

Family matters

The role of parents in children's educational attainment

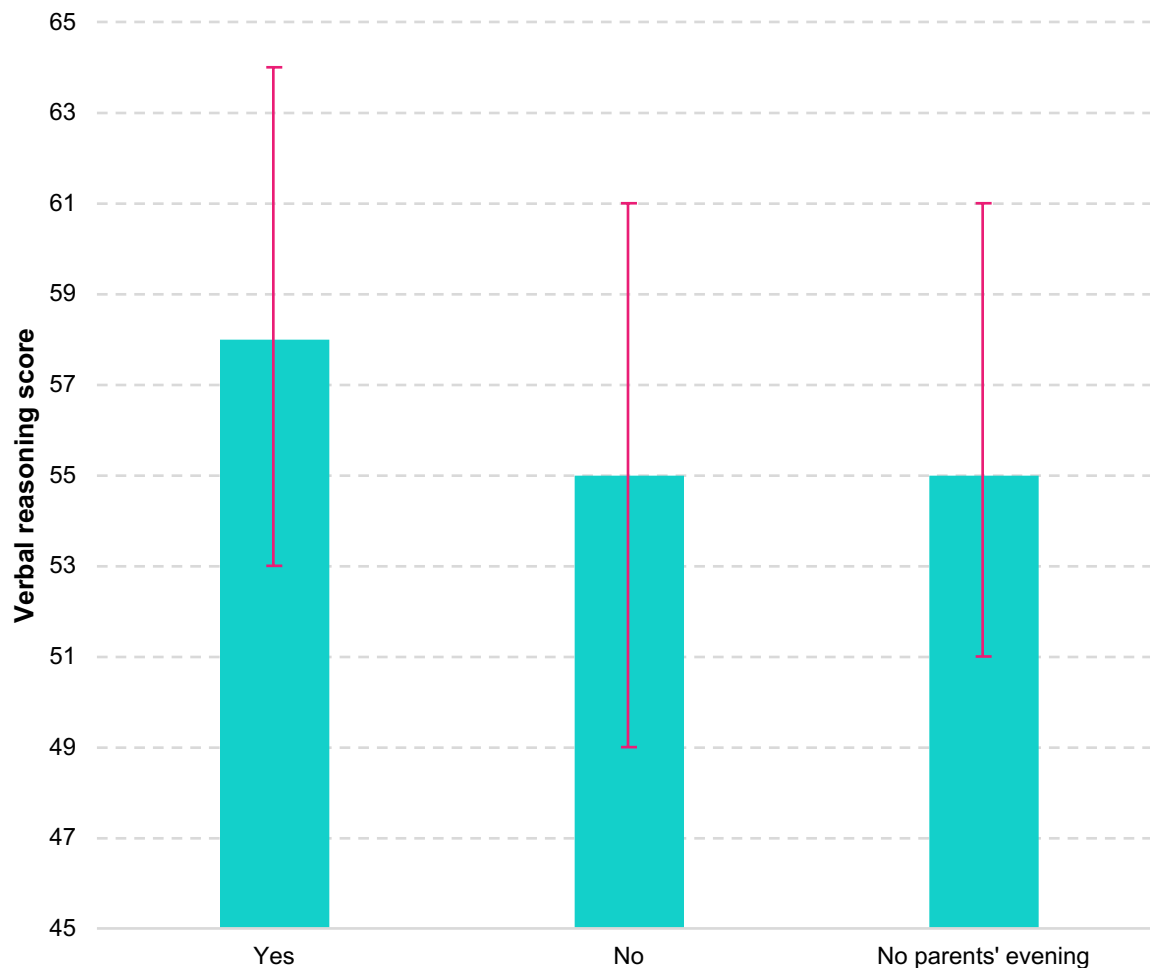
Commission on Inequality in Education | November 2016

