READY TO READ

Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in England 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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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life. Yet every year, almost 148,000 children leave primary school in England unable to read well. This includes one third of all children growing up in poverty. For many, the impact on their life chances is likely to be dramatic. This national failing helps explain the persistent educational divide in England that, each year, prevents thousands of our poorest children from fulfilling their potential.

Making sure that every child leaves primary school able to read well is a crucial part of efforts to turn this unacceptable situation around – so that every child succeeds, regardless of their background. This is why *Read On. Get On.* – a campaign coalition of major literacy and communication charities, libraries, teaching unions and publishers – is focused on ensuring that every child can read well by the age of 11. In England, we want to achieve this by 2025. We're committed to building a national mission to tackle underachievement in reading, drawing in energy and expertise from across society.

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

Learning to read well starts early, and good early language skills are the vital stepping stone. If children do not learn to 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 five-year-old in England has good language skills by 2020.

This report explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read, and why poor 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.

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. However, while there has been some progress, the rhetoric has not generally been backed up by concrete action. As we begin a new parliament, this report argues for a decisive shift towards early action and investment to help address one of the country's most pressing challenges – entrenched educational underachievement, especially among our poorest children.

The focus of this report is on the role of national government[1] and local services in England in supporting children and parents. But we know the problem of poor early language skills 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 to help parents understand what they can do.

[1] Where this report refers to the 'government', it is referring to the Westminster government responsible for education policy in England.

POOR CHILDREN ARE FALLING BEHIND IN LANGUAGE SKILLS ACROSS ENGLAND

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 England, almost one child in four (23%) does not meet this expected level of language development by the age of five. Children living in poverty face a much greater risk of falling behind – one in three (35%) does not have the language skills expected of a five-year-old. New analysis for this report shows that, while the gap in language skills between poor children and their better-off peers has fallen a little over the last five years, it remains stubbornly high.

Boys growing up in poverty face a particularly high risk of falling behind – 42% of poor boys do not have the language skills expected of a five-year-old, compared to 28% of poor girls. This shows that the gender gap in educational outcomes starts long before children enter school – and needs to be tackled from a much earlier age.

There are also significant differences in how well poor children do in language across local authority areas in England. Far too many poor children are falling behind at an early age in some parts of England – notably in some major cities in the North-West and North-East, and in some rural areas in the Midlands, North-East and East of England. In other parts of the country – for example, some inner London boroughs – poor children are faring much better. This shows that children living in poverty can make good progress in early language development if they get the right support. So, while poverty can make it much harder, there is no excuse for accepting underachievement among our poorest children.

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 32% less on reading tests at age seven and 20% less on comprehension tests at age 11 than a child who never experienced poverty and had above average language skills

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE EARLY YEARS AND THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

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

1. **Language skills at age three**: children's language skills in the first few years of life have a massive impact on their language skills by the age of five, demonstrating the importance of early action to support young children's language development right from birth.
2. **What parents do**: the bond between parent and child, and the way that parents use language at home, are crucial. Parents also have a vital role in creating early learning opportunities (like sharing stories, singing rhymes, or playing word games), which can help to compensate for the impact of poverty.

3. **Poverty**: poverty can leave parents feeling stressed, worried or lacking in confidence, which can make it harder for them to find the time and emotional energy to be consistently warm and encouraging, or 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 education and childcare**: high-quality early education and childcare can be a major benefit, especially for older preschool children and for those living in poverty. Nursery education has the biggest impact on children's 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, but these services don't always maximise opportunities to strengthen children's early language development, and some are under intense financial pressure.

- **Health visiting**: health visitors have a unique role in supporting children's early language development, because they work with all families from birth, come into the home as trusted professionals and carry out regular reviews of all children's development. But they may lack the skills and confidence to focus on children's language development, and it is not always prioritised by local services.
- **Children's centres**: these offer a range of universal and targeted services, including many that focus on children's language skills, and provide a space for parents to support each other as well. For many poor families, children's centres are a vital part of the community. But centres are under significant financial pressure, with many forced to reduce the services they provide.
- **Early education and childcare**: unlike some other services, nursery education has been an area of expansion over the last five years, and this is set to continue. But there has not been enough focus on raising the quality of nursery education. Currently, two out of five private nurseries do not have a member of staff qualified to degree level, and many staff do not have specialist training in young children's language development.
- **Libraries**: libraries support families by offering access to a wide range of free books as well as to reading and singing groups. As part of the squeeze on local government funding, public libraries are facing considerable budget pressures in many parts of the country, putting some services at risk.
- **Monitoring children's early language**: children's progress in language skills is checked when they are two and five, helping to identify those who need extra help. These assessments are changing, creating opportunities to further strengthen the help that families get. But these reforms could also make it harder for us to track progress on children's early language as a nation.

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 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 priorities for the new government, and for local services, designed to help parents and professionals do even more to support the youngest children – especially those living in poverty.

- **Invest further in the nursery education workforce**
  The new government should have an ambition for every nursery in England to be led by a trained teacher or early years graduate by 2020. This is the best way to ensure that children growing up in poverty get the highest quality nursery education,

boosting their early language skills before they start school. Now that the vast majority of older preschool children get free nursery education, with the new government planning a further expansion, it is imperative that quality for the poorest children is prioritised. Further investment in the skills of non-graduate staff is also important.

- **Strengthen support for parents**
  The need to act early and to empower parents to support their child's early language development right from birth suggests an important role for health visiting and children's centres in particular. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign wants to see:
  - a renewed focus on professional development so that all early years professionals have the skills to support parents with the basics of early language, and to identify and refer children who need extra help
  - further efforts to help early health and education professionals work together so that children's needs are addressed in the round, including a new post of early years minister in Whitehall
  - greater priority given to early language in local public health strategies
  - a review of the long-term mission of children's centres, including their role in supporting young children's language skills.
- **Tracking young children's progress across the country**
  We are concerned that reforms to the assessment of children's development at age five will make it harder for us, as a country, to track our progress on early learning – including on young children's language development. The standard profiling of five-year-olds, which is reported on nationally, is being replaced by a collection of assessments that will not produce nationally comparable information about children's progress. This will make it difficult to understand whether, as a country, we are on track in ensuring that all five-year-olds have good language skills by 2020. The new government should consider how it can enable comparable data to continue to be collected in the context of planned changes to assessments at five.

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 child in five in England leaves primary school unable to read well, rising to one in three among our poorest children. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign's mission is to rally the country to take action to get every child in the UK reading well by age 11. In England, we want to achieve this by 2025.[1]

A child who can read well at the age of 11 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. In England, we want to achieve this by 2020. Currently, one in four young children is not reaching the expected level of language development, rising to one in three of our poorest children. By the age of five, children from the poorest families are on average 15 months behind children from the richest families in their vocabulary.

This report explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read and why children growing up in poverty face a bigger risk of falling behind. It sets out the action that is needed – focusing particularly on the poorest children – to ensure that every child in England 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.

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. However, while there has been some progress, the rhetoric has not generally been

[1] *Read On. Get On.* campaign coalitions in each of the other nations of the UK share the same priorities as in England and are in the process of putting a date on their goals.

READ ON. GET ON., THE NATIONAL LITERACY FORUM AND THE FAIR EDUCATION ALLIANCE

Improving children's education across the UK, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, is a mission shared by several organisations and coalitions. The campaign is closely aligned with the Vision for Literacy manifesto set out by the National Literacy Forum, a coalition of 19 organisations dedicated to raising literacy standards across the UK. Similarly, the Fair Education Alliance is a coalition of 27 organisations committed to reducing the achievement gap between children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign is driving action to achieve the alliance's goal of narrowing the gap in literacy at primary school.

backed up by concrete action. As we begin a new parliament, this report argues for a decisive shift towards early action and investment to help address one of the country's most pressing challenges – entrenched educational underachievement, especially among our poorest children.

Achieving our goal of every child having good language skills is within our reach – but a 'business as usual' approach is not enough. Large gaps in language development open up very early in life between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers. Although there are signs that this gap has narrowed a little, current progress is too slow. Without a major step-change in progress, large numbers of poor 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 latest data on the challenge that we face. Chapter 1 examines which children are most at risk of falling behind, and 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, libraries and children's centres – to support young children's language development, and explains why this potential is not always fulfilled. The report ends in chapter 5

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

Achieving the *Read On. Get On.* campaign goals will require us all to play a role – parents, grandparents, businesses, volunteers, teachers and role models like footballers and other celebrities. This report focuses on the specific role of national government and local services, but we know the problem is not something that government alone can fix.

When we launched the campaign in September 2014, we worked with education experts EdComs 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.

by setting out three priorities for government: investing further in the early education workforce; strengthening support for parents, especially in public health services and children's centres; 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 more socially mobile and fairer country. As this report explains, this can only be achieved if we commit to boosting the early language skills of our poorest children.

1 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 one in three children growing up in poverty does not reach the expected level of language skills at age five. Shockingly, this figure rises to one in two children in some areas of England. 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 England, focusing on inequalities between children growing up in poverty and their better-off peers. We also examine how attainment varies for poor children depending on gender, ethnicity and place.

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 England has good language skills by age five in 2020 – so that they have relatively well-developed capacities in each of these areas of language. By the age of five, 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 1.1. 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:

- About 7% of young children have a 'specific language impairment', meaning that language problems are their primary need (they do not have other health conditions or disability).

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)**
• Communicates through babbling, crying and gesturing • Responds to familiar words like 'bye-bye' • Start to understand simple words • Start to use simple words	• Start to put two or three words together into simple sentences like 'Show me your nose' • Learn two or three words a day on average • Start to ask lots questions that helps them to remember and learn words	• Start to learn more complex meanings of words • Start to ask lots of questions about what words mean • Express their thoughts and feelings clearly to adults and children • Make careful choices about the words they are using and conform with grammatical rules on, for example, tenses and plurals • May still find some sounds difficult to use but are understood by most people • May stumble over words and sentences	• Able to understand and talk with new people using well formed sentences • Ask lots of 'why?' questions • Understand longer and more complicated sentences • Use and understand most everyday words that adults use • Explain what has happened, and why, in an interesting way

Adapted from: ICAN (2011)

Children in this group typically have difficulty expressing themselves – for example, struggling to remember words or follow long instructions. Some children will have mild and short-lived problems, while others will have serious language difficulties that affect them for life.

- Around 3% of children have language difficulties because of another condition, including cerebral palsy, a hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorder, dyslexia or other learning difficulties.
- Approximately 0.5% of children have severe and complex language difficulties that affect their ability to express their most basic needs. They typically need intensive support to be able to communicate in other ways (for example, through electronic devices). (The Communication Trust 2014)

The extent of language impairments and disabilities among young children means that it is not plausible that every single child in England will have a good level of language development by the age of five by 2020. But we can get very close. Only 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 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, a lack of early learning opportunities in the home, or a lack 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 this 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,

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'.

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.

NEW EVIDENCE ON INEQUALITIES IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

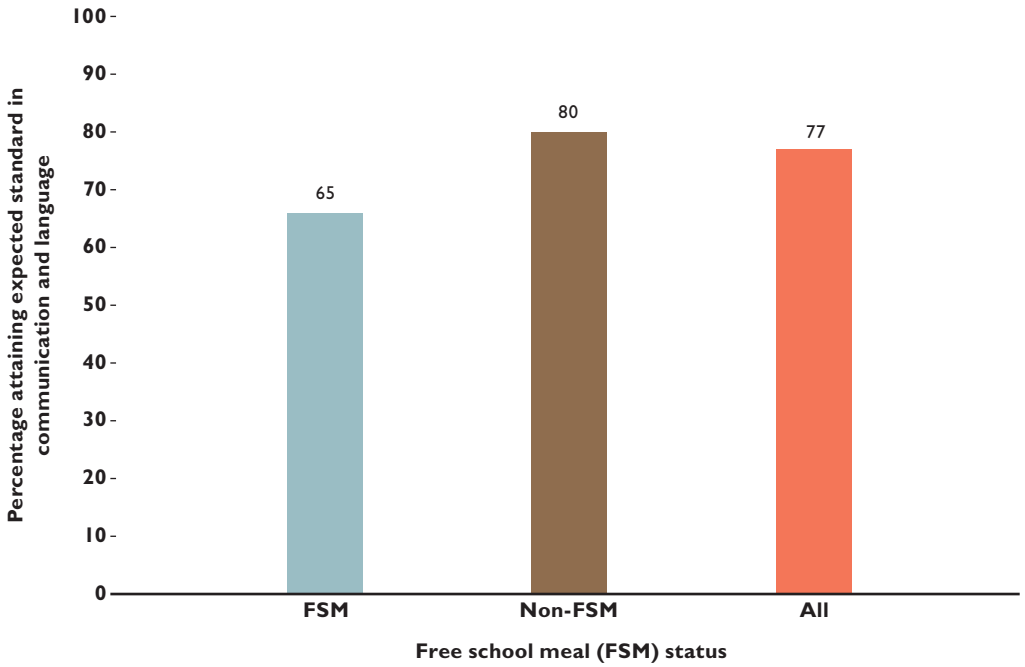
In this section we present new evidence on inequalities in language development between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers, using data from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). These are profiles of all children in England, carried out by teachers at the end of the reception year in primary school. This represents a teacher's assessment of a child's language and communication skills, which focuses on listening and attention, understanding, and speaking skills.

