

# READY TO READ

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



READ ON  
GET ON

**Front cover: Regan reading at home with his dad, Damien.**

(Photo: Elizabeth Dalziel/Save the Children)

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# CONTENTS

<b>Executive summary</b>	iv
<b>Introduction</b>	vii
<b>1 Poverty and young children’s language skills</b>	1
Children’s language development over the first five years of life	1
Inequalities in young children’s language skills	2
The lack of evidence in Scotland	4
Children’s language development between three and five: the impact of poverty	5
The challenge of rising child poverty in the next five years	6
<b>2 Why is early language development crucial for learning to read?</b>	7
How does language ability influence children’s reading skills?	7
A new analysis of children’s language and reading skills	7
The wider benefits for children of good language ability in the early years	12
<b>3 What influences young children’s language development?</b>	13
The importance of prior ability	14
The crucial role of parents, carers and the home learning environment	14
The impact of poverty on young children’s language development	18
Early education and other early years services	20
<b>4 What support do parents and children currently receive?</b>	21
Early years services: from birth to school	21
Public health, including health visiting	22
Speech and language therapy	23
Early learning and childcare	24
Libraries	26
Other initiatives and programmes	27
<b>5 Three priorities for meeting the challenge</b>	28
Policy developments	28
Policy direction for achieving progress	29
<b>Appendix 1: The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)</b>	33
<b>Appendix 2: Full regression tables for chapter 2</b>	34
<b>References</b>	38

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

Making sure that every child leaves primary school able to read well is a crucial part of efforts to turn educational inequalities around – so that every child succeeds, regardless of their background. This is why the *Read On. Get On.* campaign coalition is focused on ensuring that every child can read well by the time they leave primary school. We're committed to building a national mission to tackle underachievement in reading, drawing in energy and expertise from across society.

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

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

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

attainment gap and improve the life chances of our poorest children.

Scotland has set an ambitious and welcome agenda for its young children. 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 the lives of children – backed up by concrete action and investment. Progress is being made, but not always as quickly as we would like. Significant challenges remain. We argue that an increased focus on early language skills is needed.

The focus of this report is on the role of national government and local services in Scotland in supporting children and parents. But we know this is not something that government alone can fix. *Read On. Get On.* is working with a wide range of partners to develop a major behaviour change campaign aimed at empowering parents to understand what they can do.

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

By the age of five, most children should be able to speak in full sentences and use most of the everyday words that adults use. They should be asking lots of 'why?' questions to understand the world around them, and should be able to talk confidently about the past and the future. Although a minority of children have a disability or impairment that means

they will never develop the language skills expected for their age, most children could get there with the right support.

However, in Scotland there remains a stubborn gap in language skills between poorer children and their peers. Children from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to experience difficulties in language development before they start school. At age three, a third of children identified as having a speech, language or communication concern are from the most deprived areas.

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

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

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

- A child with weak language skills at the age of five is much less likely to be a strong reader at the age of 11 than a five-year-old with strong language skills.
- Good early language skills are even more important for children growing up in poverty – a child who experienced poverty persistently and had below average language skills scores 36% less on reading tests at age seven and 22% less on comprehension tests at age eleven than a child who never experienced poverty and had above average language skills.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS AND THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

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

1. **Language skills at age three:** children's language skills in the first few years of life have a massive impact on their language skills by the

age of five, demonstrating the importance of early action to support young children's language development right from birth.

2. **What parents do:** the bond between parent and child, and the way that parents use language at home, 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. But predicted increases in child poverty will make it much harder – although not impossible – to achieve our goal.
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. Nursery education has the biggest impact on language skills when it is led by a trained teacher or early years graduate.

## WHAT SUPPORT DO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CURRENTLY RECEIVE?

Acting early and supporting parents to engage with their child's 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 this report we consider in particular the role of early learning and childcare, public health nurses (health visiting), speech and language therapists, and libraries. We believe there are opportunities to maximise the role of these services further to strengthen children's early language development.

## THREE PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

It is vital that, as a country, we do more to ensure that the vast majority of children develop strong language skills by the age of five. The impact on the learning and on the life chances of children at risk of falling behind – and on educational inequality across the country – is likely to be significant.

Our focus is on what more can be done to support the poorest children, because they face the biggest risk of falling behind in early language and are less

likely to catch up. But achieving our campaign goals will require help for every child who needs it, regardless of their background. This will require a mix of universal services that support all children, and extra support for those who face the biggest risk of falling behind.

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

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

### **1. Invest further in early learning and childcare, particularly the workforce**

- a) Ensure all early learning and childcare settings have access to at least one member of staff with a graduate level qualification in early language or literacy.
- b) Consider how the entitlement to free early learning and childcare hours could be delivered in a way that empowers and strengthens parents' skills in supporting their children's early language skills, alongside directly supporting children.

- c) Introduce a more explicit focus on early language development in inspections.
- d) Develop evidence based poverty awareness and understanding training as a core part of on-going professional development of the workforce.

### **2. Strengthen support for parents**

- a) Ensure the early years workforce has access to quality assured training to develop skills to support parents with the basics of early language, and identify and refer children who need extra help.
- b) Undertake a review of the evidence to increase professional knowledge and understanding of what works to strengthen parents' skills in developing their children's early language skills at home.

### **3. Track young children's progress across the country**

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

# INTRODUCTION

Being a good reader is crucial for every child. It is the key to developing much of their potential. Without being able to read well, children will not be able to benefit from all the other 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 five poorer children in Scotland leave primary school unable to read well, four times higher than for children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign's mission is to rally the country to take action to get every child in Scotland reading well by the end of primary school.

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

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

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

This report focuses on the first driver – supporting children to develop good early language skills right from birth. Early language skills – listening, understanding words, speaking, and building vocabulary – are the vital foundation that enable children to learn to read: children first learn to talk and then learn to read. When young children fall behind in language, they are much more likely to struggle to learn to read when they start school. And it is 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 that every child has a good level of language skills by the age of five. Currently, children from the most deprived areas are twice as likely to experience difficulties in language development by the time they start school. At three, a third of children identified as having a speech, language or communication concern are from the most deprived areas. Further, nearly double the number of children who have experienced poverty persistently score below the average on vocabulary tests at age five compared with children who have never experienced poverty.

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 – focusing particularly on the poorest children – to ensure that every child in Scotland gets the best start when it comes to developing their language skills. With levels of child poverty set to rise significantly in the next five years, it is crucial that we act now to ensure that young children growing up in poverty have the best early learning opportunities – at home and at nursery.

Scotland aims to be the best country in the world to grow up. It has set an ambitious and welcome agenda for its young children. 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 the lives of children. Alongside this, the current focuses on the attainment gap and improving literacy standards, supported by concrete action and investment, are welcome and a good

foundation for further action. Progress is being made, but not always as quickly as we would like. Significant challenges remain. A focus on children's early language skills is needed to help address one of Scotland's most pressing challenges – entrenched 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 major step-change in progress, large numbers of poorer children will continue to miss out on the vital early language skills that are the building blocks for learning to read – with potentially damaging consequences for their life chances.

This report begins by setting out the data on the challenge that we face in chapter 1. Chapter 2 considers why this matters for being able to read well at 11. In chapter 3, we explore the influences on young children's language development, highlighting

the crucial role of parents and the impact of poverty. Chapter 4 explores how we can meet the challenge. It sets out how high-quality services and support for families can help overcome the impact of poverty. It highlights the potential for services including early education, health visiting and libraries to support young children's language development – and explains why this potential is not always fulfilled. The report ends in chapter 5 by setting out three priorities for meeting the challenge: investing further in early learning and childcare; strengthening support for parents; and making sure that, as a country, we can track the progress we are making to improve young children's language skills.

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 that all children are reading well by the age of 11 would make a game-changing contribution to making us a 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 set out the bold ambition to get every child reading by 11. Achieving this will require us all to play a role – parents, grandparents, businesses, volunteers, libraries, teachers and role models like footballers and other celebrities. This report focuses on the specific role of national government and local services in Scotland, but we know the problem is not something that government alone can fix.

When we launched the campaign in 2014, we worked with education experts Edom to review the literature on what parents and carers could do to support their children's reading. Based on this analysis, we worked with partners to promote these messages at the launch of the campaign and in the following months.

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 launch, in the summer of 2015 the *Read On. Get On.* campaign will launch a new activity for parents with young children, encouraging them to create and tell stories together. We will provide parents with 'story starters' to inspire and support them, so that we can make sure that 'all our little ones are ready to read'. 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 in 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 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 deprived areas are twice as likely to experience difficulties in language development by the time they start school. Projected increases in the number of children living in poverty will put even more children at risk of experiencing language delays over the next five years.

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

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

The term 'language' covers a range of skills, including the physical ability to speak and hear the capacity to absorb and understand spoken information, and the ability to express our own feelings and ideas verbally. It also incorporates body language, facial expressions and gestures, as well as the ability to interact with others in a two-way dialogue – reflecting on what others have said and responding appropriately.

Our interim goal is to ensure that every child in Scotland has good language skills by age five– so that they have relatively well-developed capacities in each of these areas of language. A child should be able to talk to and be understood by new people (not just a familiar figure like a parent), use full sentences and ask lots of 'why?' questions. Children should be able to understand and talk about events in the past and

future, and use most of the everyday words that an adult uses (I CAN 2009).

The typical development of a child's language is set out in more detail in Box 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 able to follow this typical path of language development. A relatively small number of children have language difficulties so serious that they cannot reach the expected standard by age five, or be helped to catch up soon afterwards. The focus of this report is on the group of children who do not have a serious impairment or disability that stops them from developing good language skills but

BOX 1.1 TYPICAL LANGUAGE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

Babies (by 12 months)	Toddlers (by age two)	Nursery age children (by the age of four)	School age (by the age of five)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communicates through babbling, crying and gesturing</li> <li>Responds to familiar words like 'bye-bye'</li> <li>Start to understand simple words</li> <li>Start to use simple words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start to put two or three words together into simple sentences like 'Show me your nose'</li> <li>Learn two or three words a day on average</li> <li>Start to ask lots of questions that helps them to remember and learn words</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Start to learn more complex meanings of words</li> <li>Start to ask lots of questions about what words mean</li> <li>Express their thoughts and feelings clearly to adults and children</li> <li>Make careful choices about the words they are using and conform with grammatical rules on, for example, tenses and plurals</li> <li>May still find some sounds difficult to use but are understood by most people</li> <li>May stumble over words and sentences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Able to understand and talk with new people using well formed sentences</li> <li>Ask lots of 'why?' questions</li> <li>Understand longer and more complicated sentences</li> <li>Use and understand most everyday words that adults use</li> <li>Explain what has happened, and why, in an interesting way</li> </ul>

Adapted from: ICAN (2011)

who nevertheless fail to develop the language skills expected of a five-year-old. These children are often described as experiencing 'language delay'. In most cases, this is due to a combination of 'environmental factors' – such as a lack of encouragement provided by parents, of early learning opportunities in the home, and of good-quality formal early education.