- The impact of parents and the family environment on outcomes in education is often neglected in policy and research. By contrast, popular discussion of education might place too much emphasis on the role of parents compared to that of schools and teachers.
- Even when the role of parents and the family environment is in the scope of policy and research, there are challenging questions about disentangling the effect of family income and parents' qualifications from engagement per se; and how to support parents in being more engaged.
- It is all too easy either to end up criticising families who are already living in tough circumstances; or to advocate measures that involve the government reaching too far into family life.
- Our aim in this paper is to ask how important is parental engagement in education; identify its impact separate from that of family income or parents' qualifications; and consider how we can best overcome social inequalities in parental engagement. Our policy discussion pertains to how parents can best be supported to engage in children's education.
- This is the fourth research paper produced by the SMF's cross-party Commission on Inequality in Education; and will inform our final policy recommendations, due in the early part of 2017. The commission is chaired by Rt Hon Nick Clegg MP; and the other members are Rebecca Allen, Suella Fernandes MP, Sam Freedman and Stephen Kinnock MP.

- This paper is inspired by recent initiatives such as the [Parent Engagement Project](#), funded by the Education Endowment Foundation, and run by research teams from the University of Bristol and Harvard University. The project involved parents being sent text messages from their children's school with the aim of increasing parental engagement in learning. After a one year trial involving 36 secondary schools, the project found small positive impacts on maths and English, and a reduction in absenteeism.
- That project is emblematic of the higher focus on parental engagement that is seen in many high-performing schools or schools seeking to make significant improvements. Other techniques – albeit unproven through equivalent research evidence – include stronger parental engagement on attendance and timekeeping; and the use of parent contracts when children are admitted to a school.
- For the purposes of this paper, we use the latest wave of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), taken when children were 11. This allows us to identify the impact of parental engagement on test scores at age 11, as well as to control for characteristics such as parental income and qualifications. We are limited to observing the impact of the forms of parental engagement recorded in the survey.
- [Previous evidence](#) suggests that parental engagement can have the greatest effects when it occurs early. Therefore we also look at indicators of engagement at age 5, when the child has just started school. Our indicator of attainment is a standard verbal reasoning test conducted as part of the MCS at age 11. This is the best indicator of attainment available in the dataset.

Straight away we see that Age 11 verbal reasoning scores vary by indicators of parental engagement

Has anyone attended child's parents' evening (main parent's answer)? Medians, 25th and 75th percentiles shown.