One in three poor children (35%) in England – as measured in this report by eligibility for free school meals – did not reach the expected level of development in language ability by the age of five. By comparison, **one child in four** (23%) not eligible for free school meals (FSMs) did not reach the expected level (see figure 1.1). These figures equate to a total of 148,000 five-year-olds who finish reception year each year without achieving the expected level of language skills, including 40,000 poor children.

Further, we have not seen the rate of improvement in poor children's language and communication development that is needed to achieve our *Read On. Get On.* campaign goal.[1] In 2007, 59% of poor

[1] In 2012/2013 a new EYFSP was introduced. The new EYFSP changed some of the ways children were assessed by teachers. This means the figures before 2012/13 and after are not directly comparable. However, they do indicate the relative performance of, or the gap between, FSM and non-FSM children during each period. Therefore, we focus here on the rate of change in each period and the gap between FSM and non-FSM children.

FIGURE 1.1 PROPORTION OF FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN ENGLAND REACHING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE, BY FREE SCHOOL MEAL (FSM) STATUS (2014)



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

children were not reaching the expected level in language and communication skills; by 2012 this had decreased to 44% of poor children. This represents an additional 15% of poor children with improved outcomes during this period. Following a change in how the assessment was carried out in 2013, the proportion of FSM eligible children not reaching the expected level in language and communication at age five decreased from 40% in 2013 to 35% in 2014. This represents an additional 5% of poor children with improved outcomes
during this period.

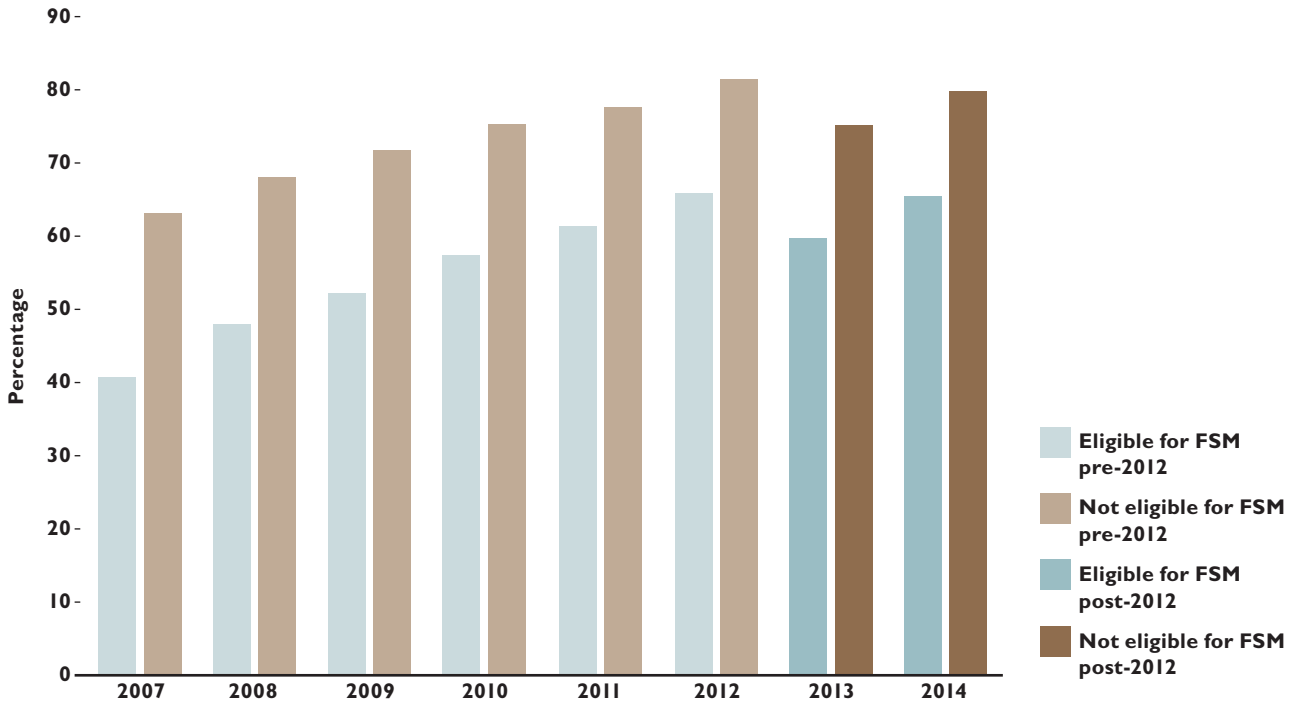
While these figures show improvements in the outcomes of poor children, even if a rate of 5% improvement persisted each year we would still fail to meet our goal by 2020. Furthermore, we know that as the proportion of children with improving outcomes increases, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the same rate of improvement. This is because the groups of children who see improvements last are often those with the most complex needs. These children often require more support than other children. This means that without additional action, a rate of 5% is highly unlikely to persist, ensuring that we won't meet our goal by 2020.

Furthermore, while the gap in attainment between poor children and their peers has fallen in both periods, the data shows that it remains large. The gap between FSM-eligible children and children not eligible for FSMs decreased from 22 percentage points in 2007 to 15 percentage points in 2012, then again from 16 percentage points in 2013 to 14 in 2014. While the gap has fallen during both periods, if we are to meet our goal by 2020, the rate at which the gap closes must increase significantly.

We can get a richer understanding of the relationship between poverty and children's early language development by using data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) (see appendix 1). Through examining this data, we can see that this gap in ability in language is apparent from age three and persists through to when children start school.

The MCS has tracked the progress of a group of children born in 2000 and contains detailed information about their development. Although data on three- and five-year-olds is now over ten years old, the survey is a useful complement to the EYFSP data. The survey measures family income directly (rather than relying on FSM eligibility as a proxy) and at each stage of a child's life. This enables us to confirm the relationship between poverty

FIGURE 1.2 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SCORES 2007 TO 2014 BY FSM STATUS



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

and children's language development implied by the EYFSP data, and also to consider the different impact of persistent and temporary poverty.

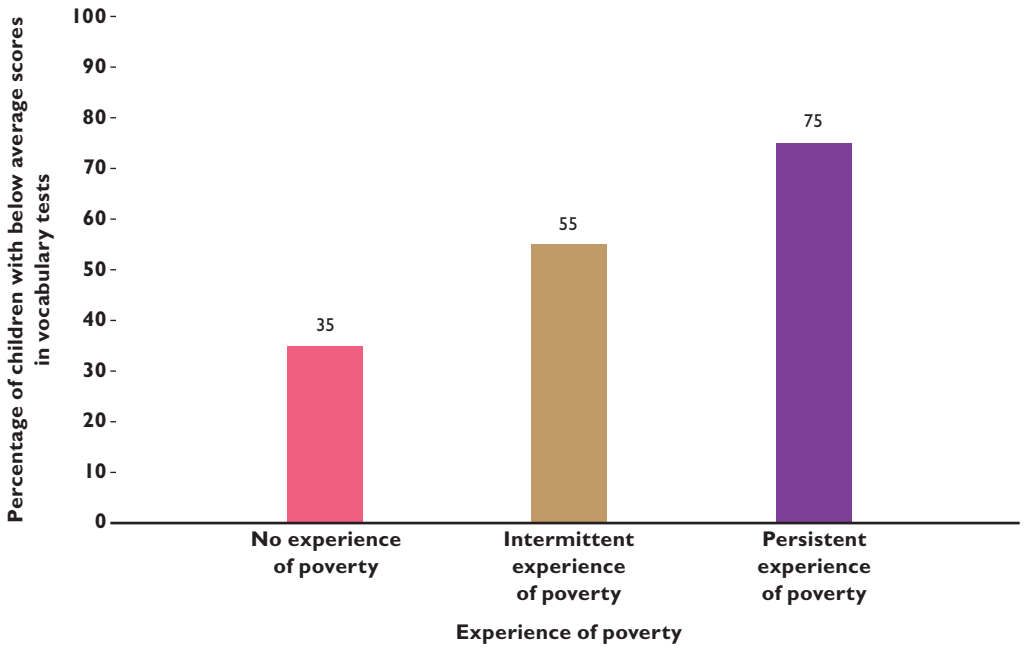
Research using MCS has shown that gaps in children's language development open up as early as three years of age (Waldfogel & Washbrook 2011). In our first report, *Read On. Get On: How reading can help children escape poverty*, we presented new analysis of children's language development by researchers at Newcastle University. This analysis covered the outcomes of children from across the UK and compared their average level of language development in months. It showed that a child in the lowest income group was on average 17.4 months behind a child in the highest income group at age three (Read On. Get On. 2014).

New analysis of MCS by the UCL Institute of Education shows how this pattern persists at age five for children in England. Figure 1.3 groups children aged five according to whether they scored above or below the average score on a standard vocabulary test. Children are also grouped according to whether they experienced poverty between the age of nine months to five years, persistently, intermittently or not at all. The analysis shows that 55% of children who experienced poverty intermittently were below the average, compared with 75% of children who experienced poverty persistently throughout the early years, and 35% who never experienced poverty.

These figures represent major inequalities in language development between children with different experiences of poverty. In particular, it is clear that children who experienced poverty persistently throughout their early life face a much higher risk of experiencing language delays.

This evident relationship between child poverty and language delay is why this report and the *Read On. Get On.* campaign focus particularly on children who are living in poverty. Children on free school meals make up nearly a fifth of all children, and are less likely to be able to read well at age 11. As this data shows, they are also more likely to be behind in the important foundational skills of language ability when they start school. This is important, because as we will demonstrate in chapter 2, if a child is behind in language ability at age five, they are considerably more likely to be behind in reading at age 11. Unless many more children from poor families have good language skills by the age of five, a national mission to ensure all children are reading well at 11 by 2025 will fail.

FIGURE 1.3 FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY LEVEL BY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



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

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

In addition to the inequalities between poor children and their peers, using the EYFSP data we can look in even more detail at inequalities in language development by gender, ethnicity and place. This builds on the analysis of reading skills in our previous reports *Read On. Get On: How reading can help children escape poverty* and *Reading England's Future*, but focuses on the language skills of children aged five.

GENDER

The EYFSP data echoes a finding also demonstrated in our *Read On. Get On.* launch report – boys are performing less well than girls. In this instance, it is in their language ability at age five, but we also know that this is true with reading well at age 11.

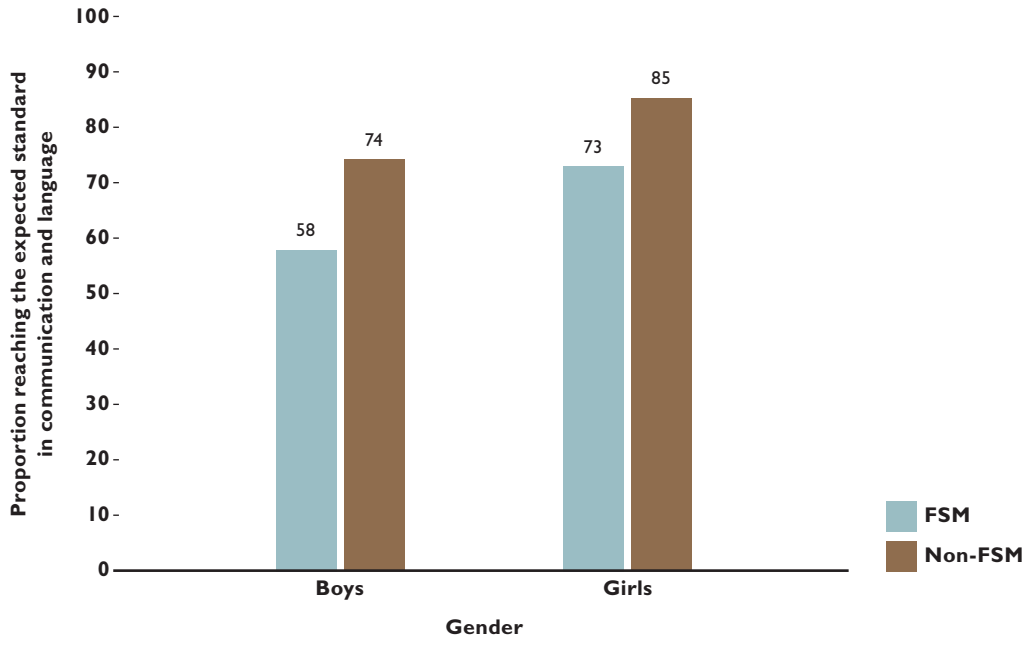
What is more, inequalities in language development between poor and better-off children is larger for boys than for girls (see figure 1.4):

- More than four in ten five-year-old boys eligible for FSM (42%) – around 24,000 boys – do not reach the expected standard in language and communication.

THE IMPACT OF BILINGUALISM ON YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

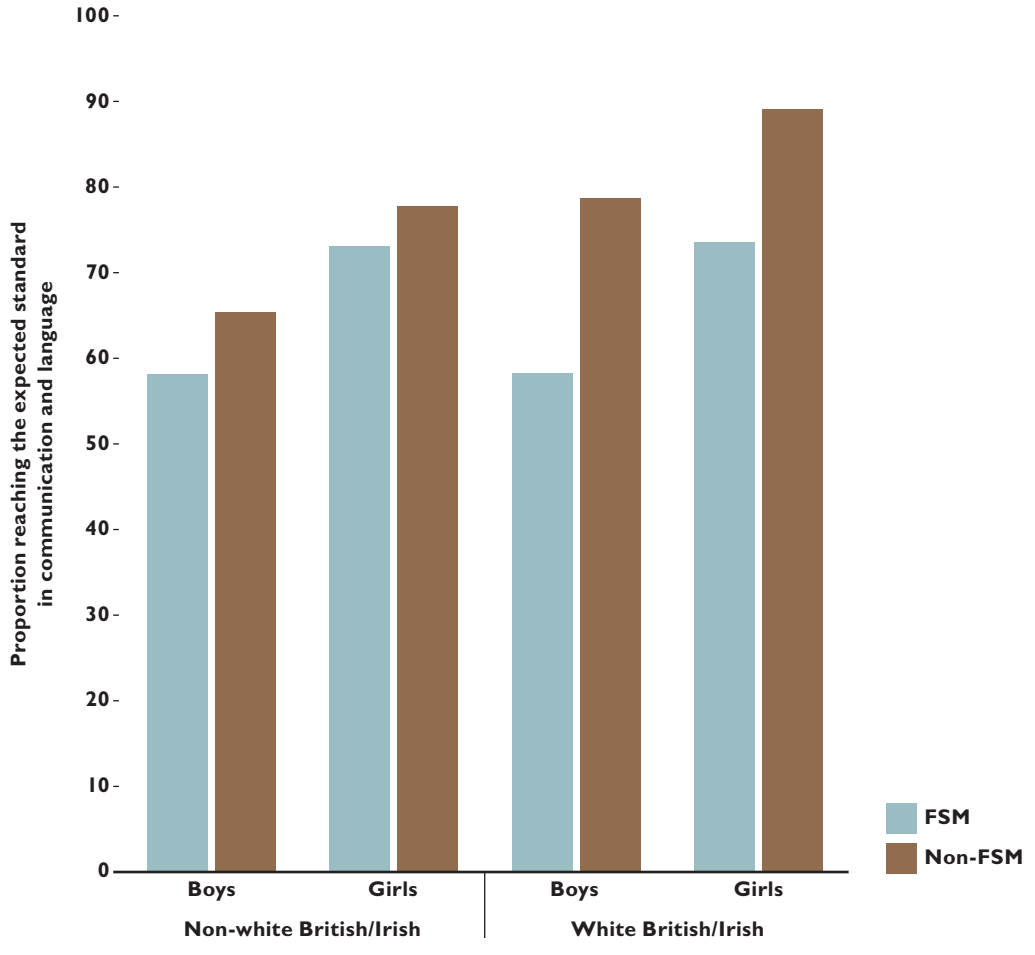
Many children grow up learning more than one language at a time, which can affect the age at which they master particular aspects of language. Last year, just under one in five children in England were registered by their teachers at age five as growing up in a household where English was not the first language (although this does not necessarily mean that English was not the child's first 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).

FIGURE 1.4 PROPORTION OF BOYS AND GIRLS ACHIEVING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION BY FSM STATUS



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

FIGURE 1.5 ETHNICITY, GENDER AND FSM STATUS OF CHILDREN ACHIEVING THE EXPECTED STANDARD IN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

- The gap between those reaching the expected standard at five between boys eligible for FSM and other boys is 16 percentage points, compared to 12 points for girls.
- While the gap is smaller for girls, one in four girls eligible for FSM, or almost 15,000 five-year-old girls, do not reach the expected standard.

This shows that the gender gap in educational attainment starts early, before children even get to school. A focus on boys' learning, especially in language and literacy, must begin right from birth.

ETHNICITY

Looking further at social class inequalities in early language skills by children's ethnicity, we find that the gap is largest for boys eligible for FSM either from non-white or white backgrounds. Figure 1.5 shows that less than three in five white or non-white, FSM-eligible boys had language and communication skills at the expected level in 2014.

REGIONS

We can also use the EYFSP data to look at how the language gap varies by regions and local authorities. In 2014 there was a difference of seven percentage points between the best performing and lowest performing regions. In 2007 this was a difference of 11 percentage points, with the South-west (64%) and inner London (53%) providing the top and bottom ends of the range.

Inner London ceased to be the lowest performing region in 2011, overtaking more regions in 2012 to put itself in the top half of all regions in the country by performance, where it has remained since then. In comparison the North-East has been the lowest-performing region every year since 2011. For language and communication skills, the largest gap between poor and better-off children, of 18 percentage points, can be found in the North-East, while the smallest difference is in inner and outer London.

London continues to be the best performing region for poor children in their language ability at age five. The rise in the success at school of children living in poverty in London has been well-documented over the past few years. This has been mostly put down to the improvement story of London's primary and secondary schools. However, this data suggests that poor children in London might also be at an advantage when they start school.

TABLE 1.1: DIFFERENCE IN LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ABILITY FOR FSM-ELIGIBLE AND FSM-INELIGIBLE BY REGION

North-East	-18%
Yorkshire and Humber	-16%
South-West	-16%
East Midlands	-15%
North-West	-15%
East of England	-14%
South-East	-14%
West Midlands	-14%
Inner London	-9%
Outer London	-9%

Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

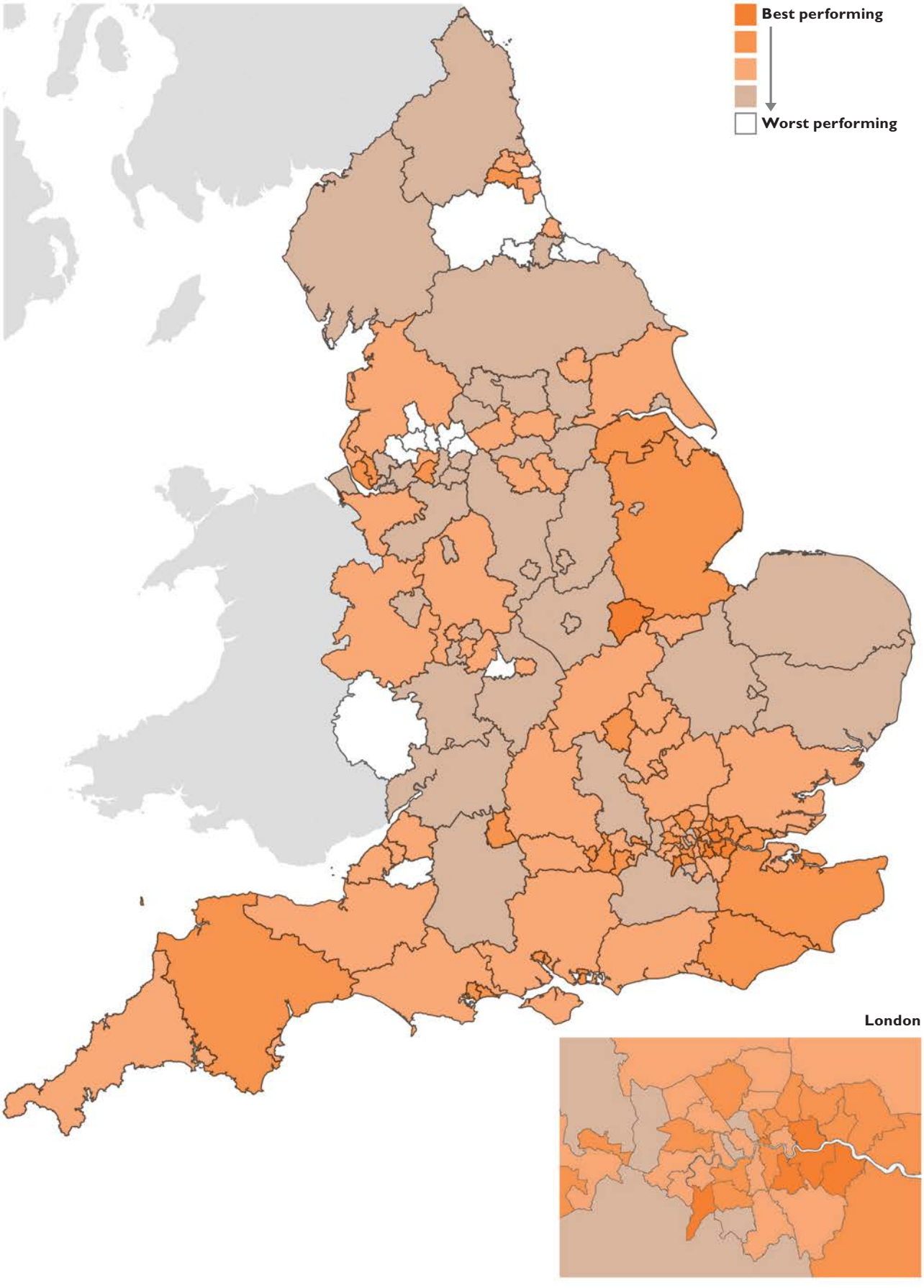
LOCAL AUTHORITIES

Another important part of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is recognising the different challenges that local areas might face in getting all children reading well and having good language ability. Our *Reading England's Future* report highlighted the differences between poor children's reading ability at age 11 by parliamentary constituency. The following data looks at language ability at age five for poor children and their peers by local authority.

Figure 1.6 shows a map of England comparing the attainment of children eligible for FSM in all of the local authorities. The map is shaded from white to dark orange according to the attainment of children. The highest performing local authorities are shaded in dark orange, while the worst performing local authorities are shaded towards white.

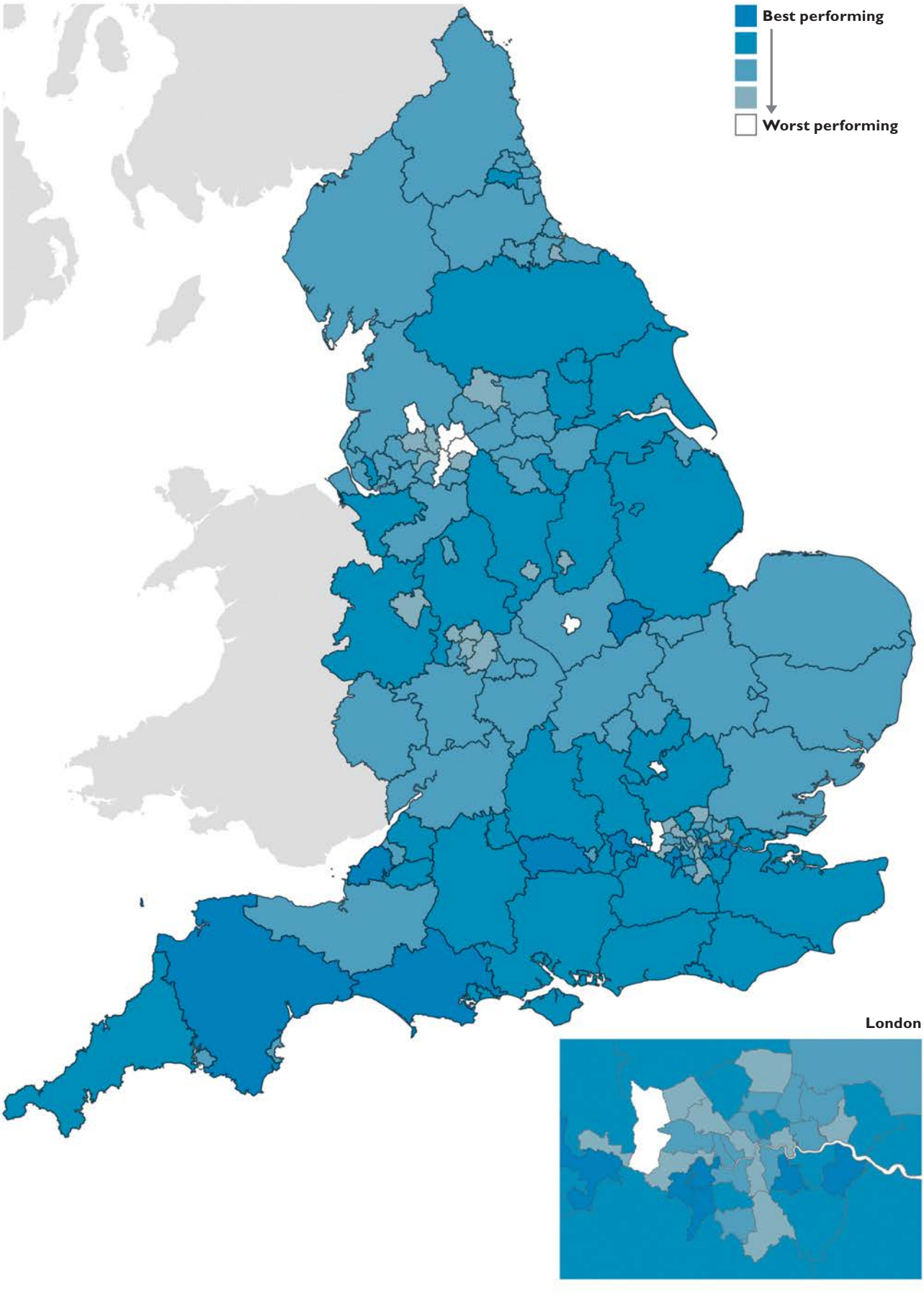
The north-west region occupies the greatest number of slots in the list of the ten lowest-performing authorities. Urban areas outside London are also over-represented. Of the local authorities that occupied the bottom ten slots in 2014, only two were in the lowest-performing ten areas in 2007: Leicester City and Middlesbrough. However, it is crucial to note here that there may be extenuating circumstances in these local authorities that mean they face challenges that can not be recognised through the data alone. But it is important if we are

FIGURE 1.6 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ABILITY OF FSM-ELIGIBLE CHILDREN IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

FIGURE 1.7 LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION ABILITY OF NON-FSM-ELIGIBLE CHILDREN IN LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND



Source: National Pupil Database, Department for Education

to achieve our *Read On. Get On.* goal to understand the true nature and scale of the challenge and to identify the areas that may need the most support.