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

## INEQUALITIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

In this section we present evidence on gaps in Scotland between young children experiencing poverty and their peers in language development, using new data from the 27–30 month child health review dataset and the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and highlighting existing analysis of the longitudinal Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) survey.

There is a significant gap in speech, language and communication skills between children from the most and least deprived areas by their third birthday, new data reveals. In 2014:

- Children from the most deprived areas were twice as likely to have a speech, language and communication concern at 27–30 months (17.5% compared with 7.6% from the least deprived areas).
- Children from the most deprived areas accounted for a third of all recorded speech, language and communication concerns at 27–30 months.

## EXPLAINING GOOD LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AT FIVE

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

There are different ways of explaining good language development at five. For example, in chapter 5 we set out what good language development means within the early year's language and communication goals in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Here, 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 longer conversations
- understand more complicated language such as 'first', 'last', 'might', 'may be', 'above' and 'in between'
- understand words that describe sequences, such as "First we are going to the shop, next we will play in the park."
- use sentences that are well formed – however, children may still have some difficulties with grammar, for example, saying 'sheeps' instead of 'sheep' or 'goed' instead of 'went'
- think more about the meanings of words, such as describing the meaning of simple words or asking what a new word means
- use most sounds effectively – however, they may have some difficulties with more difficult words such as 'scribble' or 'elephant'.

- The number of children from the most deprived areas identified as having a speech, language and communication concern at 27–30 months was significantly higher than the national average (17.5% compared with 12.7%).
- The 27–30 month check was the first time that a speech, language and communication concern had been identified for children from the most deprived areas – 13.6% were newly identified compared with 3.9% already known.
- Speech, language and communication needs were the most common developmental difficulty faced by young children – 13% of children were identified with a concern (Information Services Division Scotland NHS 2014).

A significant gap in inequalities in early language skills between children experiencing poverty and their peers at age five/as children start school has been demonstrated by previous analysis of the GUS survey:

- Children in poverty were twice as likely to have problems with expressing themselves or making

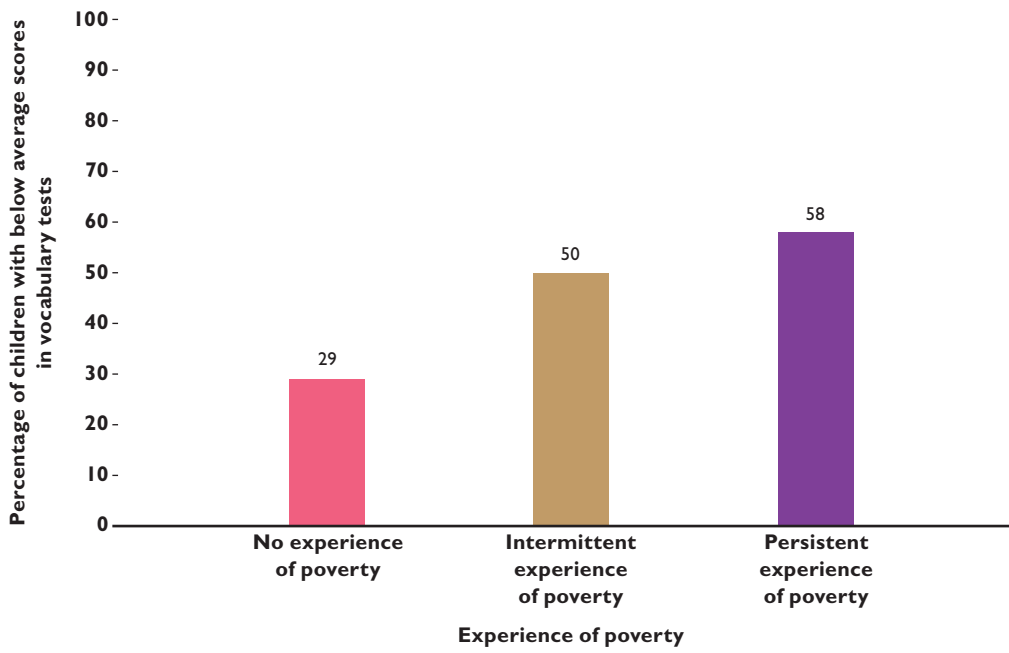
themselves understood compared with their peers at the time of starting school (Save the Children 2012).

- Children in more advantaged circumstances (whether measured by household income, parental level of education or socio-economic classification) on average had higher ability at age (three and) five than children in more disadvantaged circumstances (Scottish Government 2014).

Significant inequalities in language development exist between children with different experiences of poverty at age 5. Figure 1.1 presents new analysis of the MCS. It found that:

- Children who experienced poverty persistently throughout their early life face a much higher risk of experiencing language delays. They are twice as likely to have below average vocabulary skills at age five, compared with children who had never experienced poverty (58% compared with 29%).

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



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

It should be noted that the figures from the 27–30 month child health reviews are based on only 73% of eligible children completing a review. This may mean that the figures under-represent the national situation. There is also some inconsistency in the way that assessments are made which may affect the accuracy of the national picture. The reviews are based on assessments made by health visitors. There is no national tool for assessing development in speech, language and communication. Instead, the tools used are decided within each local area. Therefore there are likely to be differences in how this domain is assessed between (or even within) local areas.

The MCS data is over ten years old. However, it provides a useful complement to the other figures. The survey measures family income directly and at each stage of a child’s life. This enables us to confirm

the relationship between poverty and children’s language development implied by the previous data, and also to consider the different impact of persistent and temporary poverty.

### THE LACK OF EVIDENCE IN SCOTLAND

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

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

Many children grow up learning more than one language at a time, which can affect the age at which they master particular aspects of language. Bilingual children may follow a different path of

development in each language, but there is no evidence that bilingualism itself puts children at a greater risk of being behind in English language skills by the age of five (Sorace 2007, Petitto 2009).

of these inequalities and how trends have changed over time. This data is simply not available. However, there is some UK wide analysis that is relevant. This is presented in the next section.

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

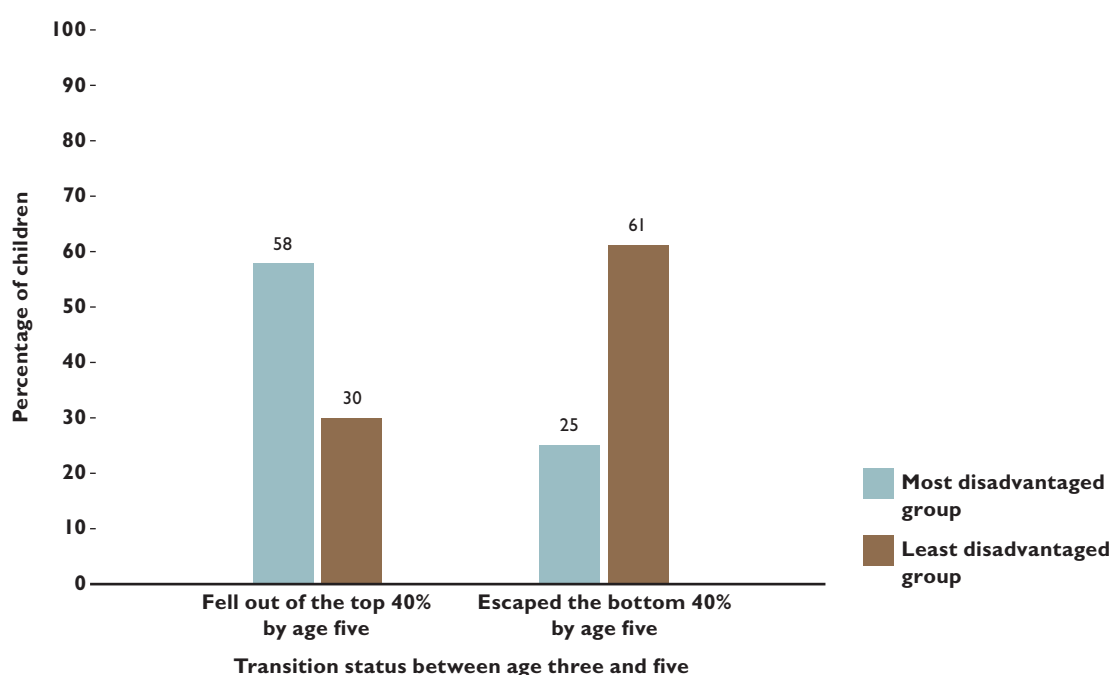
Figure 1.2 shows transitions in children's language attainment between the ages of three and five across the UK. It shows poorer children who are performing well are more likely than their peers to fall behind by the age of five. 58% of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who were in the top 40% in vocabulary ability at age three fell

out of the top 40% by age five. This is compared with 30% of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds.

Even more worryingly, if you are from a poor family and are performing poorly at age three, you are more likely to stay there than children from wealthier backgrounds. Figure 1.2 shows that only one in four (25%) children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who scored in the bottom 40% in vocabulary ability at age three escaped the bottom 40% at age five. This is compared to 61% of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds.

The analysis in this section shows that children who experience poverty are much more likely to score below average in vocabulary tests at ages three and five. It 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. This highlights the importance of the development of non-cognitive skills alongside cognitive skills which leads to improved academic performance. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families, who are increasingly likely to experience disadvantage throughout their life (Bateman, 2014).