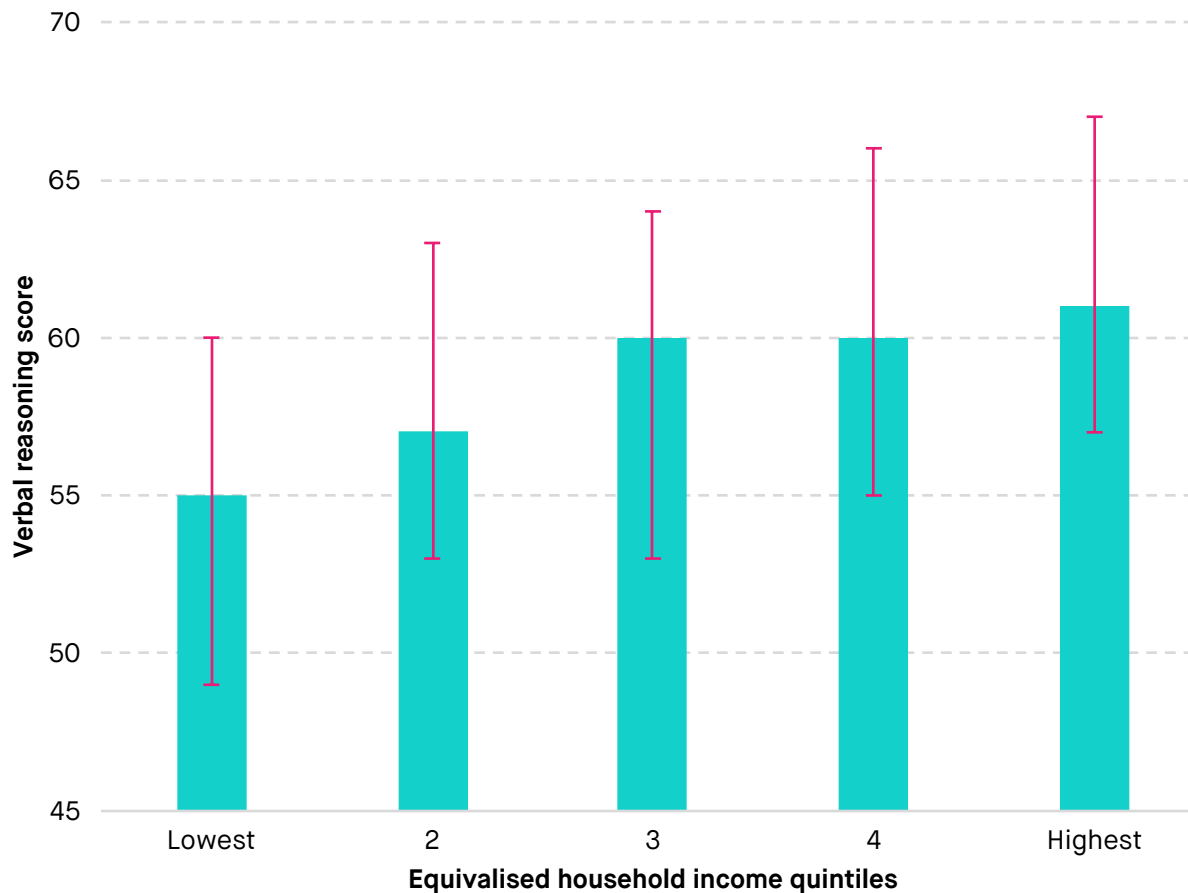


- For example, attending parents' evening is correlated with higher verbal reasoning score
- Median score for children with someone attending parents' evening is 3 points higher than for those without

