


Children's social circumstances and educational outcomes. Evidence summary

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The purpose of this briefing is to give the reader an understanding of how the circumstances in which children and young people are born, grow up and learn contribute to inequalities in educational outcomes. This paper summarises the findings of a review undertaken by the Evidence for Action team at NHS Health Scotland. The full report can be found at www.healthscotland.scot/publications/childrens-social-circumstances-and-educational-outcomes-briefing-paper

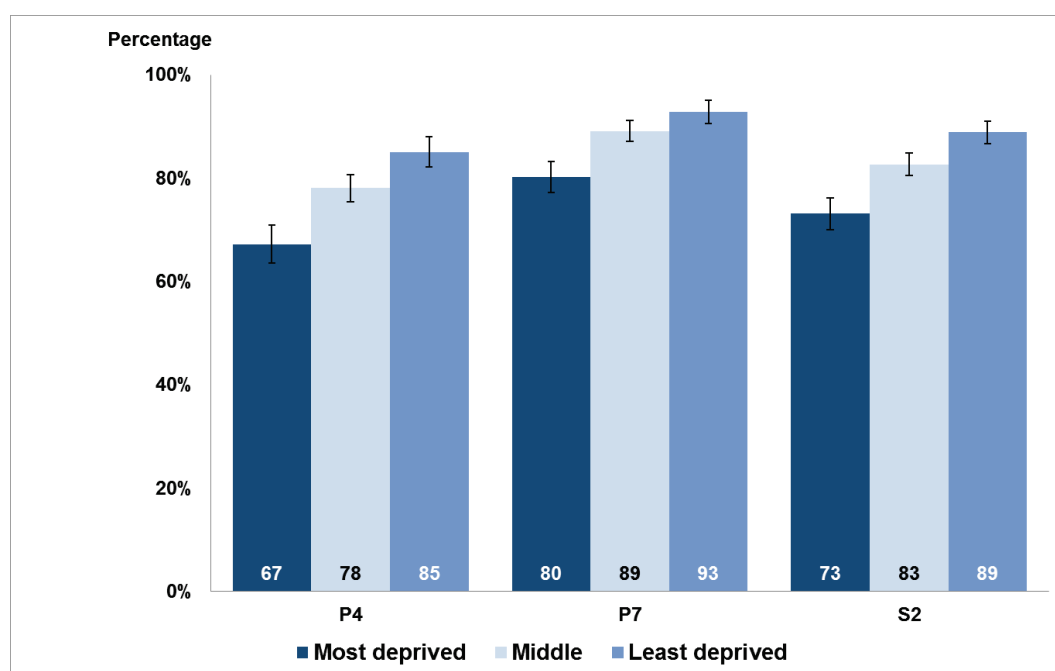
Background

Educational attainment influences employment opportunities and income in adulthood. Strong relationships between health outcomes and levels of education can be seen in the rates of death and illness in adults for a wide range of health conditions.¹ Children and young people with parents who have lower educational attainment are less likely to do well at school than their peers with better-educated parents.^{2 3 4}

In general, children living in poverty* have lower educational outcomes compared to those from more affluent families.⁵ While these associations are not unique to the United Kingdom, differences in Scotland are marked, starting before children begin school and persisting throughout.⁵ For example, in the 2016 Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy, the proportion of S2 children who were assessed as doing well or very well in reading ranged from 73% in the most deprived areas to 89% in the least deprived areas⁶ (Figure 1). Similar patterns were seen for writing, listening and talking⁶ and numeracy.⁷

* Poverty is a lack of income (either in absolute terms or relative to the rest of the population), with the most common threshold defined as having an income below 60% of median income. (NHS Health Scotland. Income, wealth and poverty. Inequality briefing 8. Edinburgh: NHS Health Scotland; 2017.)

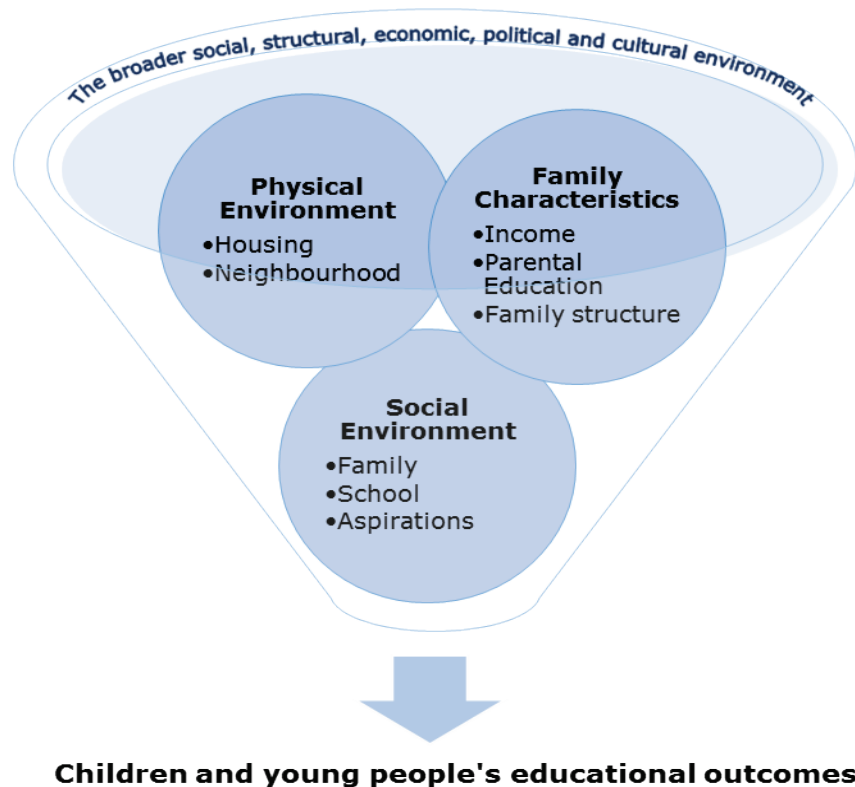
Figure 1: Proportion of pupils performing well or very well in reading by stage and deprivation category⁶