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



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

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

## THE CHALLENGE OF RISING CHILD POVERTY IN THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

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

The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicts that over the next five years, child poverty in Scotland will increase significantly. It predicts that, by 2020, one in three children in Scotland will be living in poverty, increasing from one in five in 2014 (Save the Children 2014). Young children are more likely to experience poverty. Without a massive commitment from across society to act to break the link between poverty and children's early development, it is likely that we will see even more children experiencing language delays by 2020.

Poverty is not an excuse for failure. Many poorer children do well in the early years and at school, and we must continue to have the highest ambitions for all children. But poverty represents a massive obstacle in children's way, 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 that every child gets the chance to succeed.

### A GLOBAL ISSUE

Countries across the world are trying to grapple with the challenge that children who grow up in poverty are at higher risk of facing difficulties with the development of their language skills. There is evidence of similar gaps in Canada, Australia, the USA (Bradbury et al 2011) and Ireland (Williams et al 2013), as well as in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam (Boo 2014).

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

poverty and their better-off peers. Comparative analysis has also shown that the gap between children in poverty and their better-off peers was highest in both the USA and the UK, and lowest in Canada and Australia (Bradbury et al 2011).

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

## 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 Scotland are reading well. Ensuring all children achieve a good level of language development by age five is a crucial step to meeting this goal.

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

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

### HOW DOES LANGUAGE ABILITY INFLUENCE CHILDREN'S READING SKILLS?

Children's language ability affects their learning to read in a variety of ways. Children who have difficulties with phonics (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 create practical difficulties for a child trying

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

### A NEW ANALYSIS OF CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND READING SKILLS

Children's experiences in the early years are crucial to their later educational attainment. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study in England has shown that children's experience of early education and 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 Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), including tests (set out in more detail in figure 2.1) to assess children’s early language skills, reading ability and language comprehension. See Appendix I for more information about the MCS.

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

The analysis first shows how children who scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five did in reading tests at age seven and language comprehension tests at age 11. Figure 2.2 compares how many children in Scotland 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 nearly three quarters (74%) of children who experienced intermittent or 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, compared with over half (57%) of children who had no experience of poverty.

What is most striking is that the proportion of children who had scored above the average level of language ability at age five but had experienced persistent poverty were almost as likely to score below the average level of reading ability at age seven (63%) as those children who scored below the average level of language ability at age five but had never experienced poverty (57%).

Figure 2.3 shows the same analysis but focuses on language comprehension at age 11. This shows similar patterns as those at seven; children who experienced poverty and had below-average vocabulary scores at age five were much more likely to be below the average level of language comprehension at age 11 than their better-off peers. It also shows that children who had an above average level of vocabulary ability but experienced poverty were almost as likely to score below the average level of comprehension at age 11 as children who had a below average level of vocabulary ability at age five but had never experienced poverty.

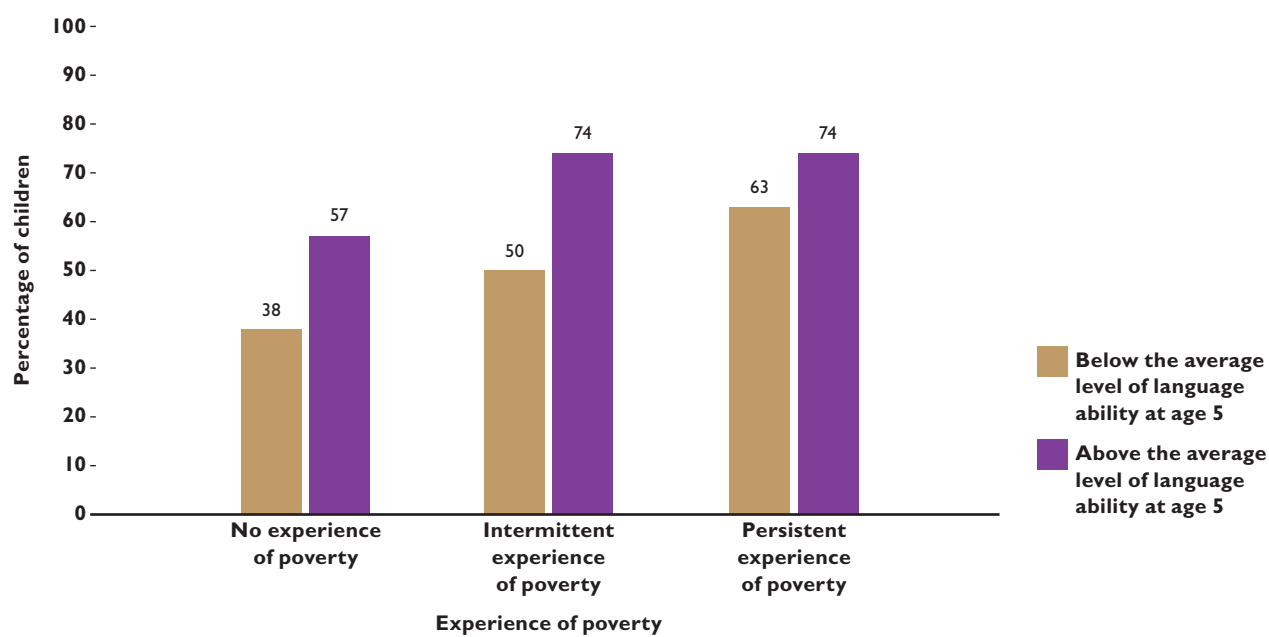
**FIGURE 2.1 BRITISH ABILITY SCALES – TESTS OF CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE AND READING SKILLS IN THE MCS**

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

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

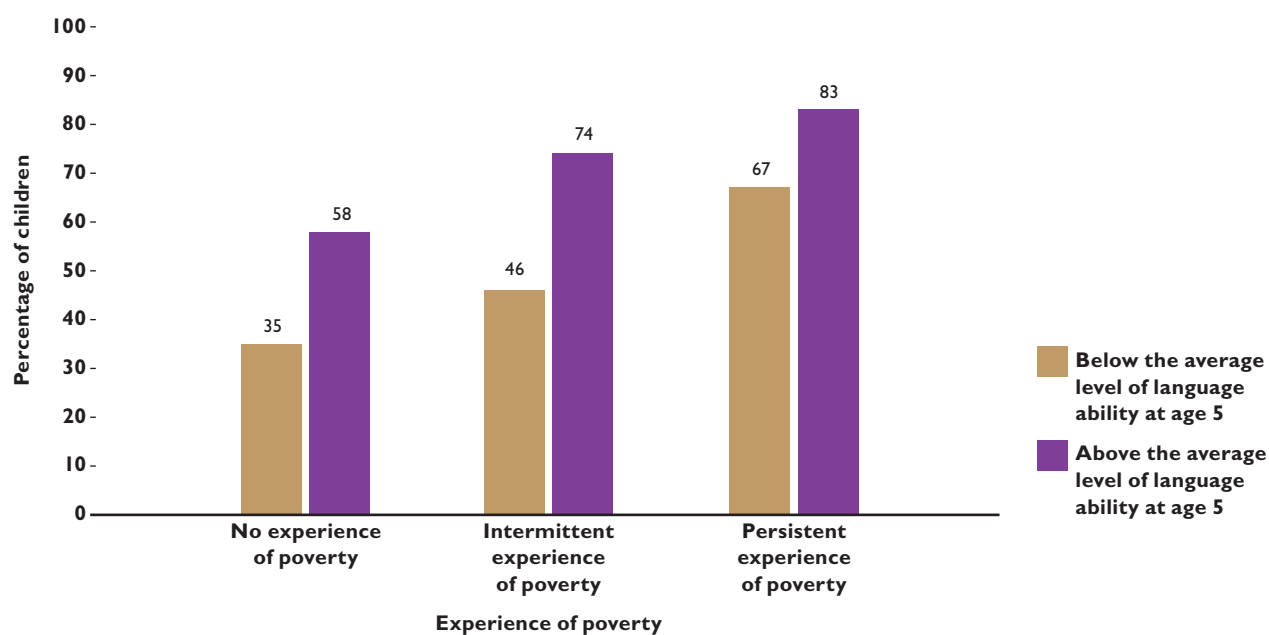


FIGURE 2.2 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BELOW THE AVERAGE LEVEL OF READING ABILITY AT AGE SEVEN BY LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE FIVE AND EARLY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



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

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



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

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

The analysis uses a statistical technique called multiple regression analysis. This assesses the strength of association between a child’s scores in the BAS Naming Vocabulary Test at age five with their scores in the BAS Reading Ability Test at age seven and in the BAS Verbal Similarities Test at age 11.

This analysis takes in to 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 focus here on the impact of vocabulary scores at age five and children’s experience of poverty. More details of the effect of other factors are included in the full regression tables in Appendix 2.

The analysis of children’s vocabulary ability and reading ability finds that a child’s vocabulary ability