But then Age 11 verbal reasoning scores also vary by parental income...

Verbal reasoning score at age 11 by equivalised household income quintile. Medians, 25th & 75th percentiles shown.

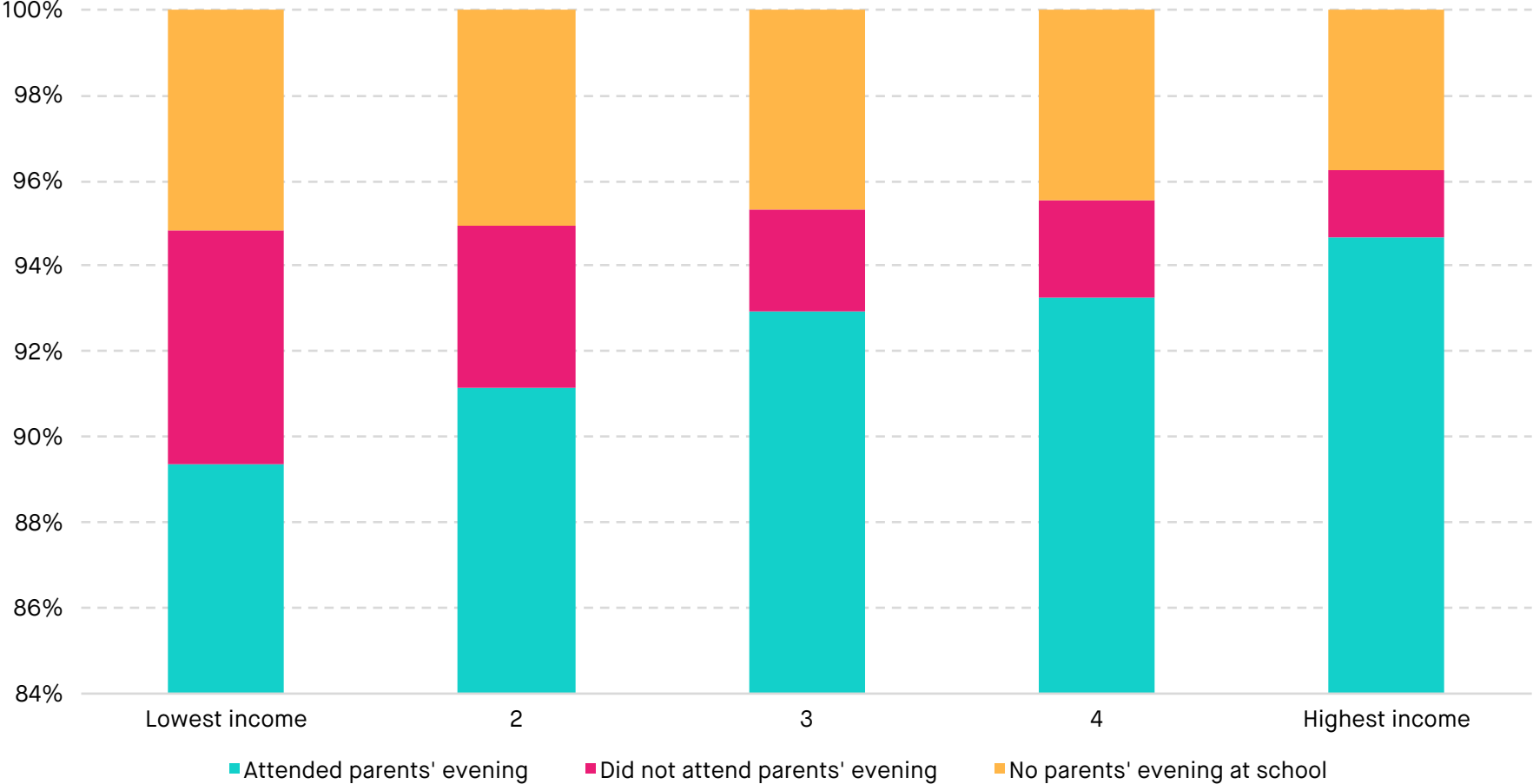
Verbal reasoning test score has a minimum of 20, maximum of 80, and a median of 58.