Key findings

- Many children and young people living in disadvantaged circumstances do well.⁸ The quality of the social and physical environments that children experience, and are exposed to, is key.^{9 10} These environments interact with the broader structural, economic, political and cultural environment in complex ways to influence educational outcomes.^{9 11 12} A combination and accumulation of these experiences can enhance or hinder children and young people's educational outcomes.^{3 9} Parental income and education shape the social and physical environments.¹³ (Figure 2). The overarching influence of the broader structural and political factors is outside the scope of this review. More information about socio-economic inequalities can be found at www.healthscotland.scot/health-inequalities

Figure 2: Influences shaping educational outcome

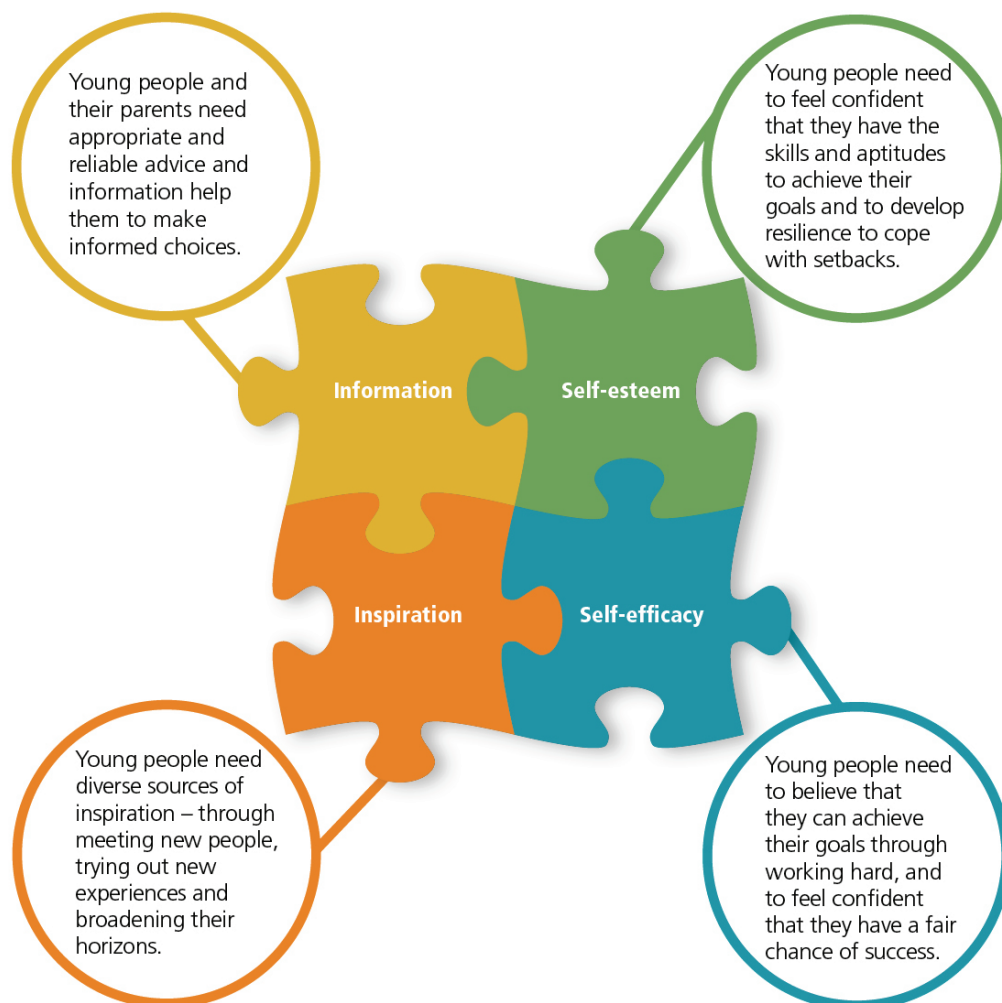


- Parental income is important for educational outcomes.^{12 14} There is strong, consistent evidence that links growing up and living in poverty with poorer educational outcomes.^{12 14 15 16} Lack of money can limit the availability of resources for learning^{2 12 15 17} as well as adversely affect the family social environment through the impact of financial vulnerability on parental mental health.^{12 15 16 17} Strong family relationships and supportive parenting can help mitigate the effects of living in disadvantaged circumstances on educational outcomes.¹¹
- Lower educational attainment has been found to be associated with aspects of children and young people's physical environment, such as living in overcrowded housing, in an inadequately heated home¹⁸ and/or in a disadvantaged neighbourhood.¹⁹ Experience of food insecurity has been linked with poorer educational outcomes as well as emotional and behavioural problems.²⁰