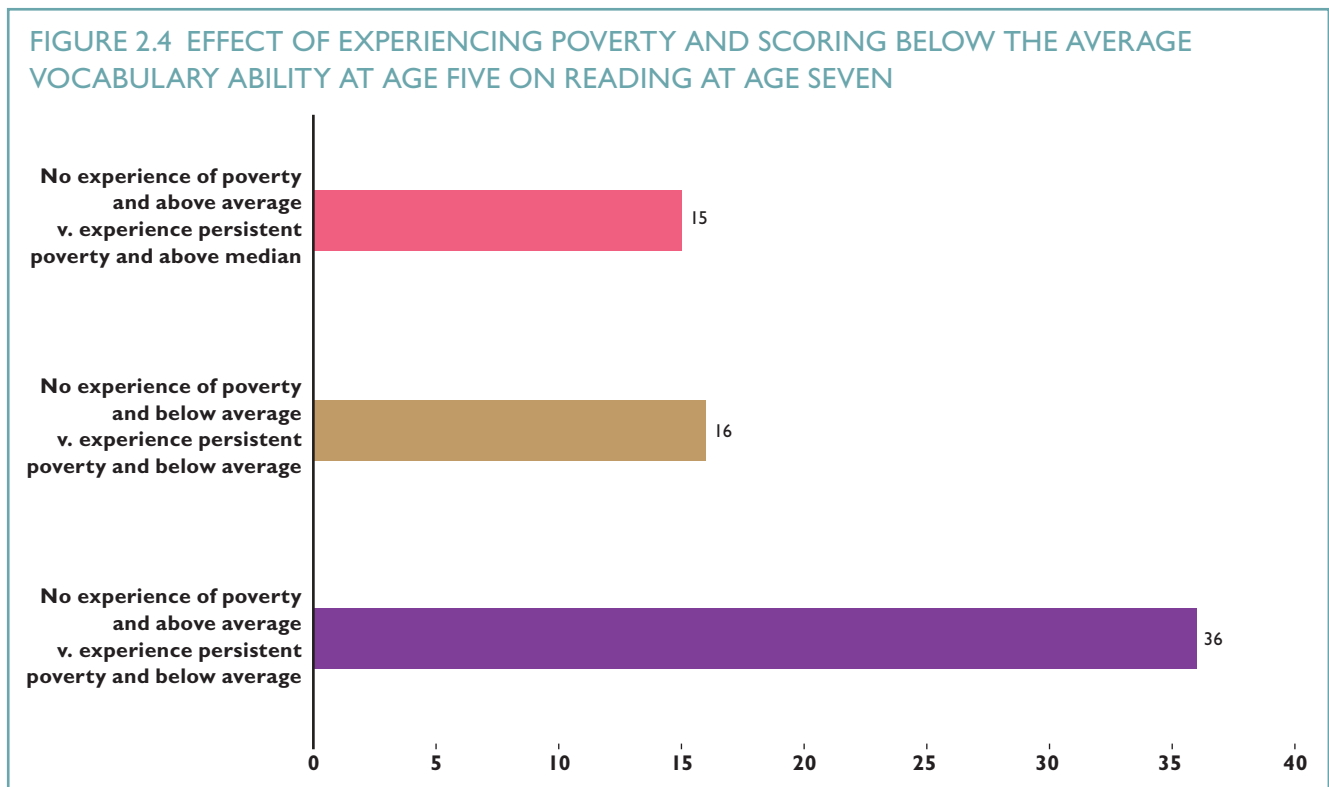
at age five is strongly associated with their reading ability at age seven.

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

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

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

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had above average scores in vocabulary tests at age five scored on average 15% higher than a child who also had above average scores, but had experienced persistent poverty



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

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had below average scores at age five scored on average 16% 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 36% higher than a child who scored below average at age five and had experienced persistent poverty

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

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

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

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

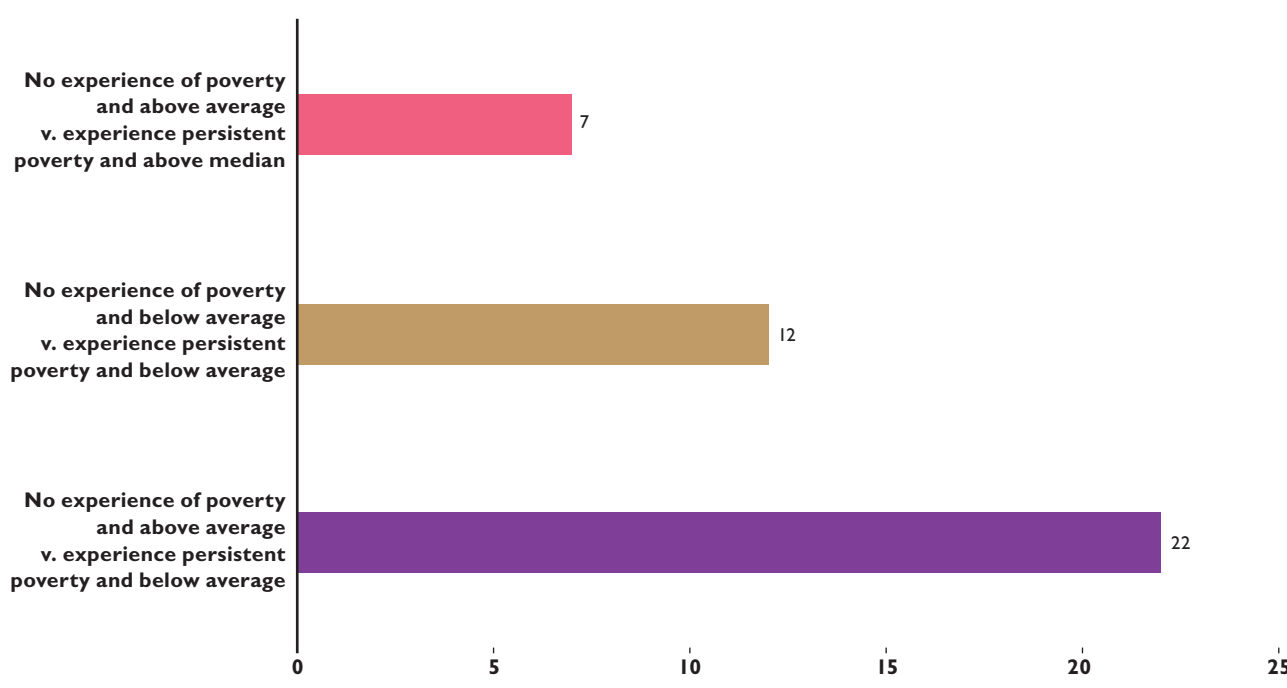
skills at age 11 as a child who had above average scores at age five.

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

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

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had above average scores in vocabulary at age five scored on average 7% higher than a child who also had above average scores at age five but who had experienced poverty persistently
- A child who had no experience of poverty but below average scores in vocabulary at age five scored on average 12% higher than a child who also had below average scores at age five but who had experienced poverty persistently
- A child who had no experience of poverty and above average scores in vocabulary at age five scored on average 22% higher than a child who had below average scores at age five and who had experienced poverty persistently

**FIGURE 2.5 EFFECT OF EXPERIENCING POVERTY AND SCORING BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE FIVE ON LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION AT AGE 11**



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

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

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 at age five to support our overall campaign goal of all children reading well at age 11. The ability to communicate well with others through spoken language is a fundamental part of everyday life. The evidence shows that good

language skills not only benefit children's reading, but also have a wide range of positive benefits for children throughout life.

Children's early language development continues to affect their overall education outcomes right through primary school (Snowling et al 2011). A study in England found 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). This clearly illustrates the powerful impact good language skills have on a wide range of areas of development in children; you need good language to be able to read, but also to interact, develop emotional skills and to learn.

There are many factors throughout a child's life that can affect their educational 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 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 to shield children from the impact of poverty and have the potential to help transform their chances in life. But parents struggling on a low income often find it much harder to offer these experiences, and may need extra support.

For a child, the most important and intensive relationship in the first few years of life is with their parents or primary carers. Children's lives also include relatives, siblings, peers, doctors, health visitors, early learning and childcare staff, and a myriad of other people they come into contact with. All of these relationships take place in different environments. The most important is the home, but children's relationships also take place on the street, in the park, in the doctor's office, in nurseries, with child-minders and 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 language development up to the age of five, focusing on:

- the importance of children's prior ability in determining their language skills at age five – highlighting the importance of supporting children's language development right from birth
- the crucial role of parents – showing that it is what parents do with their children 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, 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 the language development of some children, but they rarely determine entirely 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 PRIOR ABILITY

One of the biggest influences on children's language skills at the age of five is their language skills at earlier ages. 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 children who need extra support get the right help. Waiting until a child turns five and starts school is leaving it too late.

In fact, waiting until a child starts early learning and childcare at age three is still 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.

If we compare figure 3.1 with the influences on language ability at age three in figure 3.2, we can see the relative importance of different drivers of early language once prior ability is stripped out. 'Structural' factors – such as family income, parents' education and the mother's age at birth – can have a relatively large influence. About 40% of the difference in language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest families is explained by structural factors. This analysis highlights the importance of tackling the root causes of child poverty in order to improve children's early learning. Some of these other structural factors are very difficult or impossible to change.

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

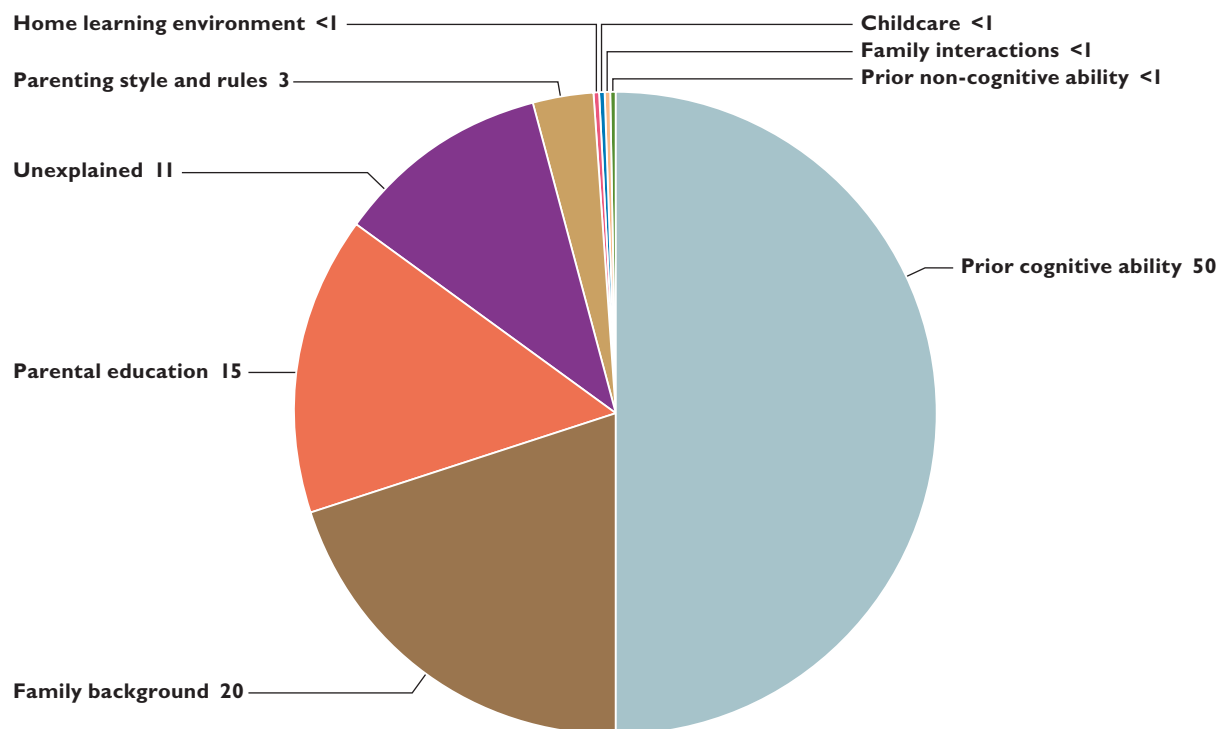
## THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF PARENTS, CARERS AND THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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