- The median test score for the highest income quintile is 6 points higher than the median score for the lowest income quintile

And higher earning parents are more likely to be engaged

Proportion of parents reporting parents' evening attendance, by equivalised income quintile



So, are test scores related to income or indicators of parental engagement?

- To get underneath this central issue, we constructed a regression model to analyse the factors most strongly related to verbal reasoning test scores at age 11
- We used several controls:
 - Parental income
 - Highest parental qualification (main parent – usually the mother)
 - Parental age
- We looked at indicators of parental engagement at both age 5 and age 11, including:
 - Child's assessment of parents' interest in their school work
 - Whether a parent has attended parents' evening
 - How often someone ensures a child has completed homework before doing other things (e.g. watching TV)
 - How often the child receives help with homework at home

- After controlling for income, parental education, and parental age, if a parent does not read to their child at age 5, this has a strong and negative effect on their age 11 test scores. On average, not reading to a child at age 5 **decreases their age 11 test score by 1.5 points**.
- However, reading to a child at age 5 does not have an impact on their progress between ages 5 and 11, over and above the disadvantage already apparent by age 5.
- This suggests that the negative impact of parents failing to read to children can be seen by age 5, and that the disadvantage neither worsens nor improves during their school years between ages 5 and 11. In other words, parental engagement is more important early on; and then teachers and schools are able to pick up the baton.
- Nevertheless whether the child reports reading for enjoyment outside school remains important. Children who never read for enjoyment have test scores that are on average **1.88 points lower at age 11**, and also make poorer progress between ages 5 and 11 (**1.53 points lower**). Furthermore, the more frequently a child reads, the better their age 11 test score.
- This suggests that instituting a habit of reading at an early age continues to drive better outcomes in education for several years; and underlines the importance of parents in helping to do that.

- We found that parents do have an important role in ensuring homework is completed. Children that had someone at home making sure their homework was completed before undertaking other activities (such as watching TV) had scores that were **1.93 points higher** than those that did not.
- They also made much better progress between ages 5 and 11, with an improvement of **1.73 points** compared to those that did not have someone ensuring homework was completed.
- We also looked at parental help with the child's writing at home. This **did not have a significant effect on their age 11 test score**, or on their progress between ages 5 and 11.
- Finally, we looked at parental help with homework. The results here are surprising but make sense on closer reflection. We find that parental help with homework is negatively associated with age 11 test scores: in other words, children whose parents help frequently with homework have lower test scores, and also make poorer progress between ages 5 and 11.
- This makes sense when we consider that it is likely that parents are providing more help if the child needs more help, and that this is an indicator of a child having difficulties with their school work. Children who are headed for higher test scores may not on the whole require parental help with homework.

