

## KEY OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN: NEW EVIDENCE FROM *GROWING UP IN IRELAND*

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The welfare of children is a key concern of Irish society and of government policy. A major new project, *Growing Up in Ireland*, aims to describe the lives of a large scale representative sample of Irish children, and to analyse the factors associated with positive and negative outcomes in terms of such areas as health and education. Such evidence is of critical importance in guiding policy choices affecting children. The study is a longitudinal one, i.e. it will follow two groups or “cohorts” of children over time: a cohort of 11,000 infants (nine months old) and cohort of 8,500 nine-year olds. A recently published report<sup>†</sup> based on initial data gathered on the nine-year old group already provides a great deal of interesting evidence on several domains of child outcomes including:

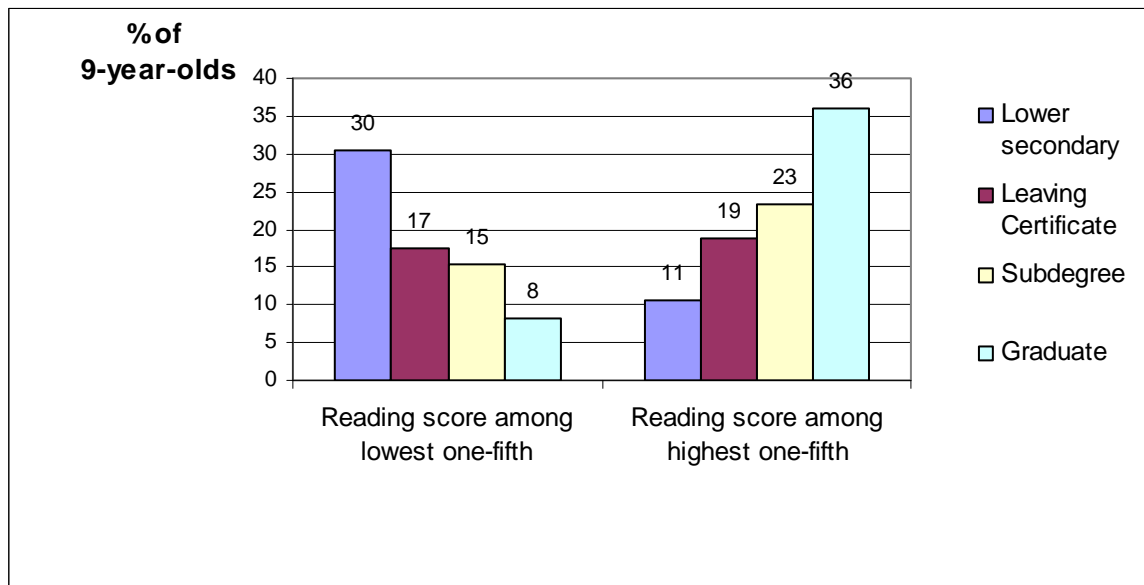
- physical health and well-being,
- educational achievement and intellectual development,
- social, emotional and behavioural well-being.

In this bulletin article we summarise some of the key findings regarding the educational achievement and intellectual development of nine-year olds, and their physical health.

The *Growing Up in Ireland* study gathered information on the reading and mathematical ability of the nine-year-olds, using the Drumcondra reading and maths tests. Academic success, even at nine years of age, was strongly related to the child’s socio-economic circumstances. Figure 1, for example, outlines the proportion of children with the lowest reading scores (among the bottom 20 per cent or bottom “quintile”) classified by level of maternal education. This shows that children whose mother was herself less well educated were much more likely to be in the lowest reading quintile than were the children of graduate mothers (30 per cent compared with 8 per cent). The corollary, of course, is seen on the right hand side of Figure 1, which shows that 36 per cent of children whose mother is a graduate were in the highest reading quintile, compared with 11 per cent of those whose mother left school at lower secondary level or less. The pattern for other aspects of social background (income, social class etc.) was consistent with that for maternal education.