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

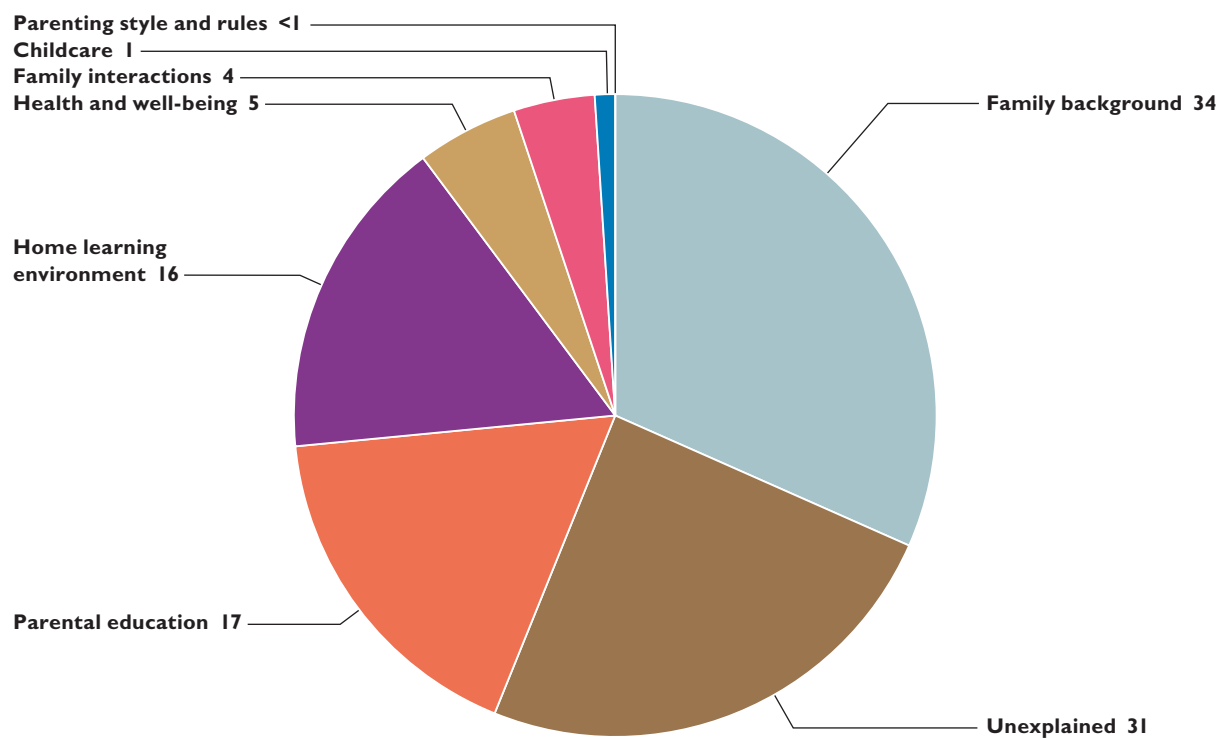
These are particularly important influences on the youngest children, who are not yet attending formal nursery education. Parents' behaviour and the home learning environment therefore have a particularly strong impact on children's language development at the age of three – which is then crucial for shaping children's language skills at five.

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



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

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



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

## 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 life, they are more likely to develop good language skills. A strong, emotional attachment 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). The strength of this attachment is crucial – the 'serve and return' interaction between a parent and baby builds and strengthens a child's brain architecture and nurtures a child's development (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 2007). As set out by the UK government's All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2, growing up without a secure attachment can have devastating long-term impacts on a child's life. As well as their language development, growing up with an insecure attachment can effect a child's later physical and mental health, behaviour and education and employment prospects (APPG 2015).

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

## THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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

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

The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (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, as well as peer interaction, were crucial for stimulating children's language development.

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

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



## WHAT PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES SUPPORT CHILDREN'S EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

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

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

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

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

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

**Storytelling and interactive reading:** regularly reading with young children is vital for developing

both their reading and language skills. Regular reading to very young children helps them learn how to say words out loud and then to build their vocabulary (Bus et al 1995). Interactive reading and storytelling can encourage children to discuss what they have read or heard and then use this information to help them predict what might happen next (Senechal et al 1995). Programmes like Scottish Book Trust's Book Bug for the Home can support parents to share books in an interactive way so that children get the most out of reading.

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

**Digital technology:** over 90% of children aged three to five have access to 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. Recent research from ASCEL found that whilst many children under five have access to digital technology, most of their time is spent playing with physical toys, drawing or colouring, or following a story read aloud from a printed book (ASCEL, 2014). 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).

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

Importantly, researchers have demonstrated that the influence of the home learning environment operates independently of a family's income or social class to some extent (Sammons et al 2002, Roulstone et al 2010). So, families that created a positive home learning environment helped to boost their child's early language development even if they were living 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 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 significantly reduce the capacity of a parent to get involved in early learning activities with their child.

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

Higher levels of stress and lack of access to material resources may be compounded by differences in 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 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 in fact less likely to engage in some of the key aspects of children's early learning – except regular reading. Hartas (2011) found only small differences in the use of language-based activities – such as singing songs and telling stories – between parents living in poverty and those not in poverty. 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 from its impact on parents' behaviour and the home learning environment – in ways that we don't fully understand. More research would be useful to understand the precise mechanisms at play here.

Independent of family income, parents' education also has a large impact on children's early language development, which poses an extra challenge for

children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Analysis of data from the MCS finds that a fifth of the difference in early language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest households can be explained by differences in parents' education (Dearden et al 2011). A child who has a parent with a university degree is much more likely to have a good standard of language development by the age of five than a child whose parents have lower level qualifications (Cullis 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, both through being less likely to be able to access services and model the language and communication skills from which children can learn.

## BOOKBUG FOR THE HOME

Bookbug for the Home is the targeted element of Scottish Book Trust's Bookbug programme. The programme takes the principles of talking, singing, cuddling and book sharing with young children into the homes of the most vulnerable families in Scotland. It does this through training the early years workforce to deliver Bookbug activities with the families they work with.

Bookbug is a preventative approach that supports all babies and young children to develop positive attachments to their mum, dad or carer, and to support early literacy. It supports positive parenting through promoting attunement and lays the groundwork for being able to learn to read without additional "needs" arising.

The quality of the resources in the home learning environment is vital to literacy development. Book selection by expert panels, such as those involved in Scottish Book Trust's programmes, ensures that books suited to the specific needs of children are available to families.

To date, more than 2,200 practitioners have been trained in Bookbug for the Home from a wide range of backgrounds, including family support officers, health visiting teams, social workers and third sector workers. Evaluation from the first two years of the programme found that parents were interacting more with their children and developing a relationship with books within the home as a result of the programme (Blake Stevenson 2015).

- The number of families reading daily with their children increased from 41% to 78%, and in the case of singing or rhyming daily with their children the jump was from 53% to 78%.
- Both professionals and parents have described positive changes in children's development.
- 93% of early years professionals who delivered Bookbug in the Home saw positive impacts and changes to behaviour within families.

The programme is funded by the Scottish government and has been rolled out in eight local authorities each year. By late 2015, it will be running in all 32 local authorities.

## EARLY EDUCATION AND OTHER EARLY YEARS SERVICES

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

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

Strong evidence on the benefits of good-quality 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 with children who do not attend any early years setting at all (Sylva et al 2014). Earlier conclusions from EPPE found that for children aged three and five, attending a good-quality full- or part-time pre-school was not only substantially beneficial for both cognitive and behavioural achievement, but 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. In addition, the EPPE study found that early years settings have a role in supporting parents and carers to develop the home learning environment.

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 those

professionals with higher levels of qualifications are better able to create a high-quality pedagogic environment. It is this environment that makes the biggest difference for children. Professionals with these skills know to create an environment where children are involved, stimulated and interact positively with staff and other children; that fully integrates care and education and uses scaffolding strategies (OECD 2012).

International evidence also shows the importance of providing high-quality early education and childcare for children's long-term development. 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), while research from Norway showed that attendance at good-quality early education and childcare settings had long lasting positive effects on children's educational attainment and labour market participation (Havnes and Mogstad 2009).

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

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.

# 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.

Early years services have a crucial role to play in helping children develop their language ability, so that they will be in a strong position to go on to learn to read well.

This chapter considers how children's early language development is supported by early years services and programmes – looking in turn at public health services and health visitors, speech and language therapy, early learning and childcare, libraries and other programmes and initiatives. It looks at the progress that has been made and remaining challenges in the service landscape to support young children and their families to develop children's language skills before starting school.

## EARLY YEARS SERVICES: FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL

In Scotland there is a range of services available to children in the early years that play a role in developing early language skills. We need to understand what services are on offer to parents and children, in order to understand how early years services might be able to strengthen support for children's language development – especially for children at risk of or experiencing poverty. There are different levels of services on offer to children:

- **Universal (or core) services:** these services are provided to all children and seek to support language rich environments that promote all children's language development (this includes home learning environments and some early years settings). As part of universal support children's language development may be monitored to ensure appropriate levels of progress. Where children are not achieving the level they should, this is addressed through targeted interventions and may include referral to targeted and specialist services.
- **Targeted (or additional) services:** targeted support is provided to children who are not or who are at risk of not achieving expected levels of progress in the development of their language skills. This may include children with delayed language development. Children requiring relatively straightforward interventions or opportunities to practice and consolidate skills have targeted support delivered by early years practitioners and parents and guided by speech and language therapy services. Where appropriate, speech and language therapists often provide specialist assessment, advice and written strategies to support each child's language development.
- **Specialist services:** for 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 by speech and language therapists to early years practitioners and parents

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

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

### THE POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) provides a consistent national approach to delivering and improving services for children and families across Scotland. It aims to improve outcomes by putting the child at the centre, taking a whole-child approach based on a shared understanding of wellbeing, common tools, language and processes, putting into practice a co-ordinated and unified approach to identifying concerns, assessing needs and risks as early as possible, agreeing actions and outcomes, and maximising the role of the skilled workforce within universal services. Significant progress has been made in embedding this approach. However, the speed of implementation has varied across local areas.

