

Written evidence submitted by Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity on 7th January 2026

Education Committee

Inquiry: Reading for pleasure

Equalise: ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Health Equity is a £9 million ESRC-funded research centre (2024-2029) based in UCL's Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, with academic partners at City St George's University London, University of Essex, University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde and Universite Toulouse III. Led by Professors Yvonne Kelly and Anne McMunn, in partnership with experts in local and national government and a wide range of health equity-focused advocacy and voluntary groups, **Equalise** tackles avoidable health inequalities across four key themes: Learning, Care, Work and Place. The Learning theme focuses on early years and vocational education and socioeconomic gaps in child development and access to quality education.

A. Executive summary

A.1. Daily reading in early childhood is linked to better socioemotional wellbeing, verbal ability, school readiness (age 3), and non-verbal/spatial skills (age 5). Increasing reading frequency (e.g., from never/weekly to daily) significantly reduces behavioural difficulties scores by age 5.

A.2. At age 11, those who read for pleasure or were read to earlier in childhood have higher verbal abilities and lower socioemotional difficulties scores.

A.3. The home environment strongly influences reading habits: factors include family income, housing quality, parental employment, mental health, and literacy/numeracy skills. Support for parents should address both proximal factors (skills, mental health) and structural factors (housing, employment) to foster reading for pleasure.

A.4. Reading in early years is associated with positive verbal development trajectories over the first 11 years; lack of early reading correlates with downward trajectories.

A.5. Reading for pleasure at age 11 is linked to higher verbal scores, helping to narrow the attainment gap over time.

B. What are the benefits to babies, children and young people of reading for pleasure?

B.1. A project assessing the benefits of reading for pleasure conducted by Professor Yvonne Kelly, John Kelly and Professor Amanda Sacker provides insights into the benefits of reading to young children. Analyses found that children who were read to daily by parents/carers during early childhood were better off in terms of:

- measures of socioemotional wellbeing (Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire [SDQ]) and verbal scores at both ages 3 and 5;
- school readiness scores at age 3;
- and non-verbal and spatial scores at age 5.

B.2. There were moderate improvements in socioemotional scores among children aged 3 to 5 whose reading routines changed to reading daily or reading weekly in the home environment. For example, increasing from weekly/never reading to daily reading corresponded to a 0.38 lower behavioural difficulties score at age 5 and increasing to weekly reading from never reading corresponded to a 0.56 lower score.

B.3. 11-year-olds who were read to at ages 3 and 5/who liked reading at age 7/read for pleasure had higher verbal ability scores at age 11 than those who did not. They also had lower total socioemotional difficulty scores at age 11. This appears to be driven by having lower 'externalising' scores i.e. fewer outwardly directed behaviours, such as temper tantrums, aggression, rule-breaking or being disruptive.

C. What is the role of the home environment in encouraging children to read for pleasure and how could parents and carers be better supported to do this?

C.1. Being read to by a parent/carer daily is shaped by a range of home environment factors during the early years, including aspects of the material environment (e.g. family income, overcrowding, parental employment), the psychosocial environment (e.g. parental depression), and parental skills in literacy/numeracy. Higher maternal age at birth, higher household income and either or both parents being in work increased the likelihood a child would be read to daily at age 3. Conversely, either parent having literacy/numeracy skills difficulties, overcrowding in the home or a parent having depression decreased the likelihood. Similar patterns are seen for when child reported reading for pleasure at age 11 is considered – the early years environment continues to shape later outcomes.

C.2. Supporting parents and carers to encourage their children to read for pleasure requires a multifaceted approach addressing proximal influences, such as parental literacy/numeracy skills and their mental health, alongside supporting good quality housing and access to employment opportunities.

D. How can reading for pleasure help to narrow the attainment gap?

D.1. Reading for pleasure helps to narrow the attainment gap by supporting positive verbal development trajectories. Research on trajectories in verbal development over the first 11 years of life¹ shows that being read to during the early years is associated with increased verbal development. Specifically, young children (age 3) who were not read to were more likely to experience declining verbal development by the age of 11, whereas those who were read to had upward trajectories. When reading for pleasure at age 11, children's verbal scores were higher than those who were not reading for pleasure.

Acknowledgments

This response has been prepared by the **Equalise** Learning theme with contributions from:

- Professor Yvonne Kelly, Professor of Lifecourse Epidemiology
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We would be pleased to speak further about our response. Please contact Yvonne Kelly (y.kelly@ucl.ac.uk).

¹ Zilanawala, Sacker & Kelly (2017) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2017.05.008>

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