

# The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment

Findings  
Informing change

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It is well known that children growing up in poorer families leave school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment. Such achievement gaps are a major factor in explaining patterns of social mobility and poverty.

Affluence and disadvantage can potentially influence educational attainment in very broad ways. This study focuses on a range of factors under the umbrella term 'aspirations, attitudes and behaviours', encompassing a wide variety of influences, throughout childhood.

## The research

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## Key points

- The aspirations, attitudes and behaviour of parents and children potentially play an important part in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.
- Children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds. At age three, reading to the child and the wider home learning environment are very important for children's educational development.
- The gap between children from richer and poorer backgrounds widens especially quickly during primary school. Some of the factors that appear to explain this are:
  - parental aspirations for higher education;
  - how far parents and children believe their own actions can affect their lives; and
  - children's behavioural problems.
- It becomes harder to reverse patterns of under-achievement by the teenage years, but disadvantage and poor school results continue to be linked, including through:
  - teenagers' and parents' expectations for higher education;
  - material resources such as access to a computer and the internet at home;
  - engagement in anti-social behaviour; and
  - young people's belief in their own ability at school.
- The research found that cognitive skills are passed from parents to children across the generations. This also helps explain why children from poorer backgrounds underperform in school.

# Background

**It is well known that children growing up in poorer families emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment. Such 'achievement gaps' are a major contributing factor to patterns of social mobility.**

The ways that affluence and disadvantage can influence educational attainment are potentially very broad. This study focused on 'aspirations, attitudes and behaviours' and used a number of rich large-scale longitudinal sources of data capturing groups of children growing up in the UK today, from early childhood, through to late adolescence.

The research showed that educational deficits emerge early in children's lives, even before entry into school, and widen throughout childhood. Even by the age of three there is a considerable gap in cognitive test scores between children in the poorest fifth of the population compared with those from better-off backgrounds. This gap widens as children enter and move through the schooling system, especially during primary school years.

## Pre-school

Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study showed big differences in cognitive development between children from rich and poor backgrounds at the age of three, and this gap widened by age five. There were similarly large gaps in young children's social and emotional well-being at these ages.

Children from poorer backgrounds also faced much less advantageous 'early childhood caring environments' than children from better-off families. For example, compared with children from better-off backgrounds, there were significant differences in poorer children's and their mothers':

- health and well-being (e.g. birth-weight, breastfeeding, and maternal depression);
- family interactions (e.g. mother-child closeness);
- the home learning environment (e.g. reading regularly to the child); and
- parenting styles and rules (e.g. regular bed-times and meal-times).

Differences in the home learning environment, particularly at the age of three, have an important role to play in explaining *why* children from poorer backgrounds have lower test scores than children from better-off families. However, a much larger proportion of the gap remains unexplained, or appears directly related to other aspects of family background (such as mother's age, and family size) that were not explained by differences in the early childhood caring environment.

This suggests that policies to improve parenting skills and home learning environments cannot, in isolation, eliminate the cognitive skills gap between rich and poor young children. On the other hand, many aspects of the early childhood caring environment do have a positive effect on children's social and emotional development, meaning that policies aimed at improving health, parenting skills and the home learning environment could still be very important.

## Primary school

Analysis of the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children suggested that the gap in attainment between children from the poorest and richest backgrounds, already large at age five, grew particularly fast during the primary school years. By age eleven, only around three-quarters of children from the poorest fifth of families reached the expected level at Key Stage 2, compared with 97 per cent of children from the richest fifth.

Poorer children who performed well in Key Stage tests at age seven were more likely than better-off children to fall behind by age eleven, and poorer children who performed badly at seven were less likely to improve their ranking compared with children from better-off backgrounds – an important factor behind the widening gap.

Some of the factors that appear to explain the widening gap during primary school are:

- parental aspirations for higher education;
- how far parents and children believe their own actions can affect their lives; and
- children's behavioural problems, including levels of hyperactivity, conduct issues and problems relating to their peers.

For example, parental aspirations and attitudes to education varied strongly by socio-economic position, with 81 per cent of the richest mothers saying they hoped their nine-year-old would go to university, compared with only 37 per cent of the poorest mothers. Such adverse attitudes to education of disadvantaged mothers are one of the single most important factors associated with lower educational attainment at age eleven.

The findings suggest that government policies aiming to change mothers' and children's attitudes and behaviour during primary schooling could be effective in reducing the growth in the rich-poor gap that takes place during this time.

## Secondary school

Analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England found that attainment gaps at age eleven were already large and further widening was relatively small in the teen years compared with earlier in childhood.

By the time young people take their GCSEs, the gap between rich and poor is very large. For example, only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth (measured by parental socio-economic position (SEP)) managed to gain five good GCSEs (grades A\*-C, including English and Maths), compared with 75 per cent of the top quintile.

It becomes harder to reverse patterns of under-achievement by the teenage years but there are some ways that disadvantage and poor school results continue to be linked. Even after controlling for long-run family background factors and prior attainment, young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if *their parents*:

- think it likely that the young person will go on to higher education;
- devote material resources towards education including private tuition, computer and internet access;
- spend time sharing family meals and outings; and
- quarrel with their child relatively infrequently.