In order to drive further progress, the Scottish government recently enshrined key elements of the approach in law (Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014) – including integrated children's services plans for local areas, a single planning approach for children who need additional support from services, a single point of contact for every child and a holistic understanding of wellbeing. Alongside this, the Realigning Children's Services agenda supports local improvement in improving the commissioning of children's services. Key elements of the programme include supporting Community Planning Partnerships to identify and effectively address priorities to improve children's outcomes (though mapping the local children's services landscape and through developing an understanding of children's wellbeing from improved collection of children's administration data).

## PUBLIC HEALTH, INCLUDING HEALTH VISITING

Public health services play a major role in supporting and reviewing young children's development. Key services include maternal and ante-natal health and health visitors. A range of support is available to new parents through NHS ante-natal information and classes. Speech and language therapists provide training to midwives (and health visitors) on encouraging early language and communication skills. However, these services largely focus on the birth itself and health-related issues, like breastfeeding, rather than on child development more broadly. We recognise the wide-ranging role that these services and professionals provide. However, we believe that there is a need to consider how the role of ante-natal support can strengthen understanding amongst parents about how their young children will develop early language and communication skills from birth.

Health visitors take over responsibility for a child's care from a midwife and provide a key support role for children and families until they start school. 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 they build up relationships of trust with parents. They work with parents to review children's progress and support parents, including referring families to specialist services where needed, which should include reviews and support for children's early language development. Health visitors receive training in early language development and screening from speech and language therapists. Health visitors also work with the charity Scottish Book Trust to present parents with a Bookbug pack for every child in Scotland. Packs include free books, advice on reading books with babies, and an invitation to join classes at the local library.

Health visitors work to the Scottish Child Health Programme (CHP), the universal public health programme for children, which includes a schedule of reviews, screenings and immunisation, health promotion and advice for parents (through for example the use of resources and sessions such as Ready Steady Baby!, Ready Steady Toddler!, and play@home). As part of the CHP, health visitors conduct assessments and reviews of children's development at key stages. The Universal Health

Visiting CORE programme sets the core services offered to families from the health visiting service in Scotland. It includes an ante-natal visit and six further visits from birth to six months. They provide the 'named person role' for young children – the first point of contact for families and taking initial action if a child needs extra help. This includes two 'assessments' when a child reaches six to eight weeks and again at four months. By the age of six months, all children should have a Health Plan Indicator – identifying the need for a core, additional or intensive programme of support.

More intensive support is available to families with greater needs:

- For example, when specific expert help is needed with postnatal depression, a sleepless baby or responding to specific concerns from parents.
- By providing ongoing support from the health visiting team and a range of other local services for families coping with more complex issues (such as severe maternal mental health issues). The health visitor works to coordinate a range of services around the needs of the family.
- The family nurse partnership provides intensive health visiting support for young, first-time mothers. Highly-trained health visitors offer an intensive programme of home visits that start in pregnancy and continue until the child's second birthday. This service is currently available in 11 NHS Board areas across Scotland, with potential to increase this further by the end of 2015.

The programme also includes universal child health reviews at 27–30 months. These reviews were introduced in 2013. They are universal and provide a snap-shot of early child development across nine domains – including speech, language and communication. The reviews are designed to identify children who need additional support, and include a specific focus on language skills (Scottish Government 2012). The expectation is that all children should have this review. The latest available data suggests that 97% of children completed a review in the first quarter of 2014.

Universal reviews provide an opportunity for every child's language development to be checked, and to identify problems early and refer families to appropriate support. They provide an ideal opportunity to engage parents in their children's early language development. Additional, more

intensive health visiting approaches provide opportunities for public health services to support the early language development of the most vulnerable children. Child health reviews are currently being introduced at 13–15 months in many local areas, a development that the *Read On. Get On.* coalition welcomes.

However, a number of factors may act as barriers to these opportunities being maximised. First, while health visitors undertaking the review at 27–30 months should have a good understanding of child development, they may lack the skills and confidence to focus on young children's language development, particularly as it is not necessarily a strong part of the initial training of health visitors. Speech and language therapists have been a crucial part of providing intensive training to health visitors implementing the checks. Second, local public health services typically have a number of priorities for young children's health and development. Guidance highlights language development as a priority for the review.

The increase in identified needs in speech, language and communication at the 27–30 month review (as highlighted in chapter 1) indicates this has been a priority. It may also indicate that these needs are not being identified and supported earlier. What is not clear from the data is how severe the identified needs are – from early 'delays' to more complex needs. The introduction of an earlier review at 13–15 months is therefore a welcome development. Finally, while a minimum dataset has to be returned on completion of the review, the tools used to support professionals in their assessments of speech, language and communication needs vary across the country. Therefore, we lack a consistent and robust process that allows the prevalence of problems in different population sub-groups to be explored.

The scope for public health to support young children's language development is potentially large. The Child Health Programme provides a number of opportunities to develop this role further. However, this is complicated by many competing demands on this service, in a context of continued pressure on public health budgets in the coming years. The focus must therefore be on further developing and supporting the workforce to improve quality and maximise the impact of increasingly limited resources.

## 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 development. Services operate at all three levels – universal, targeted and specialist – and are delivered to young children and their parents in a variety of settings, including at home, in family centres, nurseries and parents groups. At universal level SLTs provide advice to the wider workforce on making information and services 'communication accessible' for all parents, emphasising the relationship between attachment and developing communication in children. They also provide training and support to parents, carers and the early years workforce (including pre-natal and ante-natal support) on early language and communication development, how to optimise this, how to spot when a child (and/ or parent) might have a speech, language or communication need and when to refer a child for specialist support. Providing this kind of early intervention support can prevent speech, language and communication needs developing.

They also assess, diagnose and develop programmes of targeted support, to provide 'enhanced' environments to better support and stimulate children's language development. A significant focus for SLTs is the provision of support for babies and young children born with medical conditions 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 a SLT by their health visitor or GP, but any parent can refer their child to a speech and language therapist if they are concerned about their speech and language development.

Once a child has been identified as having a specific speech or language need, SLTs provide tailored specialist support to young children with severe and complex speech, language and communication needs. They design personalised strategies to help meet the communication needs of each child, and where appropriate provide children 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.

Most speech and language therapists are employed by the NHS with a few in the independent and third sectors. All local authorities contribute to NHS funding for SLTs through locally negotiated service level agreements. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) in Scotland has highlighted a number of challenges in supporting speech, language and communication in the early years. They argue that despite the vital role they could play, there is a limited understanding of the role and added value of SLTs at strategic and operational levels. They argue that this underutilisation of SLTs knowledge and skills is to the detriment of children's outcomes and leaves services vulnerable to funding cuts. The Scottish Parliament's Health Committee found that although referrals to children's services are growing, there has been an overall 8.8% decrease in funding for SLT in Scotland since 2011 – with cuts coming from both health boards (up to 21.1%) and local authorities (up to 20.6%). In the context of reductions to local budgets, there is a real risk that support for children's speech, language and communication development will diminish at universal, targeted and specialist levels. The impact of this could be significant for individual children's outcomes and the financial cost to services.

## EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE

Access to good-quality early learning and childcare has been shown to be one important route through which young children's early language development can be strengthened. Despite significant cuts to some budgets affecting families with young children, early learning and childcare has been an area of expansion in recent years – and looks set to experience further growth in future. The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 (The Act) introduced a number of changes to this service.

This Act introduced the term 'early learning and childcare' to refer to a service consisting of education and care for pre-school children. It was established through the Act as a deliberate attempt to raise awareness of the importance of integrated support for young children that has 'regard to the importance of the interactions and other experiences which support learning and development in a caring and nurturing setting.' New practice guidance, *Building the Ambition* (Scottish Government 2015), provides further information and practical guidance on the experiences and interactions necessary to support



children's development, including early language skills, from birth until entry to school.

Through the Act, the Scottish government extended free early learning and childcare from 475 hours per year to 600 hours per year (around 16 hours a week) for all three- and four-year-olds, and extended this to a group of disadvantaged two-year-olds (looked after children and children from low-income families). Initially, around 15% of two-year-olds were entitled, growing to around 27% from August 2015 (based on qualifying for free school meal entitlement in Scotland). Take-up of free entitlement of early education and childcare for three- and four-year-olds is very high; at around 97% (this is slightly lower for three-year-olds than four-year-olds). As the entitlement of two-year-olds has only been in place since August 2014 it is too early to comment on take-up among this age group.

This provision can be delivered in a nursery attached to a school, by a childminder or at a nursery or playgroup run by a private company, charity or voluntary organisation. There is a great deal of variation in pre-school settings. The majority of children – nearly six in ten (58%) – attend local authority primary school nursery classes, with 20% attending other types of local authority settings (such as a stand-alone nursery or family centre). In addition, 14% attend early learning and childcare delivered by a private provider, and 8% by a voluntary provider (Scottish Government 2014). Children from low-income households are far more likely to attend primary school nursery classes (67% compared with 47% for children from highest income households). Only 7% of children from low-income households attended a private provider (Scottish Government 2014). The quality of services is variable. Children attending local authority primary school nursery classes were found to be significantly more likely to experience higher quality provision – 37% scored five or six against all four Care Inspectorate quality themes – compared with just 16% in private settings (Scottish Government 2014).

The Act also enables this provision to be delivered in a more flexible way, away from the traditional two and half hours in the morning or afternoon during term-time to ways that suit families, depending on local demand and consultation with parents. Implementation of this provision is ongoing. Delivering these services in a flexible way will take time to implement. It will be vital to ensure that increased flexibility in provision does not come at

the expense of improving the quality of learning experiences for children attending services.

As set out in chapter 3, free early learning and childcare 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 evidence is clear on the difference that can be made through the appropriate training and development of the early years workforce.