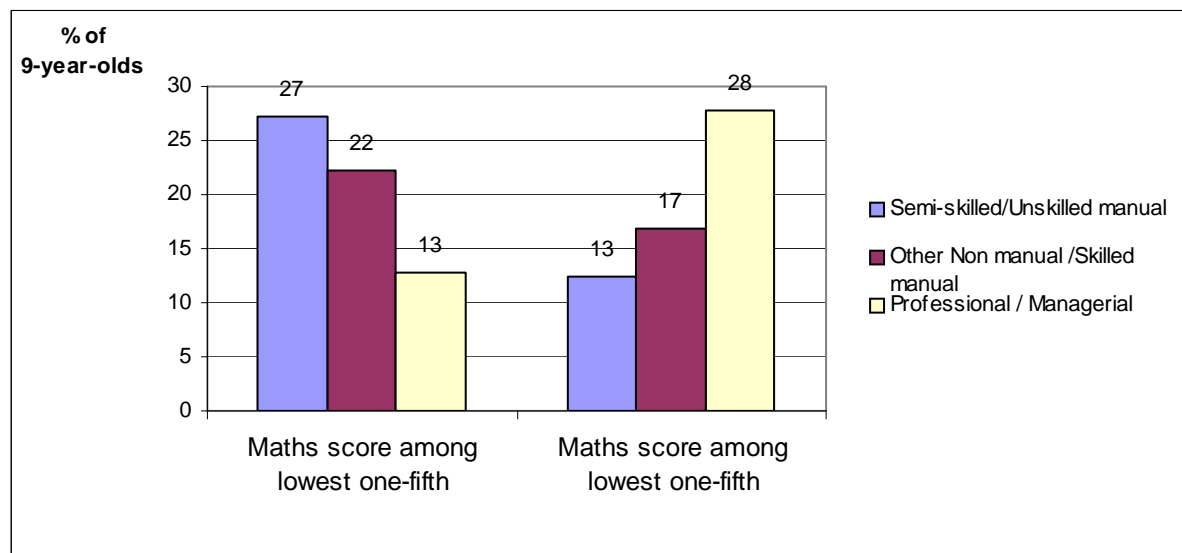
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**Figure 1: Proportion of Nine-Year-Olds with Reading Scores Among the Lowest and Highest One-fifth, Classified by Level of Maternal Education**



The pattern of children’s performance in Maths was very similar to that in reading. In general, children from higher social class backgrounds, income categories and maternal education groups had a much higher chance of being in the highest quintile of scores on the Maths test (Figure 4).

**Figure 2: Proportion of Nine-Year-Olds with Maths Scores Among the Lowest and Highest One-fifth Classified by Family Social Class**



The importance of the intellectual and cognitive development of children cannot be over-emphasised. The child’s early experiences in the home, in school and in the broader community will have a significant impact on that development which will, in turn, have long-term consequences for his/her life chances. A child’s attitude towards and engagement with school have been identified as having an important effect on his/her academic performance.