In comparison, figure 1.7 shows the same map of England but compares the attainment of non-FSM eligible children in local authorities. The map is shaded from white to dark blue according to the attainment of children. The highest performing local authorities are shaded in dark blue, while the worst performing local authorities are shaded towards white.

No part of the country, not one local area, even in London, has currently achieved the *Read On. Get On.* early language goal for poor children. This gives a sense of the challenge ahead of us.

But as this data shows, some areas have much further to go than others – it is a scandal that in some parts of the country, only half of poor children are starting primary school with the language skills expected for their age. In these parts of the country, many children potentially face a lifetime of struggling to read, which has significant consequences on their life chances. But in other parts of the country – such as some inner London boroughs – the achievement of poor children shows that our goal can be met – and that there should be no excuses when it comes to tackling poor children's underachievement.

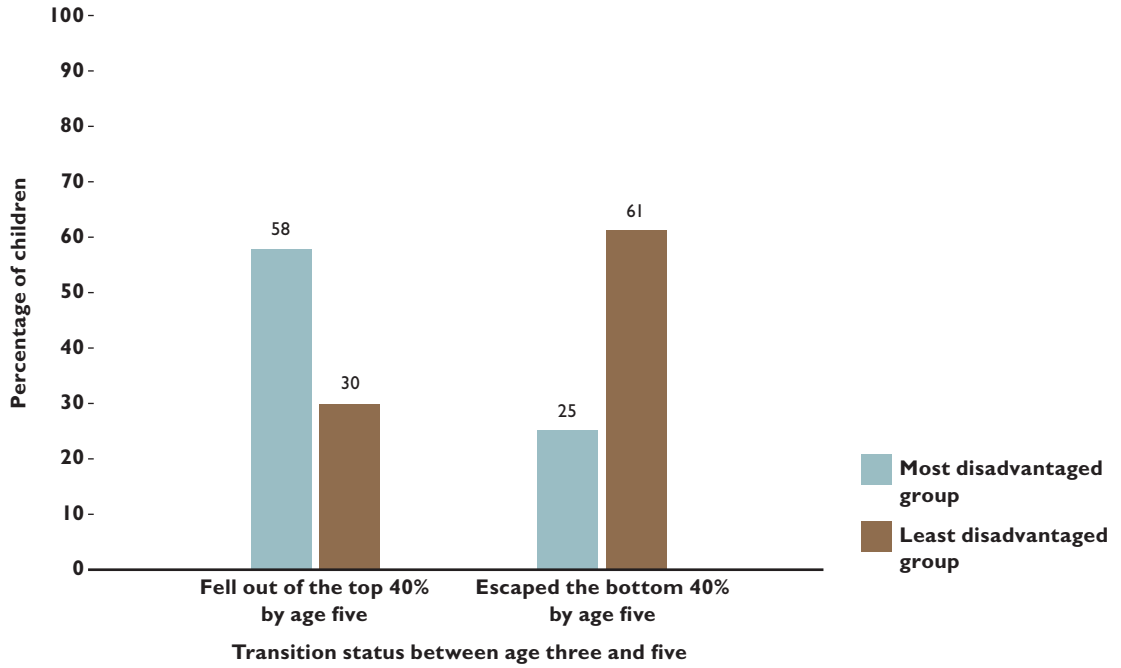
CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN THREE AND FIVE: THE IMPACT OF POVERTY

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 new findings we have presented so far focus on snapshots of inequalities in children's language skills at age 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 1.8 shows transitions in children's language attainment between the ages of three and five across the UK. It shows that 58% of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds who were in the top 40% in vocabulary ability at age three fell out of the top 40% by age five. This is compared with 30% of children from the least disadvantaged backgrounds. This demonstrates that poor children who are performing well are more likely than their peers to fall behind by the age of five.

Even more worryingly, a child from a poor family who is performing poorly at age three is much more likely to stay there than a child from a

FIGURE 1.8 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.

wealthier family. 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.

What is shocking is that these patterns are not new. Research using the 1970 British Cohort Study has 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. 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 across the UK will increase significantly. It predicts that, by 2020, 3 million children will be living in poverty, an additional 300,000 children from 2014 (IFS 2014). 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.

The evidence in this chapter shows that in some areas of England one in two disadvantaged children experience language delays. With increasing numbers of children experiencing poverty – and even more children are put at risk of language delays – that shocking figure could be repeated in more parts of England.

Poverty is not an excuse for failure. Many poor children do well in the early years and at school, and we must continue to have the highest ambitions for all children. But poverty represents a massive obstacle 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 England 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 England are reading well by 2025. Ensuring all children achieve a good level of language development by age five in 2020 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 – including how much more important good early language skills are for children growing up in poverty. 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 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, including tests (set out in more detail in figure 2.1) to assess children's early language skills, reading ability and language comprehension.

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

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

The analysis 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 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:

- Just over half (52%) of children who had no experience of poverty and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability also scored below the average level of reading ability.
- This compares to just under two-thirds (64%) of children who experienced intermittent poverty and over two-thirds (69%) of children who experienced persistent poverty.

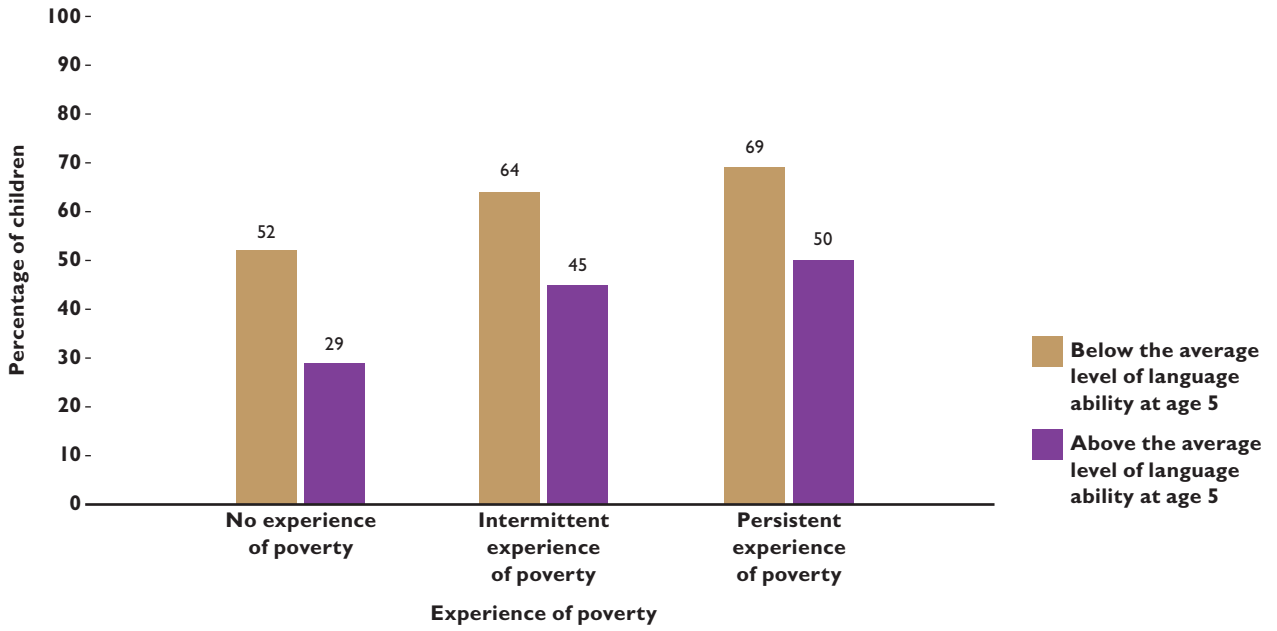
What is most striking is that the proportion of children who had scored above the average level of language ability at age five but had experienced persistent poverty were almost as likely to score below the average level of reading ability (50%) as those who had below the average level of language ability at age five, but had never experienced poverty (52%).

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)

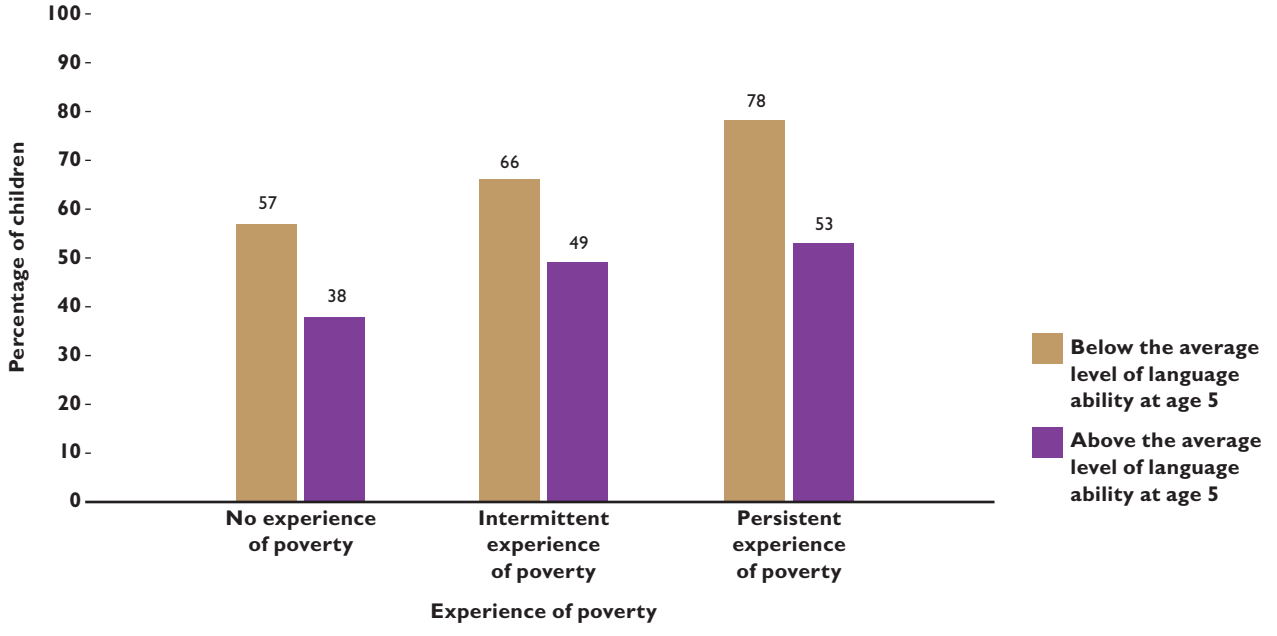
FIGURE 2.2 PROPORTION OF CHILDREN BELOW THE AVERAGE LEVEL OF READING ABILITY AT AGE SEVEN BY LANGUAGE ABILITY AT AGE FIVE AND EARLY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



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

Figure 2.3 shows the same analysis but focuses on language comprehension at age 11. This shows similar patterns to 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 had experienced poverty were almost as likely to score below the average level of comprehension as children who had a below average level of vocabulary ability but had never experienced poverty.

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



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 ability predicts their reading and language comprehension at ages seven and 11.

The analysis uses a statistical technique called multiple regression analysis. This assess the strength of influences on a child's reading ability at age seven and comprehension ability 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 attention to the impact of vocabulary scores at age five and children's experience of poverty. More details of the effect of other factors are included in the full regression tables in appendix 2.