Other indicators of parental engagement

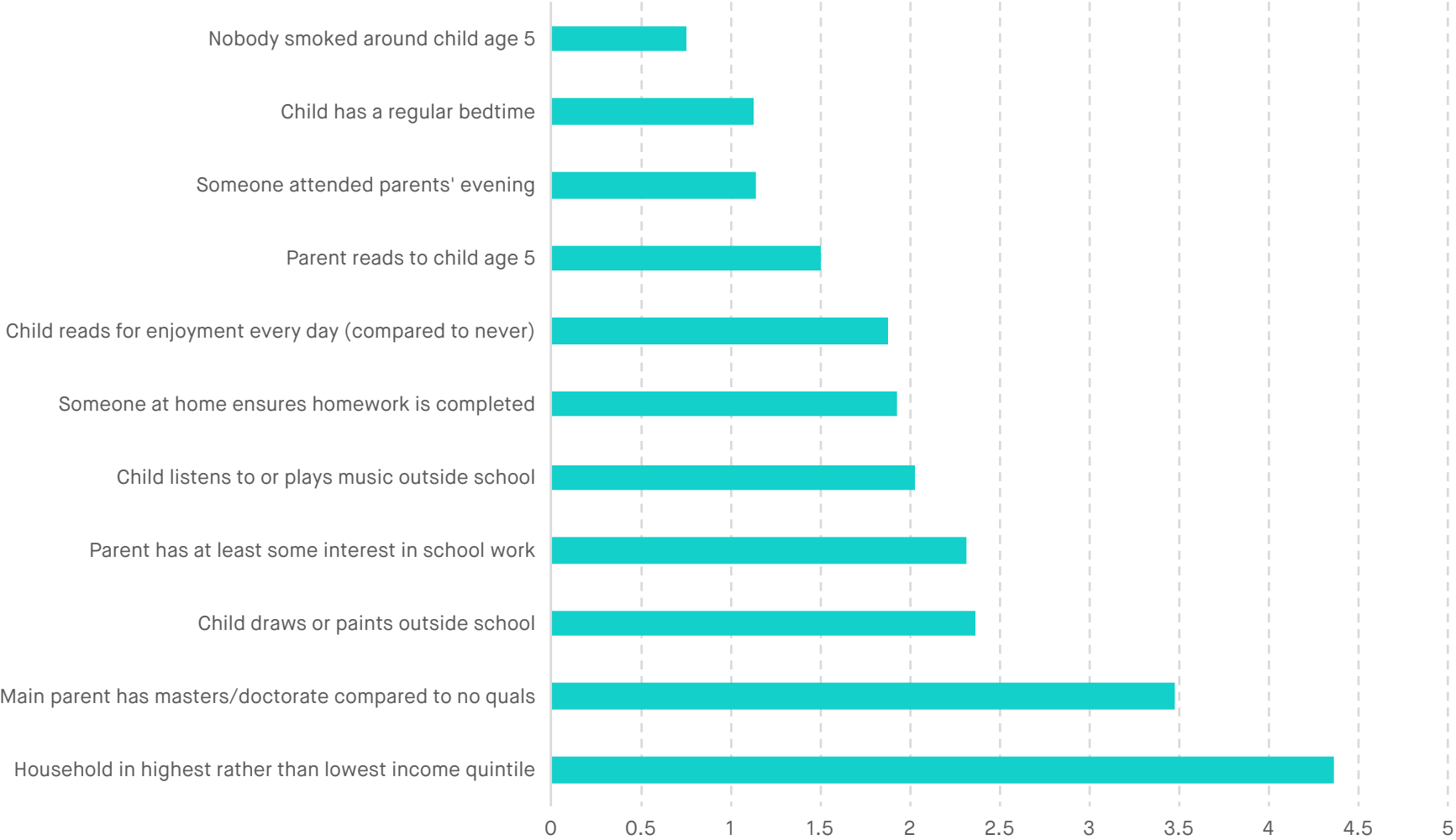
- We also looked at attendance at parents' evenings. Children who had someone attending their parents' evening had much higher test scores at age 11, with this being due to them making better progress between ages 5 and 11. Children with someone attending parents' evening made **1.26 points better** progress between ages 5 and 11 than those that did not.
- Children faced an even bigger disadvantage if their parent reported there being no parents' evening at their child's school, with their progress between ages 5 and 11 being **1.88 points lower** than those with someone attending a parents' evening. It is unclear exactly how to interpret this: it may be the school had no parents' evening, or it may be that the parent was simply unaware of it. We expect that the latter is more likely. Either way this is a significant gap in parental engagement; and one that has a clear impact on test scores.
- Finally, we looked at the child's assessment of how often their parents take an interest in their school work. Those reporting their parents never took an interest in their school work had an age 11 test score **2.32 points lower** than those whose parents took at least some interest. These children's progress between ages 5 and 11 was also **1.84 points lower**.

