

READY TO READ:

Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Wales can read well.

POLICY BRIEFING PAPER

Being able to read well is vital for a child's prospects at school and in life. Yet one in four children growing up in poverty in Wales leaves primary school unable to read well, and this gap begins in the early years. This helps explain the persistent educational gap in Wales that, each year, prevents thousands of our poorest children fulfilling their potential.

Making sure every child leaves primary school able to read well is a critical part of efforts to address educational inequality. Every child deserves an equal chance to succeed, regardless of their background. This is why the Read On. Get On. campaign coalition has set the goal of every child in Wales being able to read well by the time they are 11 by 2025.

THREE PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

It is vital that, as a nation, we do more to ensure that children develop strong language skills by the time they start school. The impact on the learning and life chances of children at risk of falling behind, and on educational inequality in Wales, is likely to be significant.

Our focus is on what more can be done to support children living in poverty, 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 know this is not something government policies and programmes alone can fix. The Read On. Get On. campaign is working with a wide range of partners to develop a major behavioural change campaign which aims to empower parents to understand what they can do.



We have identified three priority areas for the Welsh government to consider, designed to help parents and professionals do even more to support the youngest children, especially those living in poverty:

1. INVESTING FURTHER IN THE QUALITY OF THE EARLY EDUCATION WORKFORCE

- a) Ensure staff and parents in all early years settings have access to at least one member of staff with a graduate level qualification, with expertise in early language development, by 2020.
- b) Adopt a robust, systematic and consistent approach to assessing the demand for Welsh-medium and bilingual early years provision. This information should be used to ensure a sufficient supply of provision to meet parental demand. This systematic approach should include assessing whether there are sufficient numbers of staff with the requisite Welsh language skills to meet the needs of families.

2. STRENGTHENING SUPPORT FOR PARENTS

- a) Ensure staff have the necessary skills to support parents with their children's early language development, particularly those parents living in poverty. This can be achieved through establishing a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) framework for the early years and childcare workforce which includes core elements covering early language development and supporting parents.
- b) Assess how many children are living in poverty but outside Flying Start areas. Then commit to actions to ensure these children are able to access the quality support they need for good speech and early language development.

3. STRONG AND AMBITIOUS LEADERSHIP FOR CHILDREN

- a) Appoint a Children's Minister to provide strong leadership and ensure all children in Wales are able to reach their full potential.

POVERTY AND YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS

Learning to read well starts early in a child's life, and good early language skills are the vital stepping stone. If children do not learn to understand words, speak, and listen from an early age, they will struggle to learn to read well when they start school. The Read On. Get On. campaign has therefore set an interim goal that every child in Wales has good language skills by the time they start school. In Wales, we expect to be able to measure children's language skills at age four to five on entry to the foundation phase from September 2015.

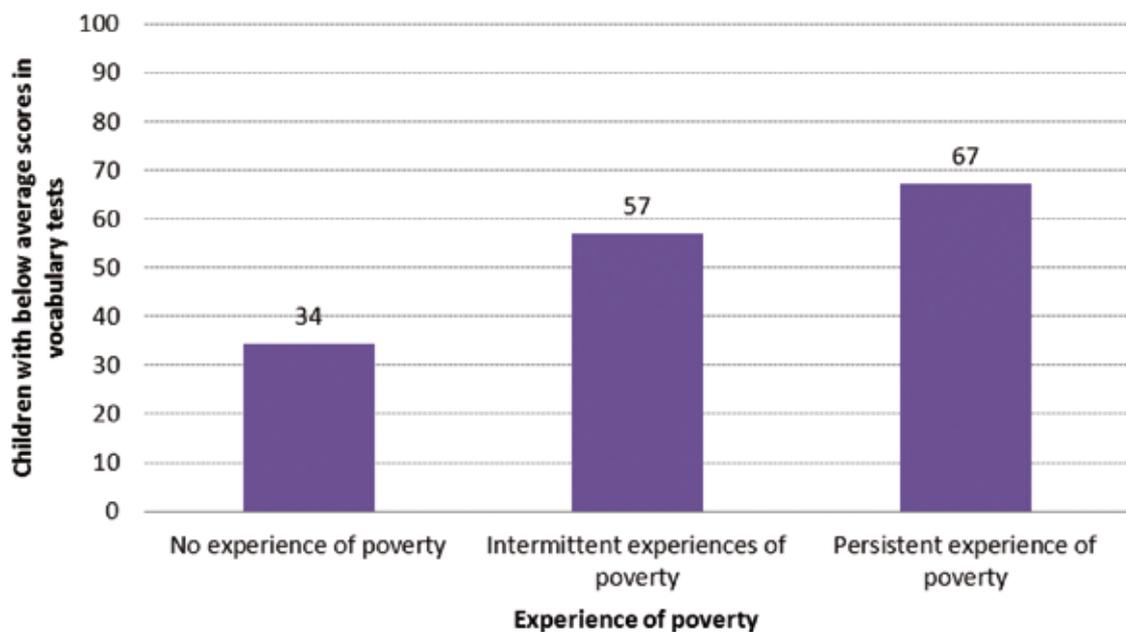
Evidence presented in the Ready to Read report explains why children's early language skills are so important for learning to read. We also show that children living in poverty are at the greatest risk of falling behind. The evidence shows that without an increased commitment to children's early language development, particularly for the poorest children, we will never achieve our goal of all children leaving primary school being able to read well. Boosting children's early language skills is critical to narrowing the attainment gap and improving the life chances of our poorest children.