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

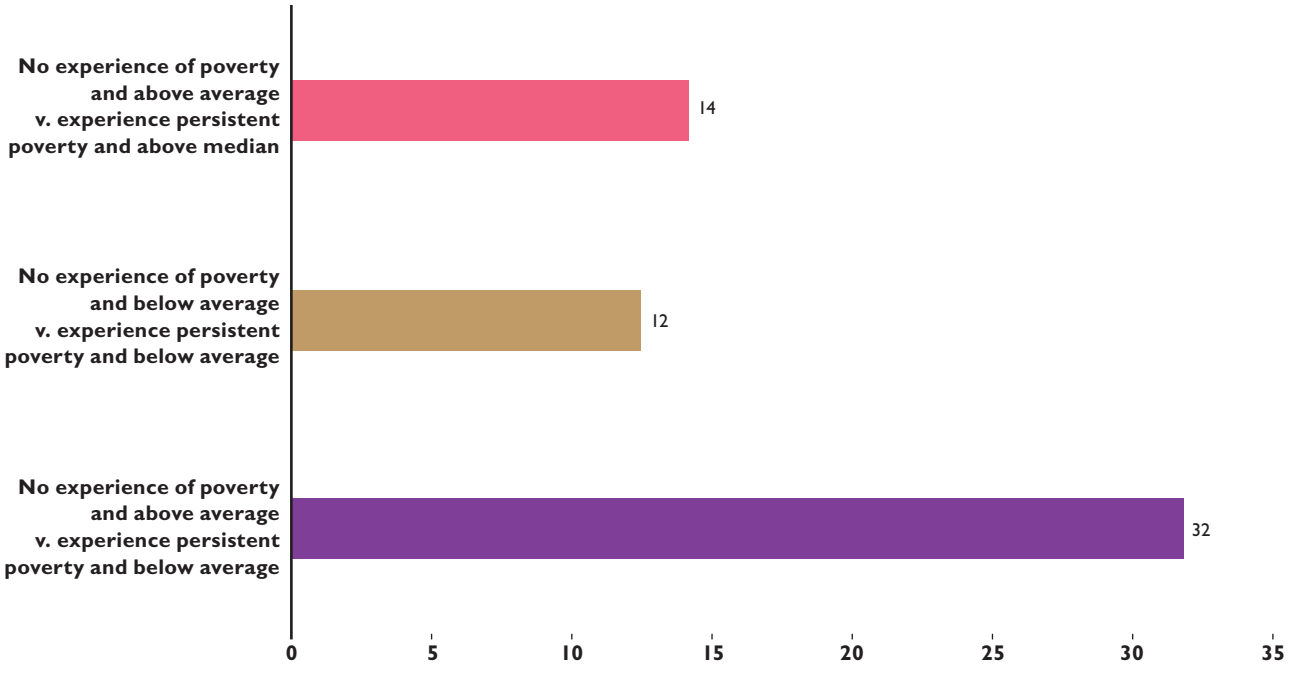
This means that when compared to a child who scored above the average level in the vocabulary test at age five, a similar child who scored below the average level was much less likely to do as well in reading tests at age seven.

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

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

- A child who had no experience of poverty and had above average scores in vocabulary tests at age five scored on average 14% higher than a child who also had above average scores, but had experienced persistent poverty
- A child who had no experience of poverty and had below average scores at age five scored on average 12% 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 32% higher than a child who scored below average at age five and had experienced persistent poverty

FIGURE 2.4 EFFECT OF EXPERIENCING POVERTY AND SCORING BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY ABILITY AT AGE FIVE ON READING AT AGE SEVEN



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

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

While this comprehension test does not directly assess a child's ability to read, it does test their comprehension and understanding of language, which, as we have highlighted 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 as a similar 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 as a similar child who had never experienced poverty.

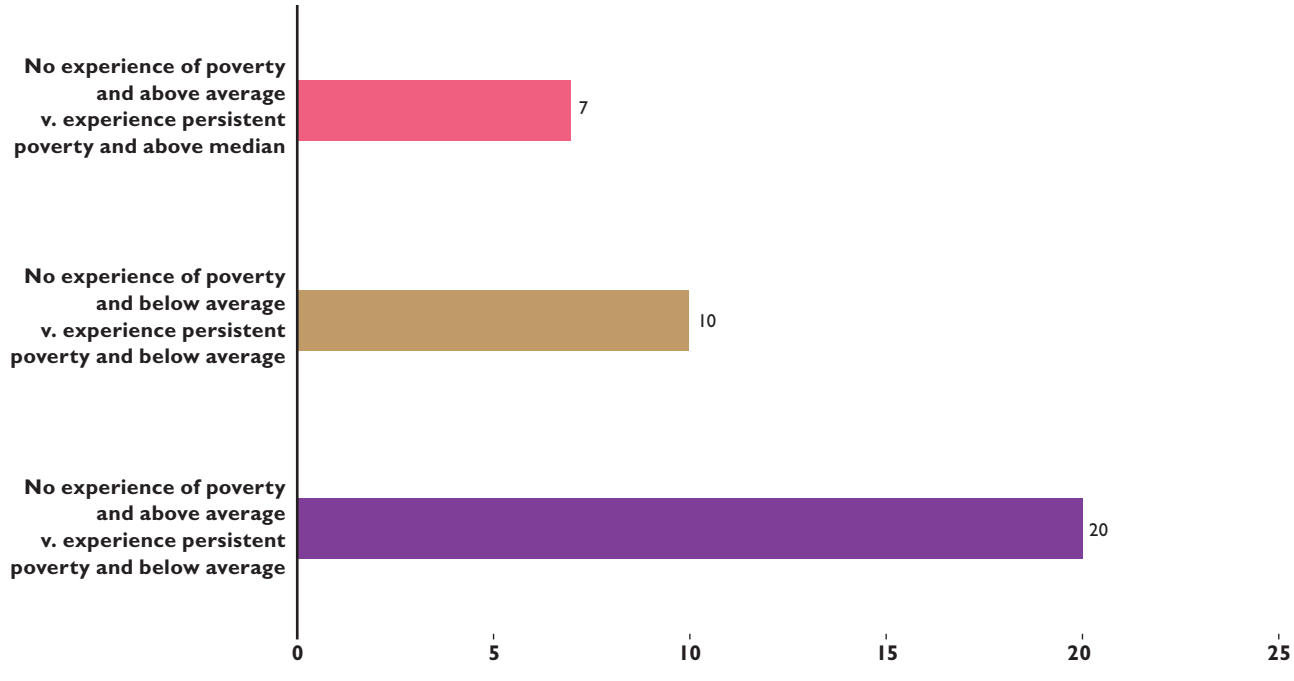
Figure 2.5 looks in more detail at this by combining the effect of a child's language ability with their experience of poverty. It shows that:

- A child who had 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, 10% 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 give scored, on average, 20% higher than a child who had below average scores at age five and who had experienced poverty persistently

Finally, the analysis also looks at variations by gender. This analysis presents findings for the UK rather than England, 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 each of the nations.

There is very little variation between boys and girls in the effect of poverty and vocabulary scores at five on reading and comprehension skills later in childhood.

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

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.

However, data presented in chapter one, as well as in previous *Read On. Get On.* reports, has shown the size of the attainment gap between boys and girls. This is crucial because if the effects of poverty and language ability are very similar for both boys and girls, they will have little to no impact on the attainment gap.

Because boys are on average already behind girls by age five, they would need to see significantly smaller negative effects from their experience of poverty and low language ability to catch up to girls in the same situation as them, let alone to girls or boys who are better off than them.

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 by 2020, to support our overall campaign goal of all children reading well at age 11 by 2025. The ability to communicate well with others through spoken language is a fundamental part of everyday life. The wider evidence shows that good language skills not only benefit children's reading, but also have a wide range of positive benefits for children throughout life.

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

Research using the 1970 British Cohort Study has also shown that children's language ability is strongly associated with other outcomes. Researchers investigating mental health outcomes at age 34 found that children who have difficulties with language at age five were at a higher risk of experiencing mental health issues (Schoon 2010b). Researchers have also found that children with good language ability at age five were more likely to have both higher qualifications and to be in employment in adulthood compared to their peers (Feinstein 2006). This clearly illustrates the powerful impact good language skills have on a wider 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, nursery 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.

As we set out in chapter 1, around 10% of five year old children in England have a SCLN as their primary special educational need, which makes learning language more difficult. A minority of these children will have severe, life-long problems with language, but others will be able to develop good language skills with intensive support.

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.

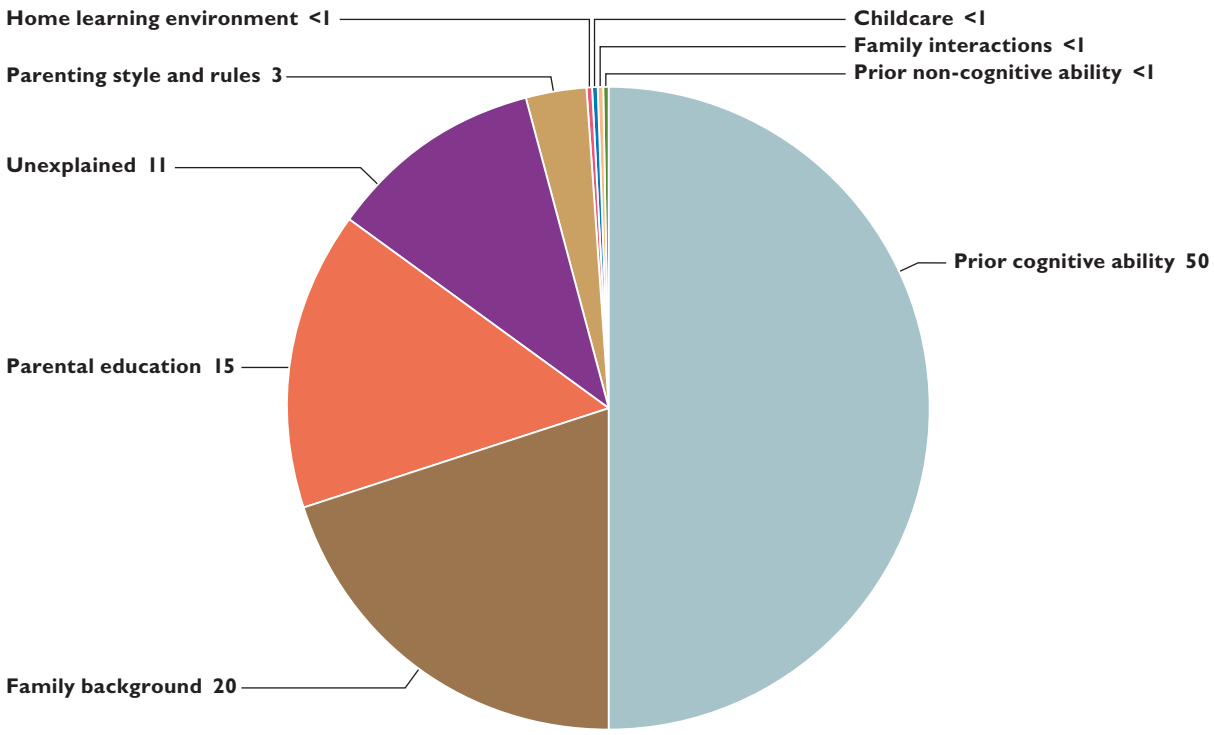
In fact, waiting until a child starts nursery at age three is still too late to start focusing on children's language skills. Babies are born ready to learn language and need stimulation and encouragement to develop their language skills, right from birth. Talking, reading, playing and singing with even 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.

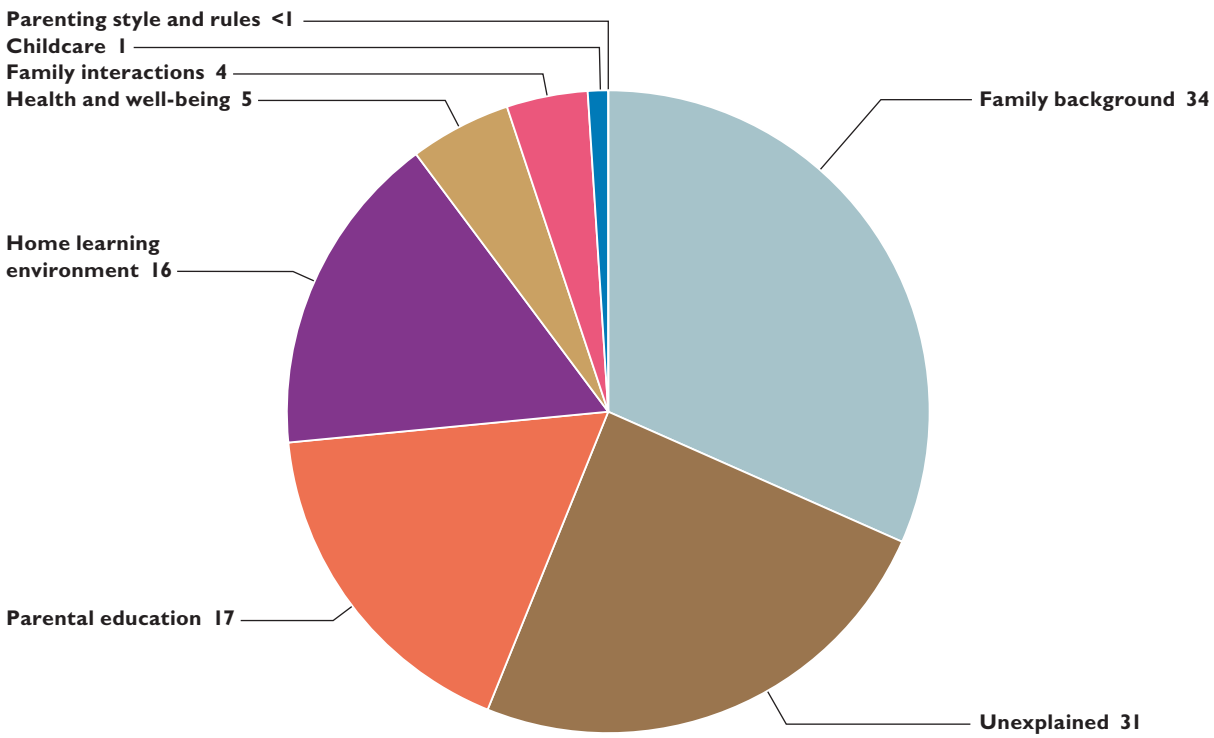
However, figure 3.2 also shows that around one quarter of the difference in language skills at age three between children from the poorest and wealthiest families is accounted for by differences in parents' behaviour, health, the home learning environment, and attendance at childcare. Alongside tackling 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.

