

Failing before school: the gap between children in high and low income families has led to a dangerous disadvantage with those in poorer families more likely to suffer from serious social and emotional problems.

The clear links between early child development and later adult outcomes do not bode well for children of the poorest families, who, as new research has shown, are much more likely to exhibit clinically relevant social and emotional problems than their wealthier peers, writes [Yvonne Kelly](#).



There have been numerous efforts to implement early intervention policies aimed at tackling the links between a disadvantaged child's early development and the likely opportunities and outcomes in their adult life yet the sheer magnitude of inequalities that exist during a child's pre-school years in Britain mean that many children are still being left behind from a very early age.

Examining aspects of the child's home environment; from reading to family routines is simply not enough. Although these factors do indeed play a role in contributing to inequalities between pre-school children, we [report](#) that certain characteristics of the child's home environment represents no more than half of a solution necessary if we want to erode the disadvantages that young children are unfairly saddled with.

For example, holding all other factors constant, reading to children daily could reduce the number of 3 and 5 year-olds with socio-emotional problems by 20 per cent. While doing so would be a positive step forward yet the child's home environment only accounts for half of the gap between children of poorer and richer backgrounds. Those children who grow up in lower income homes are still four times more likely to suffer from clinically relevant socio-emotional difficulties than their peers who enjoy their childhood in the highest income group.

By the time children reach 3 years, those in the highest income group are already seven times less likely to have clinically-relevant socio-emotional problems and the size of the gap increases again by the time children are preparing to enter primary school at age 5. In addition, there was a six point difference between rich and poor children's verbal skills at 3 years, and this jumps to a 9 point difference between the same children when they reach 5 years.

This is an increase of 50 per cent in the gap between rich and poor children's verbal ability skills and has a substantial impact on how children are able to communicate. Again, holding home environmental factors constant this gap is not fully explained. Taking influences like reading on a daily basis, play and educational activities, the mental health of the mother, and family routine into account only 'reduces' the inequality gap by about one third.

Despite the implementation of early development programmes, the scale of inequalities between pre-school children across Britain was not previously known. Home environment, and in particular, the role that reading and active learning and playing has in a young child's life, has been well publicised yet the solution to placing all children on an equal footing when they first enter school is more complex.

For parents who work long unsocial hours for very little money and live in poor quality accommodation, it is clear that the child is highly likely to miss out on the optimal environment which the child needs to truly flourish. It would be easy to say that a loving, stable, warm environment where children are read to daily and played with all the time is the answer to inequality, but this study shows quite clearly that there is still an enormous gap that is unaccounted for both in policy and in popular discourse.

The research was originally published in [Archives of Disease in Childhood](#) on June 13.