- High aspirations for continuing on to higher or further education have been reported among parents and children across the spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds.^{21 22 23 24} Rather than an innate characteristic, aspirations are shaped by a broad range of influences including family, neighbourhood, school and wider social factors which interact in complex ways^{21 22 25} (Figure 3).
- The social environment within schools can play a role in mediating the relationship between children and young people's circumstances and educational outcomes.^{2 26} Children and young people attending a school with a positive school climate* have been found to do better than might be expected based on their socio-economic background.²⁶

* School climate is a complex concept that is not well defined. (Berkowitz R, Moore H, Astor RA and Benbenishty R. A research synthesis of the associations between socioeconomic background, inequality, school climate and academic achievement. *Review of Educational Research*, 2017; 87(2), 425–69.) The term is used to capture loosely related factors such as respectful and supportive relationships and feelings of safety, inclusiveness and fairness. (Kidger J, Araya R, Donovan J and Gunnell D. The effect of the school environment on the emotional health of adolescents: A systematic review. *Pediatrics*, 2012; 129(5), 925–49.)

Figure 3: Components of aspirations²⁵ *



Local positive actions

Actions to tackle child poverty are twofold:

- Approaches to maximise household resources.
- Strategies to mitigate and prevent the adverse effects of living in a low-income household.

The following list of positive actions is based mainly on NHS Health Scotland evidence briefings published in the past six years and is not a comprehensive review of current evidence. More information about [child poverty](#) and [adverse childhood](#)

* Social Exclusion Task Force, page 10

[experiences](#) can be found on NHS Health Scotland's website. The Evidence for Action briefings that accompany the [Scottish Public Health Observatory's \(ScotPHO\) health and wellbeing profiles](#) give additional examples of positive action.

- Work in partnership with children and young people, their parents, carers and other family members to formulate, implement and evaluate approaches that prevent and mitigate the impact of living in poverty.²⁷ For example, building on initiatives like the [Cost of the School Day](#) project in Glasgow and the [1 in 5: Raising Awareness of Child Poverty](#) project in Edinburgh to improve the understanding of the causes and impact of child poverty, and to look at what changes education services and schools could make to remove cost barriers and better support children from low-income families so that they are able to participate fully in school.
- Build on existing initiatives like [Healthier Wealthier Children](#) to develop comprehensive referral pathways that link welfare and money advice services with places that parents of children and young people visit – for example schools.²⁸ Encourage and support parents/carers to apply for Healthy Start vouchers, free school meals, clothing grants and the Educational Maintenance Allowance.²⁹
- Work with local partners to improve the physical environment of children living in disadvantaged circumstances. Ensure families can access affordable high-quality housing that is energy efficient and affordable to heat.³⁰ The [Place Standard tool](#) is one way that communities, public agencies and voluntary groups can find those aspects of a place that need to be targeted to improve people's health, wellbeing and quality of life. Access to safe, high-quality indoor and outdoor spaces, free of charge, where children can play freely and confidently with their peers is important for healthy social, emotional and physical development.³¹
- Support young children's social, emotional, and cognitive development by providing support for maternal mental health. Flexible provision of high-quality affordable childcare^{29 32} can help mothers to access employment, training, education and skills development opportunities.^{29 33}
- Ensure that services and initiatives are planned and delivered in proportion to need.³⁴ Children living in poverty do not necessarily live in areas of greatest

deprivation classified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). Using a combination of both SIMD and eligibility for clothing grants and free school meals can help to identify children and young people eligible for initiatives targeted at children living in low-income households.²⁹

- Support the joint learning and development of professionals (e.g. midwives, health visitors, GPs, nursery workers, school nurses, teachers) that are in contact with children and young people, their parents and carers to understand the impact of poverty on children's health and wellbeing³⁵ and ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to deliver services that are sensitive to inequalities.^{27 36}

Further information

- NHS Health Scotland: [Health and wellbeing interventions in a school setting](#)
- NHS Health Scotland: [Child Poverty](#)
- NHS Health Scotland: [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#)
- NHS Health Scotland e-learning: [Child Poverty, Health and Wellbeing](#) [free resource; requires registration]
- National Parent Forum of Scotland: [Cost of the School Day Toolkit for Parent Councils](#)
- Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland (CPAG): [Resources for schools](#)
- Treanor MC. [Actions to prevent and mitigate child poverty at the local level](#). Edinburgh: What Works Scotland; 2017.
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