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



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

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



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

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

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

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

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.

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 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 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

THE ROLE OF MOTHERS, FATHERS AND CARERS

Mothers are often the primary carers in families and are still much more likely to engage in conversations with children on a daily basis (Poole 2013). Within families, mothers are much more likely to be seen as having the role of supporting children's learning. Fathers are often seen as having a less important role than teachers (Clark 2009). These attitudes can then be reflected in behaviours, with fathers much less likely to encourage their children to read more and also less likely to spend time reading with their children (ibid).

These patterns mean that academic studies tend to show that mothers have the greatest impact on children's emerging language skills, and that fathers have only a limited role. However, this is based purely on existing patterns of family life. There is no evidence that mothers are innately better at stimulating young children's language development. And patterns of family life are changing, with fathers increasingly taking on caring and teaching roles.

This can be supported by more help for fathers to get involved with their children's reading. Fathers often say they are unclear about their role as an educator (Clark 2009). They may not always receive the same level of information about their child's development as mothers, particularly when children are young. Most fathers still work full-time when their children are young (unlike most mothers), so may need help to identify creative ways to find time for activities that support their child's early learning.

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. A number of programmes support this, such as Achievement for All's Achieving Early programme, which operates through a structured approach to parent and carer engagement, enabling parents and carers to better support their child's language development (Achievement for All 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.

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 Book Trust's Bookstart Corner can support parents to share books in an interactive way so that children get the most out of reading (Demack and Stevens 2013).

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 a 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 while 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).

EARLY WORDS TOGETHER

The National Literacy Trust's Early Words Together programme is a targeted literacy programme for families with children aged two to five, designed to empower parents to support their children's early communication and literacy development. The six-week programme of sessions, delivered in children's centres, schools and community organisations, brings practitioners and volunteers together to enable families to improve their home learning environment.

The small group sessions are focused on literacy activities, including rhymes, songs, sharing stories, library visits and crafts. An independent evaluation of the two-year pilot found that 86% of parents who took part now talk more with their preschool children, which will have a significant impact on their school readiness and ongoing attainment. It also showed that, on average, children who took part in the programme are catching up with their peers on language comprehension, to the point where they are almost in line with expectations.

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 more likely to say that they need more information and advice about how best to support their child's early learning (Hunt et al 2011).

However, there is also some evidence that parents living in poverty are not 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.

BOOKSTART: SUPPORTING THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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

The quality of resources in the home learning environment is vital to literacy development. Book selection by expert panels, such as those involved in Book Trust programmes, ensures that books suited to the specific needs of children are available to families. For example, Book Trust's Bookstart intervention includes packs designed for deaf children; blind or partially sighted children; those with disabilities affecting fine motor skills; and dual language books. An expert review of Bookstart materials (Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, 2012) found that packs provide excellent coverage of language and literacy; phonological awareness; and physical and sensory experience.

Book Trust's Bookstart, and Bookstart Corner interventions contain not just resources for children, but guides and information for parents or carers, designed to enhance their skills and confidence (Centre for Education and Inclusion Research, 2012). They can also provide a route to further support. A study commissioned by Book Trust (Wylie, 2014) found that parents involved in Bookstart Corner were more confident and knowledgeable about reading with their child. And 66% of parents reported engagement in at least one local service as a result of the programme. This included attending a course at a children's centre, seeking help with their own literacy or joining the library.

EARLY EDUCATION AND OTHER EARLY YEARS SERVICES

Throughout this chapter, we have focused mainly on the influence that parents and the home learning environment can have on young children's language development. However, parents do not operate in a vacuum, and often rely on 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 boys and for children from low-income families (Havnes and Mogstad 2009, Sylva et al 2010, Felfe and Lalive 2013). But these benefits are only present if childcare is 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 preschool was substantially beneficial for both cognitive and behavioural achievement, and 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. The EPPE study also found that children made stronger progress by the age of five if they had attended a nursery or other form of childcare, but only if the provision was led by qualified staff. The effect was particularly strong when the nursery manager was highly qualified (to at least degree level in a relevant subject) and led the development and delivery of an early learning curriculum. Early years settings also have a role in supporting parents and carers to develop the home learning environment. The Achievement for All programme has shown that when parent/carer engagement with their child's learning is encouraged and supported by setting leaders and practitioners (eg, at school through bookclub and other activities) it leads to accelerated progress in children's outcomes in literacy (Humphrey and Squires 2011); this model is currently being piloted in early years settings in England.

Further evidence on the relationship between graduate-led early education, high-quality provision and children's language development comes from several other studies. Analysis of the Graduate Leader Fund, which supported nurseries to employ a suitably-qualified graduate, showed that nurseries that gained a graduate leader made much more significant improvements across all aspects of provision, including support for communication, language and literacy (Mathers et al 2011).

Analysis by Mathers and Smees (2014) found that, in private and non-profit nurseries operating in low-income neighbourhoods in England, only those that were graduate-led were able to provide the same quality as nurseries in wealthier neighbourhoods. This was most evident in support for language and literacy, as well as in the quality of interactions with children and support for children's individual needs. The evaluation of the pilot of free early education for two-year-olds found that children using the free entitlement had stronger vocabulary development than similar children who did not, but only if they were in a good-quality nursery (Maisey et al 2013).

International evidence also shows the importance of providing high-quality 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 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 comparatively little evidence about the impact of other early years services, such as health services, on young children's language. This is likely to be because these services are not designed primarily to support children's early language development, so this impact is rarely tested. However, in the following chapter, we argue that wider early years services have the potential to have considerable impact on children's early language skills – especially in supporting parents to engage more actively in their child's early learning. The biggest impact could be for the youngest children, especially those living in poverty.

4 WHAT SUPPORT DO PARENTS AND CHILDREN CURRENTLY RECEIVE?

Too many children, especially those from low-income families, are behind in their language ability when they start school at age five. This matters for our goal of getting all children reading well at 11 by 2025. When children are young, there are a number of different factors that influence their language development, including their parents, their home and community environment, and the services that they and their parents come into contact with.

As identified in the previous chapter, key influences on children in the early years and throughout their lives are their parents and carers. This is why a major part of the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is speaking directly to parents about reading and talking with their children, especially in the early years.

Chapter 3 looks at how poverty can be a barrier to children's early language development, making it harder for parents to provide the environment that children need to thrive. But support from good-quality early education, services, and programmes can help parents to have the resources and information they need to help their children develop good language ability.

Early years services therefore have a crucial role to play in helping children develop their language abilty, 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, children's centres, early education and libraries. And it looks at how they could support children's language development better. While there are areas of good practice, as well as good progress being made in early years policy, still too many children are behind in language ability when they start school.

EARLY YEARS SERVICES: FROM BIRTH TO SCHOOL

In order to understand how early years services might be able to better support children's language development, we need to first understand what services are on offer to parents and children – especially those in poverty. There are different levels of services on offer to children:

- **Universal services**: these services are provided to all children and seek to support language-rich environments that promote all children's language development (this includes home learning environments, some early years settings and children's centres). 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 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 communication 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. Where appropriate, speech and language therapists often provide specialist assessment, advice and written strategies to support each child's language development.
- **Specialist services**: children who have severe and complex needs over and above those that can be met via universal and targeted provision receive specialist support. This includes additional highly personalised interventions delivered as appropriate to meet the needs of each child. As part of this, specialist advice and training is provided to early years practitioners and parents on specific areas of language development, including the use of alternative and augmentative communication systems where a child's language skills are limited.

In the rest of this chapter, we set out the broad pattern of services typically available to families with young children, highlighting recent changes to service entitlements, commissioning responsibilities and the accountability of local areas.

PUBLIC HEALTH, INCLUDING HEALTH VISITING

Public health services, including health visiting, play a major role in reviewing and supporting young children's development. Health visitors take over responsibility for a child's care from a midwife two weeks after birth and until they are five years old. 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 also work with the charity Book Trust to present parents with a Bookstart pack for every child in England. Packs include free books, advice on reading books with babies, and an invitation to join the local library.

Health visitors work to the Healthy Child Programme (HCP), the universal public health programme for children, which includes a schedule of reviews, screenings and immunisation, and advice for parents. As part of the HCP, health visitors conduct reviews of children's development at key stages. Reviews at the ages of nine months to one year, and two to two-and-a-half, cover children's language development as well as their health and behaviour. We explain the potential role of these reviews in supporting children's early language development in the next section.

Health visitors offer reviews to all children as part of a universal package of support. In addition, more intensive support is available to families with greater needs:

- 'Universal plus' health visiting offers a rapid response from the local health visiting team when specific expert help is needed – for example, with postnatal depression, a sleepless baby or responding to specific concerns from parents.
- 'Universal partnership plus' provides 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.

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. Additional, more intensive health visiting approaches provide opportunities for public health services to support the early language development of the most vulnerable children.

However, two factors may act as barriers to these opportunities being maximised. First, health visitors 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. For example, an audit of the skills of health visitors carried out in Stoke-on-Trent found that the vast majority had not received any training in child development (Gross 2011). Second, local public health services typically have a number of priorities for young children's health and development. Typically, early language has not been a major priority in many parts of the country.

Local health visiting teams are held to account through the public health outcomes framework, covering the period 2013 and 2016. This sets out the outcomes that local services are expected to work towards, with data published annually about how they are doing. The current framework includes a set of indicators of young children's health and development. Of particular interest for our focus on early language are an indicator on child poverty and an indicator on children's school readiness, recorded for each local area as part of a set of indicators on the 'wider determinants of health'. School readiness is primarily judged on the basis of the EYFSP assessment carried out at the end of reception year (when most children will be aged five), together with the phonics test in year 1 (when children are aged five to six).

In addition to this, it is extremely positive that the public health outcomes framework will begin to collect children's development at age 2–2½ years, using data collected through the 'Ages and Stages Questionnaire' (ASQ-3) used by health visitors as part of the Healthy Child Programme, given that we know that children's language skills develop dramatically in the first few years of life, and that early identification of language delay and referral to appropriate support is vital for ensuring children can quickly catch up.

From 1 October 2015, local authorities will take over responsibility from NHS England for planning and funding public health services for children under five, including health visiting. This provides significant opportunities for local authorities to prioritise support for children's early language development as part of their public health services. It also provides opportunities for local authorities to join up public health services with other early intervention services for which they have responsibility, notably children's centres (discussed below). The transfer follows significant investment in health visiting by the coalition government, including providing an additional 4,200 health visitors over the course of the last parliament.

These changes mean there are huge opportunities in the next five years for public health services to have a much greater role in supporting young children's language development. However, while public health budgets for local authorities are ring-fenced – putting them under somewhat less pressure than many other local services – the scope of public health is potentially large, with many competing demands on budgets. Given the continuing funding squeeze on local government as a whole, public health budgets will undoubtedly come under pressure in the next five years. The focus must therefore be on a clear set of evidence-based spending priorities, and on the greater integration of budgets and services at the local level, to improve quality and maximise the impact of increasingly limited resources. We return to these challenges in the following chapter.

DEVELOPMENT CHECKS FOR TODDLERS

There are currently two development checks that take place when children are two to two-and-half years old – a crucial age to assess whether children's language skills are on track. Under the HCP, it is recommended that children have a review led by a health visitor, which should focus on speech, hearing and language skills as well as other aspects of a child's development. However, this is not mandatory and coverage varies considerably across England.

Children who are attending a registered childcare provider must have a progress check between the ages of 24 and 36 months (the mandatory EYFS progress check). These are designed to help childcare practitioners identify children who need additional support, and include a specific focus on language skills. The reach of these checks is expanding following the extension of free childcare to disadvantaged two-year-olds. In both checks, parents should be given clear information about how their child is progressing in key areas.

From 2015, local areas will be expected to bring together these two checks, with the intention of ensuring that every child gets the same check and to make it easier for parents to understand their child's overall progress. Combining the two review processes offers the potential to improve early identification of language problems and make sure children get the right support.

Integrating the two checks raises the question of whether they are best done by a health or education professional – particularly in terms of which option best supports early identification of language problems. Integrated reviews were piloted in five local authority areas in 2013. The evaluation findings suggest that it is best if reviews are carried out by the professional who knows the child best:

- For a child attending childcare, this will typically be a childminder or nursery staff member. But they typically will need to work with a health visitor to ensure that children's health needs are fully assessed, including physical aspects of language such as speech and hearing, and to ensure that children with extra needs are referred to the right support and that progress is regularly reviewed.
- For a child who is not attending childcare, this is likely to be the health visitor (especially for children receiving intensive health visiting support). Health visitors will need the right skills in assessing all aspects of children's language skills.

