

Five-year-olds from poor families 'are 18 months behind on vocabulary'

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CHILDREN from wealthy homes display much better vocabularies and problem-solving skills than their poorer peers by the age of five, according to research published yesterday.

The study, prepared for Scottish ministers, found a gap in academic ability between children from different socio-economic backgrounds had already opened up by the time they were three years old.

At the age of five, youngsters with wealthier parents educated to degree level were on average 18 months ahead of their less well-off peers with their vocabulary.

They were also 13 months ahead on problem-solving ability. The study of 14,000 youngsters' abilities found the gap in vocabulary widened between the ages of three and five.

Children whose parents were educated to a lower level also tended to perform more poorly and were less likely to catch up either before or after they start attending school.

The study, titled Growing Up in

Scotland, also found that more than a third of children did low amounts of exercise and watched a lot of television, while more than two-thirds did not eat enough fruit and vegetables.

It concluded that public spending should be focused on helping the most deprived children, with the intention of reducing the attainment gap between rich and poor.

Angela Constance, the Scottish Children's Minister, said: "Our priority is to create a fairer start for all, to provide the most important people in a child's journey, their parents and carers, with the right support.

"That work includes encouraging parents to 'play, talk and read' to their children every day to give them the best start in life.

"We will also engage with parents, carers and professionals in the coming months to create a comprehensive national parenting strategy which will support all parents, regardless of their circumstances."

The study, conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research, tracked the children from birth.

It listed a series of factors that helped

children develop their vocabularies and problem-solving skills more quickly, apart from their parents' wealth and qualifications.

Among the elements that could have a positive impact on youngsters aged under five were their mothers attending antenatal classes and breastfeeding. They also tended to perform better if they went to a private nursery school.

For children whose parents had no or lower qualifications, the study found poor early communication skills were likely to persist through the preschool period with little or no relative improvement.

The report said 13 per cent of five-year-olds had moderate-to-severe social, behavioural or emotional difficulties.

More than a third reported low physical activity (38 per cent) and high "screen time" in front of a TV (39 per cent). Meanwhile, 35 per cent consumed snacks with a high sugar or fat content more than once a day, and 69 per cent lacked a varied fruit and vegetable diet.

However, those children with "good" parents were up to 44 per cent less likely to suffer health and emotional problems, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds.