

Children's education crucial for social mobility

Educational inequalities may be reduced by policies focused on parents and the family home, and children's own attitudes and behaviours

Key findings

- The early home learning environment and emerging behaviour, attitudes and beliefs influenced by family background are important long-term factors for how well children perform in school.
- Mothers' aspirations for higher education and children's behavioural problems stand out as particularly important during the primary school years. Eighty-one per cent of the richest mothers say they hope their nine-year-old will go to university, compared with only 37 per cent of the poorest mothers.
- The gap between children from richer and poorer backgrounds, already large at age five, continues to widen between ages 5 and 14.
- By age 11, only around three quarters of children from the poorest fifth of families reach the government's expected level at Key Stage 2, compared to 97 per cent of children from the richest fifth.
- In later years patterns of under-achievement become harder to reverse – but influential factors are expectations for higher education, access to a computer and the internet, teenagers' experiences of bullying, antisocial behaviour and behavioural problems at school.
- Only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth (measured by parental socioeconomic position) manage to gain five good GCSEs, compared to 75 per cent of the top quintile – a gap of an astonishing 54 percentage points.

Background

It is well known that children growing up in poor families emerge from UK schools with substantially lower levels



of educational attainment. Since educational qualifications are such a strong determinant of later-life income and opportunities, such achievement gaps are a major contributing factor to patterns of poverty and social immobility.

This research considers some of the ways that affluence and disadvantage influence children's educational attainment. It focuses on a broad set of aspirations, attitudes and behaviours varying across childhood.

In order to study these factors, data have been taken from several longitudinal studies including the Millennium Cohort Study, the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children, and the British Cohort Study. The children in these studies have been observed at various points in time from early childhood through to late adolescence.

The findings suggest that the aspirations, attitudes and behaviours of parents and children potentially have an important part to play in explaining why poor children typically do worse at school.

Policy relevance and implications

The research evidence shows two major areas where policy might help to reduce educational inequalities:

Parents and the family home

- Improving the home learning environment in poorer families (eg, books and reading pre-school, computers in teenage years)
- Helping parents from poorer families to believe that their own actions and efforts matter
- 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 matter
- Raising children's aspirations and desire for advanced education, from primary school onwards.

Some of the outlined measures appear better covered by existing policy and research evidence than others. For example:

- There is much less emphasis on parenting programmes and improving child behaviours in primary and secondary school, compared with pre-school years, although our research suggests that reaching families while children are of school age might continue to be useful
- Intensive programmes that focus on children most in need tend to have the strongest evidence base behind them, but policy might need to focus more on the larger number of children from low-income families with lower intensity than those at the extreme
- Programmes to raise educational aspirations typically start in the secondary school years, while our research suggests that such interventions would be worthwhile at a younger age. ■

Brief description of the research

The report *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* considers some of the ways that affluence and disadvantage influence children's educational attainment. It is available at www.jrf.org.uk/publications/educational-attainment-poor-children

The report was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and was carried out by the ESRC research centre CMPO, and the IFS which hosts an ESRC centre.

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