delivery of services to support children's early language and learning. This includes support for parents to foster their children's early language development right from birth. This view was strongly echoed in the Allen Review, *Early intervention: the next steps* (Allen, 2011).

The *Independent review of childcare and early education registration, regulation and inspection* (Welsh Government, 2014) found strong international evidence that children and families benefit the most in countries where the care and education elements within early childhood are delivered in unity. They recommended "for policy to be effective [ ... ] there should be single ministerial responsibility for Early Childhood Education and Care". The report also recommended that local Early Childhood Education and Care Boards should be set up with the same footprint as regional education consortia, to unify delivery at a local level.

A Children's Minister with responsibility for early years and education would drive forward an integrated education, child development, and family support approach to early years policy and delivery. This would help to ensure that resources are pooled effectively, and to reach children and families most in need of support, particularly those in poverty.

## CONCLUSION

Too many children, especially those from low-income families, are behind in their language ability when they start school. This report has set out the challenges we face and why addressing them 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 prove a barrier and make it harder for parents to provide the environment children need in order to thrive.

This is why all parents, but especially low-income parents, 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 right from birth, so making sure parents have support from the start and early identification of potential language problems are vital. The services that are provided need to be led by qualified professionals and

be integrated with the needs of the family, and not fragmented along service lines. Good-quality early 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 in poor neighbourhoods.

The Welsh government has made much progress in early years policy and practice, and its focus on early language development and the importance of supporting parents is to be commended. Yet with one in three young children in Wales growing up in poverty, many are not yet receiving the support they need. We must continue our efforts to ensure all children have a good start in life.

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 to making Wales an equitable and fair country in which to grow up.



# APPENDIX I: THE MILLENNIUM COHORT STUDY (MCS)

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 months 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 10 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).

## MCS SAMPLE SIZES

| <b>Total estimated (unweighted) test sample</b> | <b>Age 3</b> | <b>Age 5</b> | <b>Age 7</b> | <b>Age 11</b> |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
| England   | 9,440        | 9,708        | 8,846        | 8,461         |
| Wales   | 2,179        | 2,127        | 1,774        | 1,751         |
| Scotland  | 1,745        | 1,798        | 1,614        | 1,452         |
| Northern Ireland                                | 1,412        | 1,535        | 1,357        | 1,285         |
| <b>Total (unweighted) sample</b>                | <b>Age 3</b> | <b>Age 5</b> | <b>Age 7</b> | <b>Age 11</b> |
| England   | 10,086       | 9,760        | 8,887        | 8,675         |
| Wales   | 2,238        | 2,147        | 1,972        | 1,834         |
| Scotland  | 1,803        | 1,804        | 1,622        | 1,472         |
| Northern Ireland                                | 1,463        | 1,535        | 1,376        | 1,306         |
| <b>Income quintile (unweighted) sample</b>      | <b>Age 3</b> | <b>Age 5</b> | <b>Age 7</b> | <b>Age 11</b> |
| England   | 1,888        | 1,942        | 1,769        | 1,692         |
| Wales   | 436          | 425          | 355          | 350           |
| Scotland  | 349          | 360          | 323          | 290           |
| Northern Ireland                                | 282          | 307          | 271          | 257           |



# APPENDIX 2: FULL REGRESSION TABLES FOR CHAPTER 2

## AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE

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

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AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

|                                | Baseline model | Full model            |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| NVQ2                           |                | 0.0735<br>(0.0541)    |
| NVQ3                           |                | 0.0942+<br>(0.0551)   |
| NVQ4+ (Degree)                 |                | 0.296**<br>(0.0519)   |
| Birth weight                   |                | 0.0557*<br>(0.0215)   |
| Other ethnicity                |                | 0.236**<br>(0.0461)   |
| Gestation                      |                | 0.00125<br>(0.000902) |
| Long-standing illness          |                | -0.00381<br>(0.0308)  |
| Long-standing limiting illness |                | -0.118+<br>(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            | <b>-0.570**</b><br>(0.0259) | <b>-0.440**</b><br>(0.0237) |
| Age                       | <b>0.0844*</b><br>(0.0361)  | 0.133**<br>(0.0341)         |
| Wales                     |                             | <b>0.138*</b><br>(0.0552)   |
| Scotland                  |                             | -0.0214<br>(0.055)          |
| Northern Ireland          |                             | <b>0.180**</b><br>(0.0456)  |
| Intermittent poverty      |                             | <b>-0.114**</b><br>(0.0274) |
| Persistent poverty        |                             | <b>-0.294**</b><br>(0.0523) |
| Female                    |                             | -0.0995**<br>(0.0197)       |
| Cohabiting                |                             | 0.0281<br>(0.0287)          |
| Single parent             |                             | 0.0906*<br>(0.0385)         |
| Rented housing            |                             | -0.102**<br>(0.0311)        |
| Other language spoken     |                             | 0.0157<br>(0.0523)          |
| Home learning environment |                             | 0.00940**<br>(0.00172)      |
| Overseas qualifications   |                             | 0.183*<br>(0.088)           |
| NVQ1                      |                             | 0.0209<br>(0.0757)          |
| NVQ2                      |                             | 0.0893<br>(0.0596)          |
| NVQ3                      |                             | 0.178**<br>(0.0687)         |
| NVQ4+ (Degree)            |                             | 0.302**<br>(0.0644)         |
| Birth weight              |                             | 0.0440*<br>(0.022)          |

continued on next page

AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

|                                | <b>Baseline model</b> | <b>Sig</b>             |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Other ethnicity                |                       | 0.245**<br>(0.0461)    |
| Gestation                      |                       | -0.000634<br>(0.00104) |
| Long-standing illness          |                       | -0.0533+<br>(0.0317)   |
| Long-standing limiting illness |                       | -0.0785<br>(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 early language skills  
so that every child in Wales 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 Wales.

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, 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. It sets out three priorities for the Welsh government:

- investing further in the quality of the early education workforce
- strengthening support for parents
- strong and ambitious leadership for children.

Helping children read