Successive governments in Scotland have taken steps to improve the quality of early learning and childcare, through developing and up-skilling the qualifications, education and professional development of the workforce. This is part of a long-term strategy to improve the quality of experiences and opportunities that children receive. There have been significant improvements in qualification levels and professional practice among the workforce in recent years. Crucially, the vast majority of staff delivering free early learning and childcare now have, as a minimum a SCQF level 6 (equivalent to Senior Phase/ Highers). Lead practitioners and managers are expected to have or be working towards level 9 (equivalent to an ordinary degree or work-based equivalent). New qualifications have also been introduced – the BA Childhood Practice and PDA Childhood Practice. The fact that these qualifications can be gained through work-based practice is important as it allows for the up-skilling of the current workforce (particularly in the private and voluntary sectors).

Recent reviews of literacy teaching and the early years workforce have considered next steps in developing the workforce. The early years workforce review concluded that, despite considerable improvements in staff qualifications and a recognition of the vital role of the workforce in the healthy development and wellbeing of children, there is still too much variability in the quality of early learning and childcare in Scotland and work remains to be done to ensure that high-quality settings are available and accessible to all – particularly for disadvantaged families. It also found that there is a lack of data in Scotland on the impact of the new qualifications on children's outcomes (Siraj 2015).

The review pointed to the need for the next phase of improvement for the workforce to have a stronger focus on those aspects of pedagogy and practice known to affect children's outcomes, and ensuring provision is of the highest possible quality to meet

the needs of younger and more vulnerable children. It sets out a 15 year vision to achieve this. We welcome the review and its emphasis on supporting ongoing professional development; introducing more and new initial graduate degrees for practitioners leading learning in early learning and childcare and specific early years teacher training and developing the role of teachers working in early learning and childcare.

Education Scotland's recent review of literacy teaching found that there was a good overall level of learning and teaching on literacy across early years settings. In terms of addressing the gap, the review found that staff recognise the need to intervene early to support children and to ensure effective support is in place when a need is identified. However, it also highlighted concerns around supporting transitions from nursery to primary one. The review concluded that improvement was needed to ensure consistency of staff skills in supporting children's progress (Education Scotland 2015b).

## LIBRARIES

Public libraries play a major role in supporting young children's language skills. They are based in every local community and are free for all families. They offer not only access to free books but also run a wide range of national and local programmes in partnership with other organisations for pre-school children focused on language development, including reading, singing or nursery rhyme groups (for example, delivering Scottish Book Trust's Bookbug sessions and Bookbug for the Home).

There is evidence that having access to books in the community can help to boost children's early language skills. A study where 330 pre-schools 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 where children play (Neuman 1999). The proximity children have 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 are 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).

Despite the evidence on the value of access to local libraries, there is some evidence in Scotland suggesting that large numbers of children are not benefiting from this service. A study found that over half (55%) of three-year-olds in Scotland have never visited their local library, with under a fifth (18%) visiting libraries regularly (Anderson et al 2007). This suggests that many families are unaware or unable to take up the support that is available to young children. There is a need to understand better any barriers families face in accessing these services, e.g. distance from home, lack of knowledge about available services, groups being held at times that are unsuitable for working parents and parents' own literacy ability and confidence. These barriers may be partially addressed through a recent commitment to automatically enrol young children in public libraries. Local authorities are currently piloting the Every Child a Library Member initiative – with some choosing to enrol children from birth and some from primary school-age.

Libraries often have partnerships with early years and health services to offer early language support and guidance to families in pre- and post-natal 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. Libraries are funded by local authorities. Local government spend on libraries in Scotland has only reduced by 2% in the last seven years (Carnegie & SLIC 2015). However, in a context of increasing financial pressure on Scottish local authorities over the next few years, there is no room for complacency. The reduction in budgets has been more likely to lead to reduced opening hours and staff numbers than closures, with a likely impact on the accessibility of the service to users.

There is a real opportunity in Scotland to develop the role of libraries further in supporting young children. A new strategy for libraries has recently been published setting out the role of this service in the coming years, with a clear role in promoting literacy and reading for pleasure, as well as supporting social wellbeing in communities (Carnegie & SLIC 2015). There is a commitment in the strategy to developing the library workforce. Library staff are not always seen as a key part of the early years

workforce. This needs to change. They should be supported to develop their understanding and skills in early language development, and to identify, and where appropriate, support young children and their families who may be experiencing language delays.

## OTHER INITIATIVES AND PROGRAMMES

It is important to note that alongside the core services outlined above, in recent years the Scottish government has invested in a number of initiatives and programmes specifically designed to strengthen parents' skills in developing young children's early literacy.

The Scottish government's Play, Talk, Read campaign encourages parents, grandparents and carers to play, talk and read with their young children every day. Through an online resource, buses and social marketing, the campaign promotes the benefits this can have for children's learning, and provides games, activities and tips for families that can help to stimulate fun and playful conversations at home.

In 2014, there were more than 100,000 visits to the Play Talk Read website, while the Play Talk Read bus enabled the campaign to reach an additional 40,000 children and families in their communities. Independent evaluation showed the second phase of the campaign delivered sessions to almost 16,000 people across Scotland, with 91% saying they would

apply their learning at home. However, there is little evidence on whether the messages are having an impact on children's outcomes, and on how well this initiative is reaching the most disadvantaged children and families.

Another example of a programme designed to strengthen support for parents is the Bookbug programme, run by the Scottish Book Trust, providing free packs of books and resources to every baby, toddler, three- and five-year-old in Scotland, and Bookbug sessions, providing free opportunities to encourage parents and carers to talk, share books, sing and play. Bookbug for the Home trains a wide range of professionals – family support officers, health visiting teams and social workers – to deliver tailored support for more vulnerable families. Evaluations suggest that the programme is having a positive impact on parents' behaviour and the home learning environment (see page 19).

It is very difficult to assess additional initiatives and programmes at the local level because there is such a varied and diverse approach in different local areas to supporting parents to create a positive home learning environment. There are many examples of approaches, such as play@home, delivered through a mix of voluntary, local authority and private providers at family centres and in other settings. There is limited evidence analysing the extent to which these initiatives are improving children's early language development.

# 5 THREE PRIORITIES FOR MEETING THE CHALLENGE

This report has set out why all children in Scotland 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 challenge we face – too many children experiencing poverty are behind in language skills when they start school. And with the projected rise child poverty in the next five years much more needs to be done to ensure all children have firm foundations in early language skills.

This section of the report examines a number of recent positive developments in the policy context, highlighting the opportunities and challenges in ensuring all children have good early language skills by the time they start school. It also draws on the evidence in the report to highlight three areas where further progress could be made.

## POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

### THE EARLY YEARS FRAMEWORK

The Scottish government has made clear its ambition to make Scotland the best place in the world to grow up. Central to this approach is a focus on the early years, reflecting the strong evidence that the first few years of a child's life are crucial to their future development and to the opportunities and choices available to them later in life. The emphasis on the early years is evident in a great deal of government activity, not least the Early Years Framework, the Early Years Taskforce and accompanying change fund. The government hopes to provide new impetus to this agenda to instigate “a more rapid shift to the early years”, early intervention and prevention.

The Scottish government's vision and ambition for long-term transformative change in the early years (from birth to age eight) set out in the Early Years Framework is to be commended. The key aims of this policy are to tackle poverty and inequality, improve quality in services (through workforce development) and intervene early. The Early Years Taskforce is tasked with delivering tangible improvement in outcomes and reducing inequalities for Scotland's

vulnerable children, and with putting Scotland squarely on course to shift the balance of public services towards early intervention and prevention by 2016.

### THE EARLY YEARS COLLABORATIVE

One challenge is the scale, diversity and fragmentation of the service landscape and workforce in the early years. The shift to greater spending on prevention and to early intervention in service delivery has not been delivered as quickly as was hoped. However, there is a great deal of experience in the sector and commitment and energy to deliver change by working together in joined-up services.

An innovative development has been the establishment of the Early Years Collaborative, an improvement agenda bringing stakeholders across the early years together to look at how to improve outcomes for children in the early years. The Collaborative has two 'stretch aims' that are relevant to our goal of all children having good language skills by the time they start school:

- 85% of children in every Community Planning Partnership area reaching expected milestones by the time of the child's 27–30 month health review by 2017

- 90% of children in every Community Planning Partnership area reaching expected milestones by the time the child starts school by 2018.

These are ambitions and welcome aims. They provide a good foundation on which to build a national framework, but only if there is a clear focus in the stretch aims on early language skills and early literacy.

### A NATIONAL FOCUS ON WHICH LITERACY APPROACHES ARE SUSTAINABLE AND WORK

The Scottish government launched a Literacy Action Plan (2010) and set up a Standing Literacy Commission to examine how Scotland could address the literacy gap associated with poverty. The commission concluded that the “stand-out issue, where more progress needs to be made, is the gap in attainment between the most and least disadvantaged young people.”(Scottish Government 2015b). Its final report documents various approaches, projects and interventions, but it does not make clear which impact most on poverty. For example, it documents professional development projects that support early learning experiences, interventions that empower parents to create rich home environment for vulnerable families, and notes the importance of identifying needs early through universal health checks at 27–30 months. However, the commission does not report on whether these approaches are working. We need to know and understand the evidence of improved outcomes for children if we are to develop a robust policy framework.

### A NATIONAL FOCUS ON ADDRESSING ‘ATTAINMENT GAPS’

The Scottish government has prioritised tackling ‘attainment gaps’ – the link between poverty and learning and development. The Scottish Attainment Challenge and Attainment Challenge Fund are aimed at improving educational outcomes for the poorest children. The Fund is being targeted on seven local authority areas initially. In addition, Attainment Advisors are being recruited for every local authority area to support the development of local approaches. Tackling inequalities in literacy are seen as core to this work. These are very welcome developments, but investment needs to target every school and every local authority. Most children in Scotland do not live in ‘poor’ areas and every school, in every area, needs to address this challenge.

## POLICY DIRECTION FOR ACHIEVING PROGRESS

To maximise the opportunities in the early years and education policy context in Scotland requires political and professional leadership. We identify three areas that could further drive leadership in this area.

We recommend:

- that the newly appointed attainment advisors in each local area have a clear role to address inequality gaps in the early years, in particular to support all children to develop good early language skills by the age of five
- a clear focus in children’s services plans at local level on early language development
- consideration is given to prioritising addressing attainment gaps in early language skills and literacy in the new duties contained in the Education (Scotland) Bill.

