

# Impact of family background on children's education unchanged in a century, research reveals

April 20 2022

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The family background of UK children still influences their educational achievements at primary school as much as it did nearly one hundred

years ago, a major new study has revealed.

The study, by the University of York, looked at data from 92,000 individuals born between 1921 and 2011 and revealed that the achievement gap between children from impoverished family backgrounds and their more privileged peers has remained stagnant.

This gap accounted for half a grade difference at [primary school](#) level, but the impact of family background persists and increases throughout the [school years](#). Previous research suggests that by GCSE year, the effect of family background on [school performance](#) is more than three times worse, accounting for a 1.75 grade difference.

The enduring impact of family background on success in education perpetuates social and [economic inequalities](#) across generations, the researchers say. They are calling for [educational policies](#) which prioritize equality in learning outcomes for children over equality in opportunities.

Lead author of the study, Professor Sophie von Stumm from the Department of Education at the University of York, said: "Our study shows for the first time that despite the efforts of policy makers and educators, children from impoverished backgrounds, whether born in 1921 or the modern day, face the same prospect of earning lower grades and obtaining fewer [educational opportunities](#) than children from wealthier backgrounds.

"We are calling for educational interventions that ensure the weakest students get the most support, as policies promoting equal learning opportunities only work if all children are equally well prepared to take advantage of them.

"For example, we know that children from low socioeconomic family backgrounds tend to start school with poorer language skills than their

better-off peers. This early disadvantage makes it more difficult for them to utilize the learning opportunities that that school offers. In turn, children from impoverished families earn [lower grades](#) in primary and secondary school, and ultimately, they earn fewer educational qualifications than children from wealthier backgrounds."

The study looked at data provided by large cohort studies up until 2016. The researchers caution that the pandemic is likely to have intensified the link between family socioeconomic status and children's school performance because it increased inequality in families' access to resources.

Co-author of the study, Professor Paul Wakeling from the Department of Education at the University of York said: "There was rightly much public scrutiny of inequalities in GCSE grades during the pandemic. However, our findings highlight how important it is to consider inequalities in earlier years of schooling. The impacts could be felt for years to come "

Professor von Stumm added: "Children growing up in low socioeconomic family homes during the pandemic were disproportionately affected by school closures, with a lack of access to [online learning](#) and suitable learning environments.

"Educational interventions that boost early-years and primary school learning for these children have never been more important. Even if such interventions have initially small effects, their long-term benefits are sizable. Tackling the persistent [achievement gap](#) highlighted by our study will be instrumental in reducing overall inequality and therefore hugely beneficial to society as a whole."

"Persistent association between family [socioeconomic status](#) and primary school performance in Britain over 95 years" is published in the journal

*npj Science for Learning*.

**More information:** Persistent association between family socioeconomic status and primary school performance in Britain over 95 years, *npj Science of Learning* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s41539-022-00120-3](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41539-022-00120-3)

Provided by University of York

Citation: Impact of family background on children's education unchanged in a century, research reveals (2022, April 20) retrieved 12 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-04-impact-family-background-children-unchanged.html>

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