Wales has an ambitious and welcome goal for its children: to have a flying start in life. 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 children's life chances. Progress is being made through concrete action and investment, but not quickly enough. Significant challenges remain. An increased focus on early language skills that reaches all children, particularly those in poverty, is needed.

By the age of five, most children should be able to speak in full sentences and use most of the everyday words adults use. They should be asking lots of 'why?' questions to understand the world around them. They should be able to talk confidently about the past and the future. A minority of children have a disability or impairment that means they will never develop the language skills expected for their age, however most children can get there with the right support.

Yet in Wales, there remains a stubborn gap in language skills between poorer children and their better-off peers. Our new analysis of Millennium

FIGURE 1 FIVE-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN IN WALES BELOW THE AVERAGE VOCABULARY LEVEL, BY EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY



Source: Millennium Cohort Study

Cohort data (MCS) for Wales shows that children who live in persistent poverty are twice as likely to score below average for language development at age five.

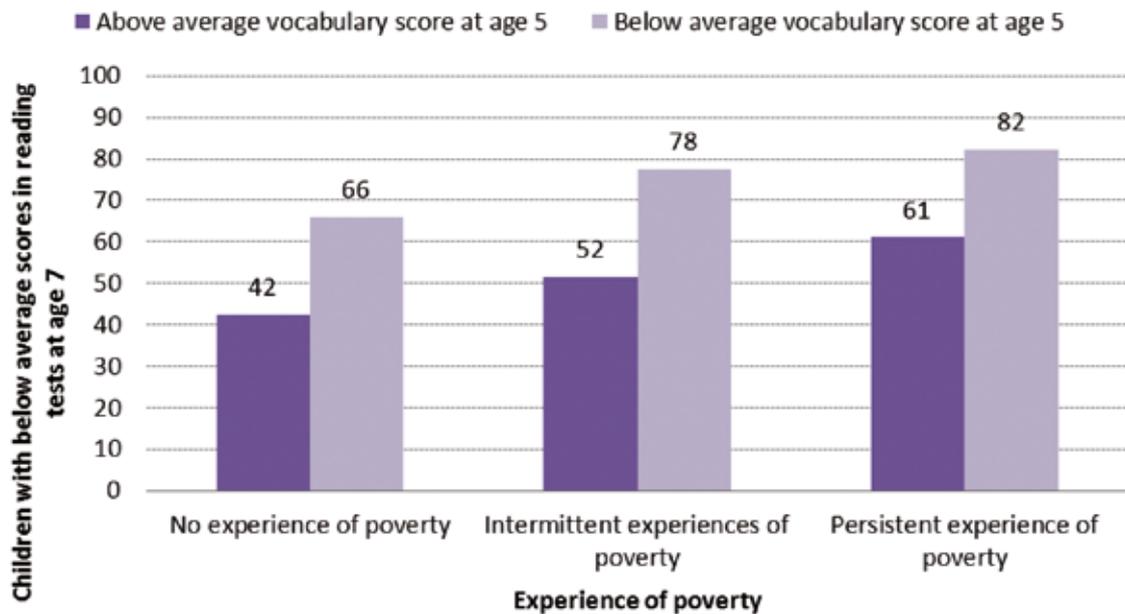
WHY EARLY LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT CRUCIAL IN LEARNING TO READ.

Children's language ability affects their learning to read in a variety of ways. Children who have 'phonological' difficulties (difficulties recognising the sounds of words) can struggle to 'decode' and understand printed words (Catts 1989). 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). New research commissioned by the Read On. Get On. campaign from the UCL Institute of Education shows the extent to which children's early language skills affect their later ability to read and the impact that poverty has on their development.

New analysis of Welsh MCS data 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 has experienced poverty persistently and has below average language skills scores 35% less on reading tests at age seven and 22% less on comprehension tests at age 11 than a child who has never experienced poverty and has above average language skills.

FIGURE 2 TRANSITIONS IN ABILITY BETWEEN FIVE AND SEVEN: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN WITH BELOW AVERAGE READING SCORES AT AGE SEVEN BY VOCABULARY SCORE AT AGE FIVE AND EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY IN WALES



Source: Millennium Cohort Study

WHAT INFLUENCES YOUNG CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

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 which interact with each other to help shape young children's language skills by age 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. This demonstrates the importance of early action to support young children's language development from birth.
2. **What parents do:** the bond between parent and child, and the way 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.
3. **Poverty:** poverty can leave parents feeling stressed, worried or lacking in confidence,

which can make it harder for them to create lots of early learning opportunities. More support and information for parents are key. Particularly in the context of stubbornly high child poverty rates in Wales.

4. **Early learning and childcare:** high-quality early learning and childcare can be a major benefit, especially for older pre-school children and for those living in poverty. Early years education has the biggest impact on language skills when it is led by a trained teacher or early years graduate.

WHAT SUPPORT DO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES CURRENTLY RECEIVE?

Falling behind so early in life has profound consequences for a child's ability to get on at school. This disadvantage can extend far into adulthood. Acting early and supporting parents to engage with their children'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 in Wales.

In this report we consider in particular the role of health visitors, speech and language therapists, Integrated Children's Centres, Flying Start, early education, libraries and Families First. The service landscape for parents to access support for their children's early language development is broad, and in places diffuse. A significant challenge remains to join up the efforts of all partners and ensure the children and parents who need additional early language support are able to access it.

For further information on our calls or to find out more about our work please contact:

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Helping children read