This shows the need for professional development among both the health visitor and childcare workforce, particularly on early language development – these issues are further addressed in the next chapter.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) play an important role in the design and delivery of early years services aimed at improving children's language development. SLTs assess, diagnose and develop programmes of care, including training of the wider workforce and parents and carers to improve children's language development. They provide advice and support to parents and children throughout the early years, including delivering prenatal and antenatal support, and deliver a range of targeted support to parents and children in preschool settings and the home.

A significant focus for SLTs is the provision of support for babies and young children born with medical conditions that require extra support in speech and language. For example, SLTs often provide communication support for babies with hearing impairment, cleft lip and palate and learning disabilities. Pregnant women and young children are often referred to an SLT by their health visitor or GP, but any parent can refer their child to 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. They design personalised strategies to help meet the communication needs of each child, and, where appropriate, provide children with additional tools to help them communicate. Strategies may focus on developing parent–child interaction, vocabulary and sentence development (using spoken language or augmentative communication aids), or speech sound difficulties and fluency.

Speech and language therapy is funded by the NHS through clinical commissioning groups. SLT support is delivered to young children and their parents in local community health settings such as child development centres and community hospitals and clinics. As part of health-based community care, SLTs also support health visitors and childcare staff to carry out progress checks at age two. In the context of reductions to local budgets, there is a risk that support services for children with special educational needs and disability, such as speech and language therapy, will only be provided on a very limited basis, or that particular groups of children and young people might completely miss out.

CHILDREN'S CENTRES

A large proportion of parents in areas of disadvantage receive universal early parenting support through children's centres. Children's centres offer integrated early support services appropriate to the needs of expectant parents, preschool children and their families from a single location. This may include childcare, health (including speech and language therapy), parenting and family support services. Centres often have a focus on early language development and aim to create communication-rich environments, which can help compensate for the developmental and educational impact of poverty (Law, 2013).

For many parents, children's centres are an important place in their neighbourhood, where they can access general support as well as more specialist services, including for early language development. Children's centres can be an important source of information and advice: parents living in deprived neighbourhoods are much more likely to turn to children's centres than other advice services or professionals (Huskinson et al. 2014). They offer a range of universal access services, including language-based activities such as 'stay and play' or chatter groups and Bookstart Corner, which aims to develop parents' confidence in sharing books with their young child (Demack et al 2013). They often host more specialist services, including speech and language therapy for children with identified needs. They can also offer a vital source of mutual support for parents, providing a focal point for parents to come together to support each other.

However, children's centres face a series of challenges. Fundamentally, there is a major lack of clarity about their purpose. This is rooted in a lack of strategic direction, including at the national level, about their precise role and, therefore, the sorts of services they should be offering (Education Select Committee 2013, Rallings 2014).

The previous government refocused its mission on the most disadvantaged families but retained a very broad remit in order to: reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness; raise parents' aspirations, self-esteem and parenting skills; and improve child and family health. In addition, children's centres must serve the needs of children from birth to five, which in practice covers a substantial period of children's development.

A lack of strategic direction means that local areas are left to decide what services children's centres should run. As a result, the kinds of services that families can access vary considerably across England. This lack of clarity of purpose also puts services at the mercy of huge budget pressures on local government. A lack of clear objectives also makes it

EVERY CHILD A TALKER (ECaT)

Launched in 2008, Every Child a Talker (ECaT) was a universal level programme covering all English local authorities by 2011. It was designed to improve the skills of the early years workforce in supporting speech, language and communication development in preschool children (mainly three-to-five-year-olds).

ECaT was delivered by early language consultants (speech and language therapists and specialist teachers) working alongside identified practitioners in specific early years settings across the local authority. It targeted practitioners and parents and was designed to help them set up environments that support a child's language and communication development. It focused on everyday experiences and opportunities, building on children's interests.

The aim of ECaT was to enable children to start school as confident and skilled communicators, with parents and practitioners who have an increased awareness, knowledge and involvement in children's language development.

An evaluation of the programme found that it was associated with a fall in the number of children who were judged to be behind, or at risk of falling behind, in the key aspects of language and communication (The Department for Education, 2011). Some local authorities continue to run programmes that have their roots in ECaT, though there is no longer central funding to support these programmes.

hard to asses the effectiveness of children's centres and to hold local services to account (Rallings 2014). In addition, as relatively new public services, they have not yet gained a strong foothold in the public imagination – in the same way that nurseries or schools have, for example. These factors – lack of clarity of purpose, lack of proven outcomes and relative youth – make children's centres especially vulnerable to funding cuts.

Despite their challenges, children's centres across England do fantastic work with children and families, and offer enormous potential for supporting young children's language development. With the right strategic direction and clear objectives, they could become an even more important part of the local infrastructure that supports families with young children.

EARLY EDUCATION

Despite significant cuts to some budgets affecting families with young children, early education has been an area of expansion over the last five years – and looks set to experience further growth in future.

In 2010, the coalition government extended free early years education from 12.5 hours per week to 15 hours per week for all three- and four-year-olds, and extended this to the most disadvantaged 40% of two-year-olds. The new government has recently published a new Childcare Bill that will extend the free offer for working families of three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week. Free early education 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. Take-up of the free entitlement for three- and four-year-olds is very high, at around 96%, and the vast majority of free places are delivered by nurseries (rather than childminders). This means that almost every young child in England now spends some time at nursery. Take-up of free places for two-year-olds is somewhat lower, although this is a much more recent innovation.

As set out in chapter 3, free early education can have a significant impact on children's outcomes, especially for our poorest children, but only if it is of good quality – ideally, led by a trained teacher or early years graduate. The coalition government made several moves to improve the quality of early years education, introducing a new 'early years teacher' status achieved through more rigorous degree courses. The previous Labour government also invested in upskilling the childcare workforce – for example, through the Graduate Leader Fund.

There have undoubtedly been significant improvements in qualification levels and professional practice among the childcare workforce over the last 20 years. Crucially, the vast majority of staff delivering free nursery education now have, as a minimum, an intermediate-level qualification in a relevant subject (equivalent to A levels). However, the number of staff with a relevant degree remains far too low. In 2013, just 13% of staff in private full-day-care nurseries had a degree, compared to 35% in school nurseries. Only three out of five (59%) full-day-care nurseries had at least one member of staff qualified to degree level in a relevant subject, compared with 100% of school nurseries. In the following chapter, we argue for further investment to ensure nurseries serving large numbers of poor children are led by a graduate with an early years degree.

But the evidence is clear on the difference that can be made through the appropriate training and development of the early years workforce. Achieving Early – a pilot being run by Achievement for All in early years settings in England – enables young children to develop their language skills. Through leadership development and a collaborative approach with parent carers, their child, practitioners and other professionals, settings improve practice around the child. Bateman (2014) recommends the need for a leadership development programme for setting managers in areas of deprivation; provision in these areas does not always support positive outcomes for children.

A further innovation put in place by the previous coalition government is the early years pupil premium (EYPP). This was introduced in April 2015 and provides extra funding for nurseries delivering free early education for three- and four-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds. The premium is worth £300 for each eligible child, and about 170,000 children will be eligible in 2015. The money is paid straight to the nursery, with no conditions on how it is spent, although nurseries will be accountable to Ofsted for how they use the money to improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children.

EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The Early Language Development Programme (ELDP) has been led by I CAN (the Children's Communication Charity) with funding from the Department for Education (DfE) since 2011. The England-wide programme focused on skills development for early years practitioners, recognising that they are key in both supporting early language development and enabling parents to do the same. Through the programme, more than 15,000 practitioners working with children under three were trained and over 150,000 families in some of the most deprived areas of England were supported.

Key findings from the independent evaluation recognise that the ELDP training led directly to changes in how early years practitioners organise their settings and interact with babies and toddlers (both known to impact on early communication development) (OPM with University of Sheffield, 2015). Practitioners also supported parents through resource libraries, newsletters, story sacks and parent pop-in groups.

This results in positive impacts on children's communication and language; parents and practitioners reported both an increase in confidence and knowledge, with evidence of greater progress in children's communication development.

"It has helped me to think about how you speak to a child… you add a word onto what your child is saying, rather than saying a whole long sentence to your child and expecting them to understand. That has been really interesting. Since I have been shortening my sentences to match my child's, I have found he is actually starting to communicate a lot more." (Parent)

Following the success of the programme and the end of DfE funding in 2015, the great work continues to be sustained through the thousand lead practitioners trained to run ELDP courses. As well as this, I CAN continues to offer ELDP courses resources. This will carry on making a difference to very young children's communication development.

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 access to free books and also run a wide range of programmes for preschool children focused on language development, including reading, singing and nursery rhyme groups.

There is evidence that having access to books in the community can help to boost children's early language skills. A study where 330 preschools 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 is also linked to increasing children's learning. Creating 'nooks and corners' for reading and play in public libraries improves the richness and regularity of children's language interactions (Morrow 1998).

Libraries also 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, and have faced significant budget pressures over the last five years.

5 THREE PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

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

If we are to achieve our goal of all children reading well by age 11 by 2025, then action has to be taken early, before children even get to school. The words that children hear when they are young become the words that children learn to speak and then learn to read. The environment in which they grow up – their home, their community and their nursery – provides the essential foundations for children developing their language ability, which will enable them to learn to read when they are at school.

Acting early, before children start school, is crucial, as children's prior attainment can have a big impact on their language ability at age five. This is why all parents, but especially low-income parents, need support from good-quality services and programmes so that they can help their children develop good language skills. Children are learning language right from birth – so making sure parents have support from the start and early identification of young children's potential language problems are both vital. The services that are provided need to be led by qualified professionals and integrated with the needs of the family, not fragmented along service lines. Good-quality early education can compensate where the home learning environment is not so strong, which is why we need to make sure that every nursery is offering the best early education, especially nurseries in poor neighbourhoods.

Poverty can make life harder for parents who are trying to do the right thing for their children. In many cases, parents are demonstrating the right behaviour to encourage their children's language development. However, there is no doubt that a lack of household finances can make life hard, particularly in providing the type of home learning environment children need to get the best start in life. Rising child poverty over the next five years will make it much harder – although not impossible – to achieve our goal.

It is clear that there is a crucial role for a range of early years services in ensuring that parents and children have the right support to help children to develop their early language skills. Support for early action and investment to improve children's life chances is widespread, but too often the rhetoric has not been followed up by action. We have identified three priorities for the new government and local services to sharpen the focus on acting early to boost young children's language skills.

Alongside the priorities for health, education and early intervention services set out in this report, it is vital that the new government sets out a clear plan for tackling child poverty. Although poverty is no excuse for educational underachievement, in practice, it puts an unnecessary obstacle in the way of children's progress.

Achieving the *Read On. Get On.* campaign goal on early language is crucial if we are to meet our objective of all children reading well at age 11 by 2025. Yet with one in three young children who grow up in disadvantaged families falling behind in language by the age of five, and with the projected rise in child poverty, much more needs to be done to ensure that all children have a good start in life. Firm foundations in early language and in reading are critical to breaking the cycle of educational inequality – and to improving the life chances of the poorest children.

1 INVEST FURTHER IN THE EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

KEY RECOMMENDATION

By 2020, every nursery in England should have at least one early years graduate, with government investment initially focused on nurseries serving the poorest children.

This report has set out strong evidence that nursery education led by a trained teacher or early years graduate can have a measurable impact on young children's language development. This impact is typically stronger for children growing up in poverty. Yet two out of five private or non-profit nurseries do not have any staff with a relevant degree-level qualification.

That is why we have argued that the new government should set an ambition that every nursery is led by an early years graduate by 2020 (Read On. Get On. 2015). Initially, this could be paid for by increasing the early years pupil premium to the level of the primary pupil premium (currently £1,300), but making this enhanced rate only available to nurseries that employ an early years graduate.

In line with the recommendations made in the Fair Education Alliance's[1] 2014 Report Card, we propose initially concentrating an enhanced early years pupil premium on nurseries with higher numbers of eligible children. This would incentivise nurseries that employ at least one early years graduate to expand provision for poorer children, driving up the number of good-quality places for the children who need them most.

The maximum cost of increasing the early years pupil premium to £1,300 for all three- and four-year-olds would be £170 million. However, these costs would be reduced in the short term by initially focusing the enhanced rate on nurseries serving higher numbers of disadvantaged children.

Although the enhanced rate would be tied to employing a graduate, there should be no further requirements on how the premium is spent. Nurseries would be free to spend it on wider workforce training as well, including intermediate-level training in young children's speech, language and communication among non-graduate staff. This is recognised as important for helping to identify children at risk of language delay.

A central argument set out by the *Read On. Get On.* campaign in our report *The Power of Reading* was that we must, as a priority, continue to drive up the quality of the early education workforce. Our ambition as a country must be that the entire early years workforce is of a standard that best supports the development of all children, but particularly those growing up in poverty.

The evidence set out in *The Power of Reading* and in this report demonstrates the vital role of early education in complementing the efforts of parents

[1] The Fair Education Alliance is a coalition of 27 organisations committed to reducing the achievement gap between children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and their better-off peers. The *Read On. Get On.* campaign is driving action to achieve the alliance's goal of narrowing the gap in literacy at primary school.

to support their children's early language development. There are two critical points about the potential of early education in boosting the early language skills of England's poorest children. First, the vast majority of young children in England, including most of those living in poverty, now attend nursery funded by the state before the age of five. This creates a massive opportunity to influence the early language learning of large numbers of poor children. Second, there is a very robust evidence base for the action needed to improve the quality of early education and the impact this can have on children experiencing poverty. This is why we attach such priority to improving the quality of early education to help meet our campaign goals.