- Being able or allowed to undertake some recreational activities outside school is positively associated with age 11 test scores. Children who never listen to or play music outside school have age 11 test scores **2.03 points lower** than those who do, with progress being **1.02 points lower**. Children who never draw or paint outside school have age 11 test scores **2.37 points lower** than those who do, with progress being **1.76 points lower**.
- Having a regular bedtime in term time matters. Those who have a regular bedtime have a score **1.13 points higher** than those that do not, and have progress between ages 5 and 11 that is **0.74 points higher**.
- We also find small positive impacts where children aged 5 have no one in the home around them who smokes.

Returning to the impact of parental income and qualifications . . .

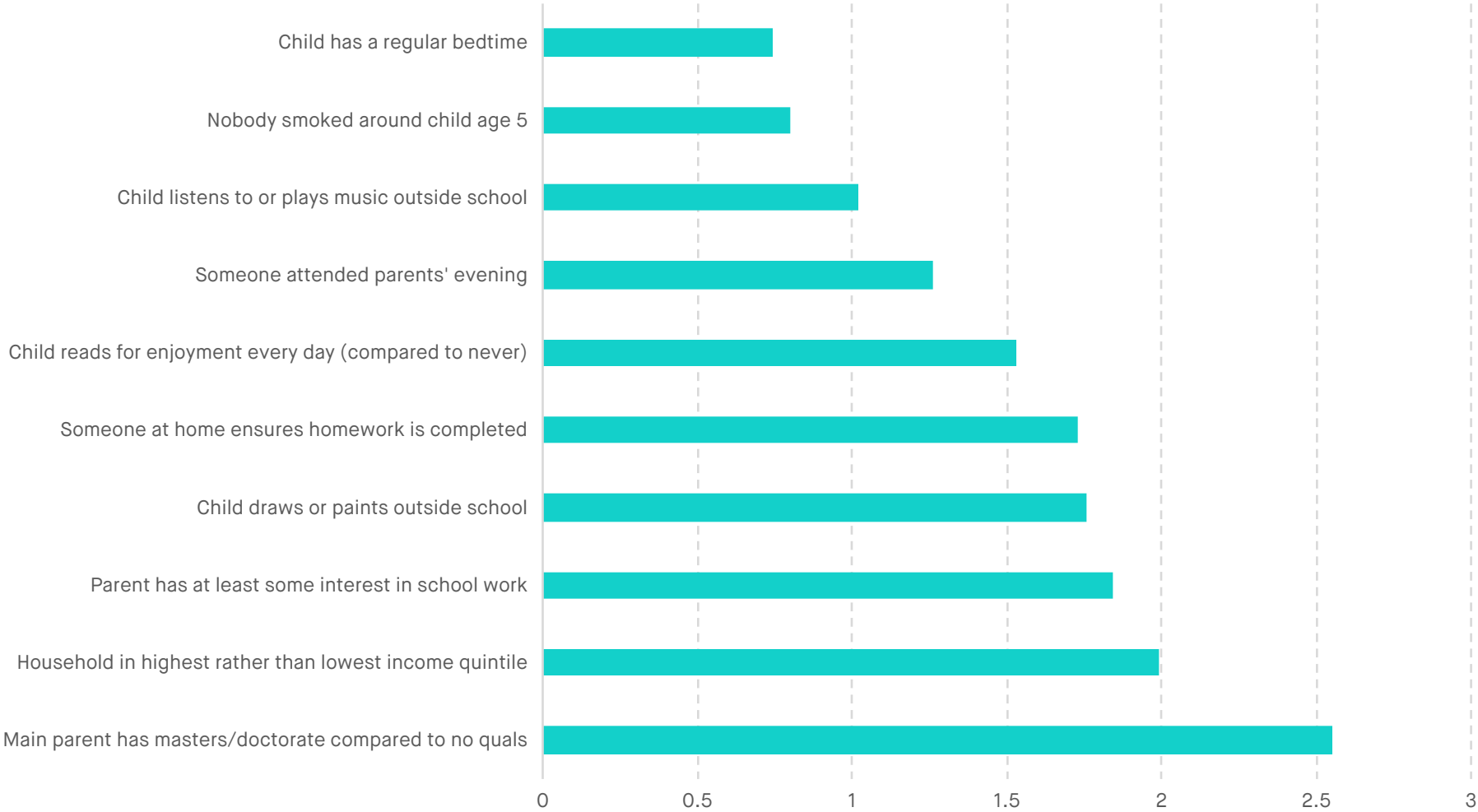
- While we find significant associations between test scores and indicators of parental engagement, it is worth remembering again that parental income and qualifications may be bigger factors.
- When indicators of parental engagement are left out of the regression model we built, a child from the highest income quintile on average has a test score 5.21 points higher than a child from the lowest income quintile.
- A child with a main parent (usually mother) with a Masters or Doctorate on average has a test score 4.43 points higher than a child with a main parent with no qualifications.
- Where a child is from a family with both a high income and a high level of qualifications, these differences added together are such that a child's score would be almost 10 points higher on average.
- So these are very big factors. The Commission will remain focused on how teachers and schools can close the gap between the attainment of children from different backgrounds; and this will still constitute the major part of our final report.
- Nevertheless parental engagement has a significant role to play. We can illustrate that role by comparing the size of the impact on test scores from various indicators of parental engagement; on the same scale as that of parental income and qualifications. None of the impacts are of the same size on their own, but they are large of themselves and together are larger than the impacts of parental income or qualifications. These impacts are illustrated on the following two slides.

Average improvement in age 11 test score



Key predictors of progress between ages 5 and 11

Average improvement in progress between age 5 and age 11



- Parental demographic characteristics such as income and education level matter a lot, and efforts to reduce inequality in attainment by focusing on parental engagement should not come at the expense of efforts to tackle other inequalities.
- Nevertheless, we demonstrate aspects of parental engagement that are associated with attainment, and well-designed policies in these areas could have the potential to improve children's educational prospects.
- If several areas of parental engagement were addressed at once then results could be powerful. Equally our results show that most indicators of parental engagement that appear to affect the progress of children between ages 5 and 11 also affect children's test scores at age 11 more broadly. This suggests that policies designed to help children during early years could also have beneficial effects for children during later ones.
- One important caveat is that our analysis only identifies associations between forms of parental engagement and test scores, albeit associations that stand up to closer scrutiny. It is also worth bearing in mind that a [major literature review](#), supported by the Nuffield Trust, was unable to find high quality studies that show a causal link between higher parental engagement and improved attainment. Though, as the Trust commented: "This does not mean that we should stop trying to increase parental involvement in education. Rather, it means that if we are going to invest in significant interventions, we also need to invest in high quality, rigorous research that will show to what extent they are effective in raising attainment and other outcomes."