We identify three areas that we believe will help progress to ensure a sustainable shift towards meeting the goal of all children having good early language skills by the time they start school. We believe action in these areas will help to meet the government’s early years collaborative stretch aims one and two and wider attainment gap goals. The Read On. Get On. coalition in Scotland is keen to work with stakeholders to develop the recommendations outlined below.

### I INVEST FURTHER IN EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE, PARTICULARLY THE WORKFORCE

Universal free early learning and childcare provides a strong foundation for creating a world-class system capable of ensuring that all children have good early language. There is a major opportunity to capitalise on this foundation by continuing to develop the early learning and childcare workforce, so that every child gets the best early learning experiences – especially those growing up in poverty.

We must, as a priority, continue to drive up the quality of the early learning and childcare workforce. Our ambition as a country should be that the entire early years workforce is of a standard that best supports the development of all children, but particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This means continued investment, training and support for all staff.

The evidence demonstrates the vital role of early education in complementing the efforts of parents to support their children’s early language development.

There are two critical points about the potential of early learning and childcare in boosting the early language skills of Scotland's poorest children. First, the vast majority of three- and four-year-olds in Scotland, and increasing numbers of two-year-olds, including most of those living in poverty, will attend early learning and childcare funded by the state before the age of five. This creates a massive opportunity to influence the early language learning of large numbers of poorer children. It is critical that the increase in the number of hours on offer is backed up by the investment required to ensure that free early learning and childcare is of the highest quality – especially for children growing up in poverty. Otherwise, there is a major risk that the government's plans will not have the desired impact on children's early learning and life chances. Second, there is a very robust evidence base for the action needed to improve the quality of early learning and childcare and the impact this can have on children experiencing poverty.

This is why we attach such priority to improving the quality of early learning and childcare to help meet our campaign goals. These benefits were highlighted during a recent parliamentary inquiry into inequalities in the early years. A key finding of the inquiry was that good-quality early learning and childcare services could make a difference, and provided a "huge opportunity" to support children from disadvantaged backgrounds, but only if there was stronger investment in the educational aspects of early learning and childcare (Scottish Parliament 2015).

We believe an increased focus within early learning and childcare on supporting young children's early language development is needed. We identify four key areas that will support progress:

- a) **Ensure all early learning and childcare settings have access to at least one member of staff with a graduate level qualification in early language or literacy.** This role could be part of local early years teams with specific responsibility for developing early language and literacy related competences and practice and developing and mainstreaming the use of screening tools and evidenced based resources.
- b) **Consider how the entitlement to free early learning and childcare hours could be delivered in a way that empowers and strengthens parents' skills in supporting their children's early language skills, alongside directly supporting children.**

- c) **Introduce a more explicit focus on early language development in inspections.** This would support a renewed emphasis on this critical set of skills within services. The focus on inspections should reflect current knowledge about what works, and provide an opportunity to identify examples of what works, where gaps may be emerging, and how they could be addressed.
- d) **Develop evidence based poverty awareness and understanding training as a core part of on-going professional development of the workforce.** Children living in poverty can face additional barriers to achieving key milestones in early language. Further, most children in poverty do not live in 'deprived' areas. Therefore, poverty is an issue for every setting. While there is considerable knowledge of poverty amongst the workforce, this is not always consistent or well understood. Training and support should be given to assist professionals in developing practice that best supports children experiencing poverty.

## 2 STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

Our goal of all children achieving a good standard of language on starting school can only be met if the proposals for early learning and childcare set out in this report are combined with action to ensure that a range of other services are supporting children's early language development.

This is crucial because children's language skills up to the age of two have such a strong impact on their reading and literacy in later years, and are influenced by the environment they grow up in from birth. With fewer children under the age of three attending formal early learning and childcare, other services potentially have a critical role in supporting children's early language and helping parents to do the best for their children.

The National Parenting Strategy (Scottish Government 2012) aims to champion the importance of parenting and ensure that parents get the support they need to prevent problems arising. It includes a specific commitment to exploring ways to support parents to engage in their child's learning and to creating a good home learning environment. There is a varied and wide range of support and interventions aimed at supporting parents to create a positive home learning environment for their children, from national social marketing campaigns and resources to direct support for families. Both universal and targeted services have a role to play in providing this

support. Parents receive a lot of information about how best to support their children's development in the early years. This can sometimes be overwhelming for families and difficult to decipher. Yet, at the same time parents often report a lack of information.

It is also important to recognise that parents can face a number of barriers to engaging with this support. Low income is linked to low engagement with services amongst families with children under five in Scotland. A study of parental services in the early years found that 41% of mothers were deemed 'low service users' when their child was aged ten months and 43% when their child was aged four years (Mabellis at al 2011). Reasons for non-attendance at ante-natal classes and at parent and baby groups suggest that the group format of some of these supports is off-putting for some women. The study concluded that this appears to stem, at least in part and for some of the mothers, from a lack of confidence in their ability as a parent. Thus, rather than a source of support, such groups are considered a source of scrutiny and stress. The study pointed to the need to look at building relationships between services and families, and to consider non-professional community-based options for support (mirroring the finding of other studies).

We are concerned about an apparent lack of priority given to family support within local budgets, especially given the context of reduced budgets. This would suggest a need to revisit the role of universal services in providing this support and strengthening the case for additional investment in these types of services. In order to strengthen support for parents to develop their children's early language, we believe there is a need to better understand what works. This includes looking at what works in supporting families experiencing poverty – specifically, understanding what good practice looks like, why it works, who should deliver it, how it should be delivered, what barriers to service use need to be addressed, and how this information can be shared with those commissioning, developing and managing services. We strongly recommend that service commissioners and providers ensure that the models or programmes they select are fully supported by outcome evidence that shows these models or programmes will help to reduce inequalities and improve young children's language skills. Given the pressures on budgets and the welcome focus on preventative spending, increased adoption of evidence-based programmes and practice must be a key element of that equation if outcomes are to be improved.

Many early years services are already contributing to supporting parents and developing children's early language. Our ambition for the early years workforce does not stop at early learning and childcare. Health visitors, childminders, library staff and other professionals also need more support to develop the skills and confidence to support parents and spot problems with children's language development early.

We have identified two priorities for ensuring that parents have more support to engage with their child's early language learning and understand the progress their child is making. Our intention is to do more work as a coalition and, working with partners, to develop specific proposals in each area:

- a) **Ensure the early years workforce has access to quality assured training to develop skills to support parents with the basics of early language, and identify and refer children who need extra help.** In particular, consideration should be given to whether health visitors providing intensive support to the most vulnerable families should have specific opportunities for extra professional development around young children's language development. This training should include the importance of early language development, normal development milestones up to age five, and how to identify needs and respond effectively. Training and qualifications in language and communication development could become a strong 'promotion pathway' for the early years workforce.
- b) **Undertake a review of the evidence to increase professional knowledge and understanding of what works to strengthen parents' skills in developing their children's early language skills at home.** This review should include parents' views on what works. Consideration should also be given to embedding a robust monitoring and development framework for all programmes designed to support parents to develop their children's language skills at home.

### 3 TRACKING YOUNG CHILDREN'S PROGRESS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

We are concerned at the lack of a single, widely agreed and easily understood method of measuring children's outcomes in the early years. This has been highlighted in various reports. Geddes at al (2012), Save the Children (2012) and recently Siraj (2015) have called for a national monitoring and assessment system to track young children's development.

Without such a measure, it will be difficult to know whether or not the increased political and policy emphasis on the early years is actually delivering improvements in the lives of our young children.

In 2009, a Scottish government led group developed an outcomes framework for the early years. This set out 35 indicators that could be used to measure early years outcomes. It included two indicators of early language – the percentage of children scoring at or above the mean for their age on the BAS and the percentage of children displaying age-appropriate communication skills. However, these indicators are not mandatory or prescriptive and it is not clear if they could be used at local level. The 13–15 and 27–30 month child health reviews provide an opportunity to develop a robust and consistent approach to reviewing young children’s progress. However, this is limited to children under three.

Tracking young children’s progress across the country is important for three reasons. First, it enables us to understand the impact of early learning and childcare and other services on supporting children’s early language development and other outcomes. Second, it would support an analysis of trends for different populations of children – for example, children

living in poverty. Third, this improved understanding would allow policy and service developments to be based on children’s identified level of need, and on a more in-depth understanding of where children are making progress and where there may be gaps. It could also help inform progress against the Early Years Collaborative first three stretch aims. The early years workforce review (Siraj 2015) highlighted the hesitation to develop a national system of assessment and data collection and the risk of inappropriate comparisons being made. We believe that the system could be designed to avoid this risk. We believe the benefits of such a system would far outweigh the risks and could be avoided by using certain approaches.

We identify one area that will help progress:

- a) **Introduce a national child development measure to track young children’s progress against agreed milestones and outcomes from birth to starting school. Early language and communication should be a priority area within this measure.** The measure should be designed to enable reporting on the progress of different populations of children – for example, children experiencing poverty.



# 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 their families, across the United Kingdom. The cohort members were born, in England and Wales, over the 12-month period starting September 2000; in Scotland and Northern Ireland they were born over 13½ months from November 2000. The sample design allowed for disproportionate representation of families living in areas of child poverty, and in areas of England with high ethnic minority populations. Information was first collected from parents, through a home-based survey, when the cohort members were aged nine months. This first survey recorded, amongst other things, the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as those of the early months of life, and the social and economic background of the children's families.

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

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

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

At ages 3 and 5 of the MCS we measure expressive verbal ability using the "naming vocabulary" subscale of the British Ability Scales (BAS). At age 7, English reading ability is measured using a subscale of the BAS. The child is asked to read a series of words presented on a card; the assessment consists of 90 words in total; the words are organised into nine blocks of 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).

# APPENDIX 2: FULL REGRESSION TABLES FOR CHAPTER 2

## AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE

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

*continued on next page*

AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

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

## Notes:

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

## AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE

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

*continued on next page*

AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

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

## Notes:

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

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# READY TO READ

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

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

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

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

*Ready to Read* argues for a decisive shift towards early action and investment. It sets out three priorities for Scottish government:

- investing further in early learning and childcare services and workforce
- strengthening support for parents
- making sure that, as a country, we can track the progress we are making to improve young children’s language skills.

Helping children read