The study also found that young people are more likely to do well at GCSE if *the young person* him/herself:

- has a greater belief in his/her own ability at school;
- believes that events result primarily from his/her own behaviour and actions;
- finds school worthwhile;
- thinks it is likely that he/she will apply to, and get into, higher education;
- avoids risky behaviour such as frequent smoking, cannabis use, anti-social behaviour, truancy, suspension and exclusion; and
- does not experience bullying.

Since young people growing up in poor families do less well in all these respects compared with those in better-off families, this provides some explanation for their poorer educational attainment by the end of compulsory schooling.

While intervening earlier in childhood is likely to be most effective, policies aimed at improving attitudes and behaviour among teenagers could also have some beneficial effects in preventing children from poor backgrounds falling yet further behind during the secondary school years.

## Expectations and aspirations for higher education

One issue of particular concern among policy-makers is whether raising educational aspirations is the key to helping young people from poor backgrounds to do better at school. This study found that aspirations and expectations for higher education (HE) were strongly associated with higher educational attainment. However, at both primary and secondary school aspirations and

expectations for HE among parents and children were generally high even among young people from the poorest backgrounds. For example, at age 14, far more parents and children reported that they were likely to go on to HE than eventually would go, from all income backgrounds including the poorest. This suggests that focused work is also required to convert high expectations and aspirations into reality.

## An intergenerational picture

The analysis of children of the British Cohort Study found that children's test scores were lowest when poverty had persisted across the generations, and highest when material advantage was long-lasting.

Parents' cognitive abilities and other childhood circumstances play a very important role in explaining the gap between the test scores of richer and poorer children today. Nearly one-fifth of the gap in test scores between the richest and poorest children could be explained by an apparent 'direct' link between the childhood cognitive ability of parents and that of their children. This was found even after controlling for a wide range of environmental factors, and after taking into account many of the channels through which cognitive ability might operate, such as parents' subsequent educational attainment, adult socio-economic position and attitudes to education.

On the other hand, while good social skills also appeared to be linked across generations, these do not make a significant direct contribution to the current gap in cognitive test scores between rich and poor children.

There was also a strong intergenerational correlation between a wide variety of other attitudes and behaviours, such as whether a parent reads to their child every day, and parental expectations for advanced education. The passing of such traits across generations also helps to explain the persistent disadvantage that children from poor backgrounds face in their educational attainment.

## Policy conclusions

These findings suggest that attitudes and behaviour are potentially important links between socio-economic disadvantage and children's educational attainment. However, drawing policy conclusions from this evidence must be done with care. While this analysis is based on rich data, it is not derived through robust trials which are needed to establish causal connections and hence to prove that a) these factors can be changed, and b) such change would improve poor children's outcomes in the way that is hoped.

This research has shown two major areas where policy might help to reduce educational inequalities.

#### **Parents and the family home:**

- Improving the home learning environment in poorer families (e.g. books and reading pre-school, computers in teen years).
- Helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education.
- Raising families' aspirations and desire for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

#### **The child's own attitudes and behaviours:**

- Reducing children's behavioural problems, and engagement in risky behaviours.
- Helping children from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts can lead to higher education.
- Raising children's aspirations and expectations for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

There has been a marked shift in government policy emphasis in recent years away from a narrower focus on educational outcomes, and towards the wider emotional and social well-being of children. However, some of the areas highlighted above are better covered by existing policy and evidence than others. For example:

- There is considerable emphasis on parenting programmes and improving child behaviour in the early years before schooling starts, but much less so in the primary school years (and even less in secondary). This research suggests that reaching families while children are of school age might continue to be useful.
- Intensive programmes that focus on helping small numbers of children most in need tend to have the strongest evidence behind them. However, educational disadvantage affects a very large number of children from low-income families, but with lower intensity than those at the extreme, and it may be that policy needs to focus more on these.

- Programmes to raise educational aspirations (such as Aim Higher) typically start in the secondary school years, while this research suggests that such interventions could be worthwhile at a younger age – for example in primary schools.
- The evidence on school and local-based interventions to improve young people's social and emotional skills, behaviour, and participation in positive activities needs to be strengthened. In particular, there is very little evidence on whether these eventually lead to improved school attainment.

Schools have a major role to play in tackling many of the issues raised here. Relevant policies are likely to include how funds are allocated towards pupils from the poorest backgrounds, and the direct teaching support provided to children when they start to fall behind.

If successful, these suggested changes might at least help to prevent children from poor backgrounds from slipping further behind their better-off peers throughout their schooling, and indeed could go some way towards closing the rich–poor gap.

### **About the project**

This study used four rich large-scale longitudinal sources of data capturing groups of children growing up in the UK today. These were the Millennium Cohort Study, the Avon Longitudinal study of Parents and Children, the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England and the Children of the British Cohort Study. The children in these studies ranged from early childhood through to late adolescence.

Each of the datasets used has a different geographical coverage: the MCS covers the whole of the UK, ALSPAC, just the Avon area, the LSYPE covers young people in England, and the British Cohort Study's sample was drawn from births in Great Britain.

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### **For further information**

The full report, **Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?** edited by Alissa Goodman and Paul Gregg, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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