- Bearing in mind that caveat that future interventions should be accompanied by robust evaluation, our analysis does indicate some areas where greater support for parental engagement could focus.
- **The first of these is support for parents in helping children to read.** We find that, on average, not reading to a child at age 5 decreases their age 11 test score by 1.5 points; and children who never read for enjoyment have test scores that are on average 1.88 points lower at age 11, and also make poorer progress between ages 5 and 11 (1.53 points lower).
- Schools are now highly focused on reading; but there may be benefits to them doing more to engage parents in early literacy. Some parents themselves will have poor literacy, which limits their ability to help their children's learning. Equally most parents will not have learned to read using modern techniques such as phonics. Schools could do more – as part of the extended school day – to support parents in becoming more confident in these techniques and using them with their children.
- [Estimates](#) by the Education Endowment Foundation suggest after school clubs cost, on average, £7 per session per person. A four week session for parents and their children to improve parental engagement on literacy would therefore cost £56 per parent and child pair. The [average size](#) of infant classes taught by one teacher is 27.4; and hence the cost is roughly £1500 per class, assuming 100% take up.
- In Budget 2016 Government pledged additional funding to secondary schools for extending the school day. A small amount of funding to primary schools from within this pledge would cover the costs of trialling after school classes on literacy for pupils and parents; then rolling these out would be subject to the results of evaluation.

- **A second area for further action is to consider how other educational institutions can help to support parents in their engagement with children's learning.** The Prime Minister recently announced that independent schools would be subject to a tougher standard in demonstrating that they provide 'public benefit' in order to maintain their charitable status. The Government Green Paper 'Schools that Work for Everyone' envisages that there will be new benchmarks for independent schools to meet; and, if they fail to do so, then the Government will legislate to make them compulsory.
- In drawing up these benchmarks, Government could require that independent schools themselves provide out-of-school activities to the children of parents living locally who are unable to pay for or provide those activities themselves. We find, for example, that children who listen to or play music, or draw or paint outside of school have higher test scores at age 11 and make more progress between ages 5 and 11. Independent schools may have the facilities and staff expertise to provide such activities more widely to other children.
- Equally the Government is looking at adding to the requirements that universities must meet as part of their access agreements to widen participation in higher education. There may be a case for universities now to involve parents more when they reach out to young people who are less likely to go to university. This would mean speaking to parents on school visits as well as pupils; and involving parents in campus visits and summer schools. While some universities already do this, better engagement of parents may lead on to more of them engaging in the secondary school attainment and future choices of their children.

- Finally, our analysis suggests that some parents do not know about the parents' evening in their children's school; and some parents do not attend even if they do know about it. Moreover not knowing about the parents' evening or failing to attend is associated with lower test scores at age 11. Behind these findings, there are likely to **be issues around the level and nature of engagement between schools and parents.**
- The [latest figures](#) from the Parent View survey run by Ofsted suggest that on the whole these issues relate to a small minority of parents. For example, only 16% of parents 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with the statement 'I receive valuable information from the school about my child's progress'. That said the response rate to the survey is extremely low. Parents are told about the survey and encouraged to fill it in when their children's school is being inspected by Ofsted. They can also choose to fill it in at any time of year via the Parent View website. Despite this, the survey was completed by only 3.1% of parents in state schools during the 2015/16 academic year. This is a small fall from the 3.7% response rate in the previous year.
- Such a narrow range of responses cannot give confidence that parents are well enough engaged by schools; or given the opportunity to provide feedback on how schools are performing in engaging them. In fact it is likely that the parents who are least well engaged by their children's school are the least likely to fill out the survey; and that the schools that are ineffective in engaging parents are also ineffective in telling them about the survey. Ofsted should now have a fresh think about how it ensures that parents' views are canvassed and taken into account when judging school performance.

1. Government should fund schools to increase the support for parents in helping children to read by running after school literacy classes for parents and pupils together. This is a low cost intervention that can be trialled within the funding already announced by Government in Budget 2016 to support schools in providing after school activities.
2. Government should require that independent schools, as part of the new benchmarks they will have to meet to retain their charitable status, provide out-of-school activities to the children of parents living locally who are unable to pay for or provide those activities themselves.
3. Government should encourage through the guidance to universities on the content of their access agreements that they focus more on how to engage parents in outreach activity for young people who are currently less likely to go into higher education.
4. Ofsted should explore possible methods by which it could more effectively obtain the feedback of parents on how well schools are performing, including how those schools are doing in engaging parents in their children's learning.