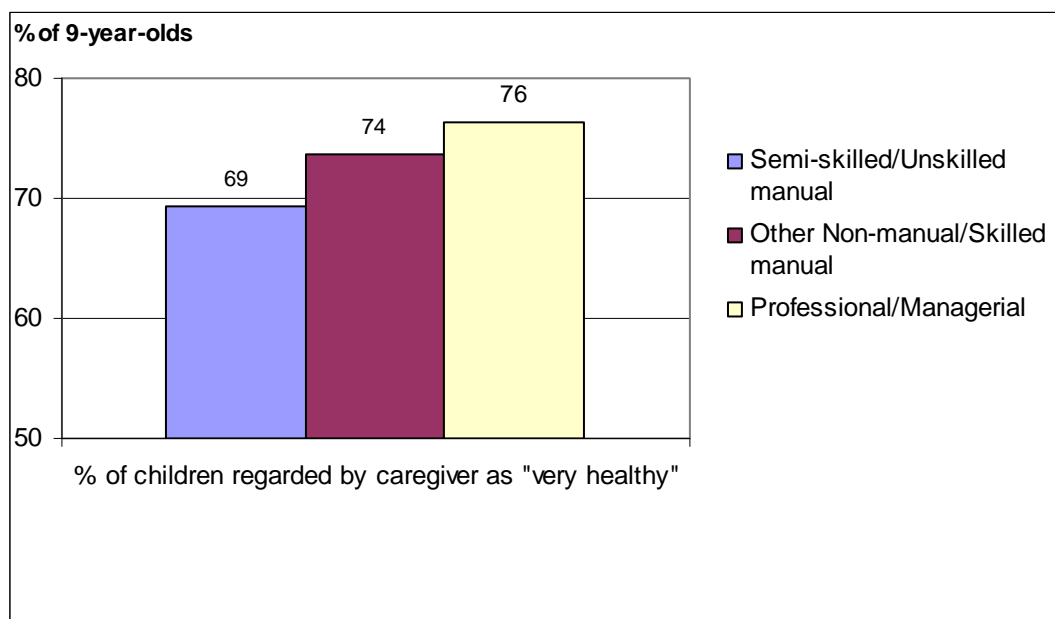
Nine-year-olds generally had a very positive attitude towards school. Over one-quarter (27 per cent) said they *Always* liked it, 67 per cent said they *Sometimes* liked it and only 7 per cent said they *Never* liked. Similar positive views were expressed about their teacher (only 6 per cent of nine-year-olds said they *Never* liked their teacher). Overall, girls had a somewhat more positive attitude towards school than boys.

Absenteeism among children will clearly affect their school performance. On average, nine-year-olds were absent from school on 6.4 days in the year preceding their interview. Significant differences in the number of days missed were apparent in terms of the child's socio-economic characteristics. For example, children whose mothers had lower levels of educational attainment had higher levels of absenteeism than those whose mothers were third level graduates (7.6 days compared to 5.4 days respectively).

Childhood health is important for children's well-being and development and is a good predictor of adult health. It is also widely accepted that the experience of poor childhood health may contribute to socio-economic and other differences in health later in life (e.g. Palloni, Milesi, White and Turner, 2009).

The majority of nine-year-old children were reported by their mother to be in good health – 73 per cent were reported to be *Very Healthy* and 25 per cent to be *Healthy with a few minor problems*. Although there were no statistically significant differences in the health statuses of boys and girls, children from higher social class groups were more likely to be reported as *Very Healthy* than those from lower ones – 76 per cent of nine-year-olds from Professional/Managerial groups were reported to be *Very Healthy* compared with 69 per cent of those from Semi-skilled/Unskilled Manual backgrounds (Figure 1).