The new government's plans to expand free early education add a further imperative to the need to raise quality. Expanding provision from 15 to 30 hours a week for three- and four-year-old children for working families will affect the 2.3 million children in poverty whose parents are in work. It is critical that the government's plans to increase the number of hours on offer is backed up by the investment required to ensure that free early education 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.

That is why one of our key recommendations is that the new government ensures that every nursery is led by an early years graduate by 2020, with government investment initially focused on nurseries serving the poorest children. Our full proposals are set out in the box above.

In addition, while it is positive that the majority of staff in both school and private nurseries now have at least an intermediate-level childcare qualification, the quality of these qualifications is highly variable. Many do not include specific training in young children's language, speech and communication. There is, therefore, a considerable need for extensive opportunities for continuing professional development for the whole childcare workforce, in order to ensure that all young children can have

TEACH FIRST: READING IN THE EARLY YEARS

As an Early Years Teacher, Gabrielle's mornings are varied. Mondays and Tuesdays begin with her four- and five-year-olds settling into their normal seats, with a parent or carer beside them. In these 'stay and read' sessions, parents stay for half an hour after drop-off to share a book with their child. "It's really great for the children to see home and school as interrelated," Gabrielle explains, "and it's useful for parents to hear and practise the strategies we're using with the children, like synthetic phonics, where we split up words into their composite sounds and blend them together. But we try to keep it pretty informal – it's not about the parents being teachers, more about everyone feeling confident in listening to and encouraging reading."

Wednesdays are storytelling mornings – each week, a different parent is invited to tell a story important to their culture or from their own childhood. During the day, children practise telling their own stories, and 'story-scribing' sessions turn their verbal narratives into written stories that they can take home and share. "Story-telling is crucial for young children's understanding of narrative, sequencing, and cause and effect. In celebrating story-telling, we're aiming to demonstrate to parents that this is an important way in which they can help their children's language development – and it's accessible for those with weak literacy skills themselves, or for those who don't speak English. Children with English as a second language need to build a strong range of vocabulary in their mother tongue, to strengthen the 'mapping' of new English vocabulary."

Gabrielle trained through Teach First's Early Years Leadership Development Programme. Her training involved a placement in a children's centre, working with two- and three-year-olds. This means she has a strong grounding in early child development, as well as a post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE), specialising in the three to seven age group, from UCL Institute of Education. Gabrielle is one of 53 participants placed in reception and nursery classes across London and Kent. From next year, teachers like Gabrielle will be training and teaching in early years classes in the West Midlands too, as part of Teach First's plans to expand its early years programme to train 200 teachers a year by 2018.

language development problems properly identified and remedied.

We therefore also call for every nursery in England to have at least one non-graduate member of staff with an appropriate intermediate-level qualification in young children's speech, language and communication. These qualifications give staff the skills to spot potential problems early and identify appropriate interventions to help children catch up. It should also enable staff to work with parents to ensure they have the skills and confidence to support children's early language development at home.

2 STRENGTHEN SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

This report has demonstrated that beyond early education, there are a number of services that parents and children come into contact with in the preschool years. Children under three are much less likely to attend nursery than older preschool children, yet we know that acting early to support young children's language development is vital. This means a big role for a range of other early years services, notably public health, children's centres and libraries.

Many of these services are already contributing to supporting parents and developing children's early language. We have identified four 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.

First, we need a renewed focus on professional development so that staff have the skills to support parents with the basics of early language, and identify and refer children who need extra help. Our ambition for the early years workforce does not stop at early education. Health visitors 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. Health visitors are often the most important source of support for parents with very young children – especially for families receiving intensive support. And health visitors have a crucial role in reviewing children's progress, often before they start nursery.

The crucial role of health visiting and public health services has also been identified by Public Health England (PHE), the national body responsible for setting the strategic direction of public health, including health visiting. PHE has set out its seven strategic priorities for the five years from 2014, including "ensuring every child has the best start in life" (Public Health England 2014). Its objective is explicitly to "increase the proportion of children ready to learn at two and ready for school at five" (ibid). For PHE, this objective recognises the important association between children's educational outcomes and health throughout life, as well as the role of public health services in supporting children's early cognitive development.

With the support of organisations like PHE, there should be a focus on ensuring all health visitors have training and continual professional development in children's early language development. This should include helping parents and carers to understand how to support their child's language skills and how to raise concerns about their child's progress and secure extra support. In particular, consideration should be given to whether health visitors providing intensive support to the most vulnerable families should have specific opportunities and requirements for extra professional development around young children's language development. This suggests an important role for Health Education England as the body that oversees the training of health visitors.

Second, local services need to maximise new opportunities to help early health and education professionals work together so that children's needs are addressed in the round. A major challenge in improving children's language

development lies in the complexity and fragmentation of services on offer to young children and their families. Services, funding and accountability have often been split across the NHS, education and local government. This has created competing priorities and meant that opportunities to identify problems early have sometimes been missed.

The transfer of public health responsibilities for young children to local government creates a major opportunity to overcome some of the barriers to more effective joint-working. Local government now holds the purse-strings for the majority of early intervention support for families with young children, through public health and children's centres. It also continues to have a role in shaping the local childcare market, including allocating funding for free childcare places and raising quality. However, across all these services, budgets will continue to come under significant pressure. Local government will face growing pressure to make the best use of existing funding and to identify major strategic priorities. A priority should be to consider how the new requirements around health and development checks could be operationalised in local areas to deliver the maximum possible gain for young children's language development.

As a response to the need for better integration across education and health, the *Read On. Get On.* campaign is also supporting calls from the National Literacy Forum for the creation of a new cross-departmental post of early years minister (National Literacy Forum 2014). This role would act to drive forward an integrated approach to early years services across Whitehall departments, including those responsible for education, health and local government. This could help to ensure that central government funding streams and strategic priorities are aligned, to support stronger joint-working at the local level.

Third, greater priority should be given to early language in local public health strategies. We recognise that local authorities will face a range of competing pressures, on budgets and priorities, when they take responsibility for public health services in October 2015. The evidence about the crucial importance of early language skills for children's later life chances, including in health, and the vital role that public health services can play in promoting early language mean it should be a top priority for local services.

Currently, one of the indicators used to hold local public health services to account is children's school readiness at five (assessed by the EYFS profile). We have argued that focusing on children's development at five is relatively late and also puts the greater responsibility on nurseries and childminders rather than public health services. PHE also has an objective to increase the proportion of two-year-olds who are 'ready to learn'. It is positive that the public health outcomes framework will soon also be tracking data on child development at 2–2½ years.

We recognise that assessing the development of very young children is very difficult, particularly in a way that could be reported on locally and used to compare the performance of local areas. But it is important that this is used as a robust accountability measure for local areas, that also provides useful and practical information for parents. This, in turn, could help to drive early language further up the agenda of local public health services. It would build on the work to integrate and strengthen progress checks for two-year-olds (set out in chapter 4).

Fourth, a review of the long-term mission of children's centres, including their role in supporting young children's language skills. Children's centres offer many high-quality services to families with young children, many of which have an important role in supporting language development. But their mission is too fuzzy and there is no shared strategic view of what they are for.

Given the enormous pressures on funding, it has become even more important that there is a clear vision for children's centres across England and a clear set of objectives against which they are held to account. We would like to see the new government commission a full independent review of the mission and purpose of children's centres. This should consider, as a priority, their role in supporting the development of children's early language skills, through working with children, parents and other professionals. It should also consider a range of other factors, including the age of children they should serve and their focus on the most disadvantaged children.

NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST HUB

A National Literacy Trust Hub is a partnership between the National Literacy Trust, a local authority and a wide range of local partners including voluntary and community organisations, businesses, health, education and cultural organisations. It aims to create long-term change in places where low levels of literacy are entrenched and are having a major impact on people's lives. Hubs seek to achieve this by changing knowledge, behaviour and attitudes around language and literacy.

Each Hub has a range of specific literacy priorities and activities based on the needs of the local community, as well as authority-wide work including a local media campaign. With Hubs in Middlesbrough, Bradford and Peterborough, the National Literacy Trust works with each local authority to address fragmentation of services and embed literacy provision within other existing services. The goal is to reach the most vulnerable families. Emerging evidence shows that this localised approach can have an impact on communities, although its full potential can only be realised where there is strong leadership within the local authority.

In Middlesbrough the National Literacy Trust Hub is working in partnership with health services to embed literacy awareness and support in neo-natal units. The National Literacy Trust Hub manager and the Northern BLISS regional co-ordinator have worked in partnership to develop a welcome pack to include guidance to parents on the importance of babies in the unit hearing their parents' and family members' voices, and on the value of sharing stories with babies from the earliest stages. The local authority is now looking to replicate this more widely by providing health visitors with key messages around early communication and literacy.

This is supported by posters and leaflets with key messages around early literacy placed across the city, including free standing adverts in town centres, in baby red record books, registrars, prisons, children's centres, drug and alcohol rehab centres, neo-natal units, paediatric wards and receptions and foyers of public buildings in Middlesbrough. The National Literacy Trust Hub in Bradford is embedding early literacy awareness and support within a range of local services. Early Words Together (see page 25) is being delivered in children's centres, along with a targeted programme to engage fathers in improving their child's school readiness. This has helped overcome some of the traditional cultural expectations of fathers' roles – and the children's teachers have also commented on the improved confidence and school readiness of children involved in the programme.

3 TRACK YOUNG CHILDREN'S PROGRESS ACROSS THE COUNTRY

We are concerned that reforms to the assessment of children's development at age five will make it harder for us, as a country, to track our progress on early learning – including on young children's language development. Currently, children are assessed on their development across a range of domains at the age of five, when most are in the reception year at primary school. They are assessed against the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP), which sets out the expected level of development in each area. Communication and language skills are one of the three prime areas covered by the EYFSP.

The EYFSP assessment is mandatory for all children in England. It is an assessment carried out by the teacher, rather than a test, and can be based on observations of a child's behaviour and learning throughout the reception year. The results of the assessment must be shared with the child's parents, their year 1 teacher and the local authority, who have to pass results on to the Department for Education. National and local summaries are then published each year, showing how different groups of children are doing.

However, from September 2015, the EYFSP assessment will no longer be mandatory. The government is introducing new 'baseline assessments' of children at the start of reception year. The main objective of these assessments is to be able to measure the progress of children throughout their primary school life, rather than just measuring absolute attainment at the end of primary school. From September 2015, schools will be able to take part in the pilot year of the new baseline assessments, and they can choose from six different assessments, each offered by a different company. They will not be mandatory but schools will have to use them if they want to be judged on the basis of children's progress, rather than on their absolute attainment at 11.

While we welcome and understand the move to measure the progress children make through primary school, which can be particularly important for recognising the role that schools play when they have a more challenging intake of pupils, we have two concerns about the new assessment scheme.

First, will the new assessments have a strong enough focus on communication and language, as currently can be found in the EYFSP? Second, will it be possible to produce comparable information about children's progress at five between schools, local areas and across the country as a whole? Without this, it will be difficult to understand whether, as a country, we are on track to ensuring that all five-year-olds have good language skills by 2020. It will also make it difficult to compare the progress achieved by different schools, and across local authority areas. The new government should consider how it can enable this to continue in the context of planned changes to assessments at five.

APPENDIX 1: 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

	Baseline model	**Full model**
< median age 5 test	**-0.571**** (0.0202)	**-0.449**** (0.0194)
Age	0.318** (0.0447)	0.347** (0.0447)
Wales		**-0.278**** (0.055)
Scotland		**-0.0916*** (0.0383)
Northern Ireland		**-0.287**** (0.0437)
Intermittent poverty		**-0.179**** (0.0278)
Persistent poverty		**-0.276**** (0.046)
Female		0.114** (0.0204)
Cohabiting		-0.0113 (0.0268)
Single parent		0.0162 (0.0406)
Rented housing		-0.0838** (0.0257)
Other language spoken		0.217** (0.0475)
Home learning environment		0.0118** (0.00136)
Overseas qualifications		0.129 (0.104)
NVQ1		-0.0828 (0.0667)

continued overleaf

AGE 7 WORD READING STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

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

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

AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE

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

continued overleaf

AGE 11 VERBAL SIMILARITIES STANDARDISED SCORE *continued*

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

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

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READY TO READ

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

COVER PHOTO: ELIZABETH DALZIEL/SAVE THE CHILDREN

Ensuring that all children are reading well by the age of 11 would make a game-changing contribution to creating a fairer and more socially mobile 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 education, health visiting, libraries and children's centres – to support young children's language development. And it explains why this potential is not always fulfilled.

At the beginning of a new parliament, *Ready to Read* argues for a decisive shift towards early action and investment. It sets out three priorities for government:

- investing further in the early education workforce
- strengthening support for parents, especially in public health services and children's centres
- making sure that, as a country, we can track the progress we are making to improve young children's language skills.

Helping children read

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NAHT FOR LEADERS, FOR LEARNERS · National Literacy Trust · THE PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION · THE READING AGENCY · Save the Children · TeachFirst