**Figure 3: Proportion of Children Regarded by Main Caregiver as “Very Healthy” by Family Social Class**

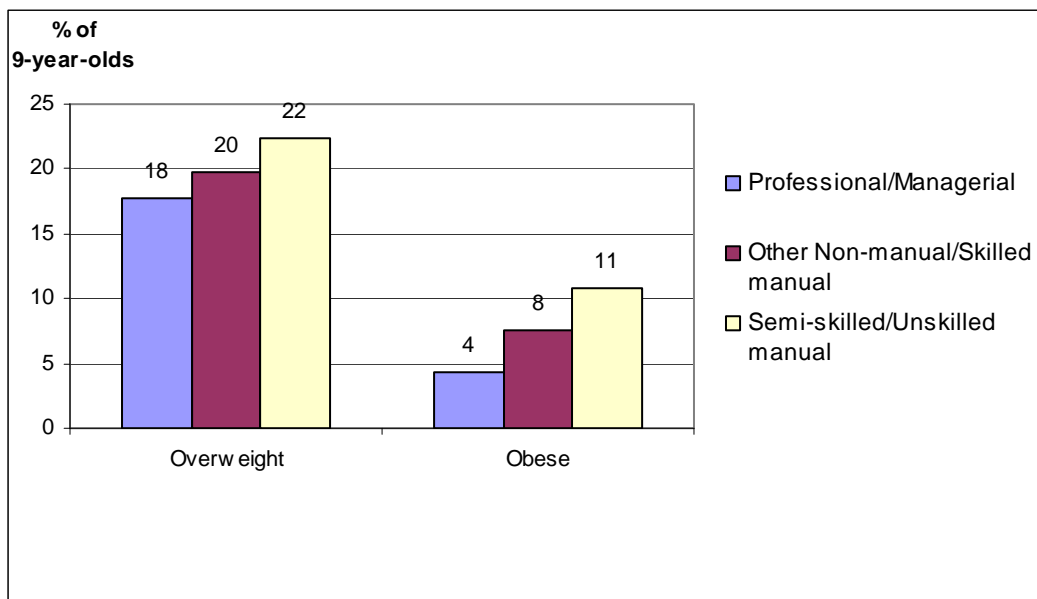


Overall prevalence of on-going chronic illness or disability among nine-year-olds was reported at 11 per cent by their mothers, with 7 per cent of the children who had a chronic illness or disability being reported to be severely hampered by it in their daily activities.<sup>1</sup>

Increases in childhood overweight and obesity have been recognised as a serious public health problem (National Taskforce on Obesity, 2005). Obese children have a higher chance than others of becoming obese adults (Dietz, 1998) and the link between childhood obesity and health problems in later life has been well established (Regan and Betts, 2006).

Using international thresholds for Body Mass Index (BMI) *Growing Up in Ireland* found that 19 per cent of nine-year-olds were overweight and a further 7 per cent were obese. This means that one in every four nine-year-olds in Ireland has an elevated BMI. Girls were significantly more likely than boys to be overweight (22 per cent compared with 16 per cent) and obese (8 per cent compared with 6 per cent). Social gradients were also clearly apparent in the weight status of nine-year-olds. A total of 22 per cent of children from the Semi-skilled/Unskilled Manual group were classified as overweight compared with 18 per cent of children from Professional/Managerial backgrounds. The corresponding figures for obesity were 11 per cent and 4 per cent respectively (Figure 2).

**Figure 4: Proportion of Children Classified as “Overweight” or “Obese” by Social Class Category**



The policy and related challenges presented by some of the findings contained in the first substantive report from *Growing Up in Ireland* are substantial. In important areas such as health and education the clear social (and in some cases gender) differentiation in child outcomes, even at the relatively early age of nine years, must be a source of concern and a matter of focus for policymaking and service delivery.

<sup>1</sup> This means that 0.7 per cent of all nine-year-olds were reported by their mothers as experiencing a chronic illness or disability and being severely hampered by it.

The specific issues sketched above represent only a tiny fraction of the information recorded in the *Growing Up in Ireland* project. A wealth of quantitative and qualitative information has been recorded from an array of informants – from the children themselves, their parents/guardians, teachers, school principals, non-resident parents and other regular caregivers, as appropriate to the age and circumstances of the child. An anonymised version of the data will shortly be deposited in the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA). This will facilitate all interested researchers in their work on children and child development. The longitudinal approach greatly enhances the analytical potential of the project, particularly in identifying causal relationships and establishing links between early events and experiences on the one hand and later outcomes on the other.

The study covers a broad range of child outcomes with a view to documenting how well children in Ireland are doing along a number of key dimensions. In so doing, it will facilitate comparison with findings from similar international studies, as well as establishing domestic norms. Being longitudinal in nature the study will also address developmental trajectories over time and will allow researchers to explore the factors which have the greatest impact on those trajectories and on the life chances of children as they grow and develop. By providing an evidence-base of research and insights into children and childhood, the study will inform and contribute to the setting of responsive policies and the design of services for children and their families.

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