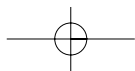
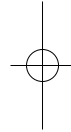
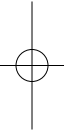




Part Two: Unequal chances



2.1

Introduction

Children in the UK have very different chances in life according to their different social and economic circumstances. This part of our report investigates the extent of these differences, tries to unravel some of the causal relationships at work, and considers the impact of government policy. Sections 2.2 to 2.5 consider four successive stages in children's development: the start of life; infancy and the early years; the period of compulsory schooling; and transitions post-16 to further and higher education, training and employment. Section 2.6 then considers poverty and the inequalities in the wider society that affect life chances.

Throughout a child's development their life chances are affected both by their previous experiences and by current factors such as their family circumstances. To help structure our thinking about these processes we identify four main sets of influences affecting children across the whole of their life course: first, parental and family factors; second, neighbourhood effects and public services; third, features of the social environment such as socio-economic inequalities; and fourth, wider public policy interventions.

At each stage in the life course it is possible to identify a number of key developmental issues that have particularly important effects on life chances. For example, at the very start of life a child's health is critical for it to have a good chance of achieving cognitive and emotional development in its early years, which is in turn critical for good social behaviour and attainment later on at school. In each case these outcomes are affected both by what has gone before and by the wider influences on the child. We can thus build up a life chances framework, illustrated

Narrowing the Gap

in Figure 1 (right), that brings these different sets of influences together and indicates likely causal relationships with arrows.

Many of the processes by which some children have better and others have worse life chances can be readily identified, at least in a general way. For example, it is easy to see how more affluent parents will be able to bring their resources to bear to the benefit of their children. They can afford to live in better quality accommodation in safer, more prosperous areas, with better public services, transport links and amenities. Lower income families will be obliged to live where they can afford to, which may mean lower standards of housing, safety, transport or education.

But if the general nature of the relationship between such family characteristics and children's outcomes is widely known, it is much more difficult to understand exactly how things work in detail. There is still much to discover about the relative effects of specific factors, such as parents' income or education, and about the precise way that specific problems act to curtail opportunities.¹ Developing such an understanding is critical if we are to choose the right policy interventions.

The aim of this part of our report is therefore to identify the factors which influence children's development and to understand as best we can the nature of the processes – biological, social, and psychological as well as economic – by which inequalities are generated, compounded and passed on over time, from generation to generation, and from childhood to adulthood. We seek to explain *why it is* that the life-courses of different children appear to be set to a high degree by the time they are born, and to understand *why* at every stage pre-existing advantages and disadvantages tend to accumulate still further.

Thus, in section 2.2 we focus on the period between conception and birth and examine the factors affecting foetal development during pregnancy. In section 2.3, we examine the factors affecting development after birth, both in the home environment and outside the home, focusing in particular upon pre-school care and education. From the age of five, the most important source of stimulus outside the home becomes the school environment, which is the focus of section 2.4, while section 2.5 addresses children's outcomes at the end of compulsory education.

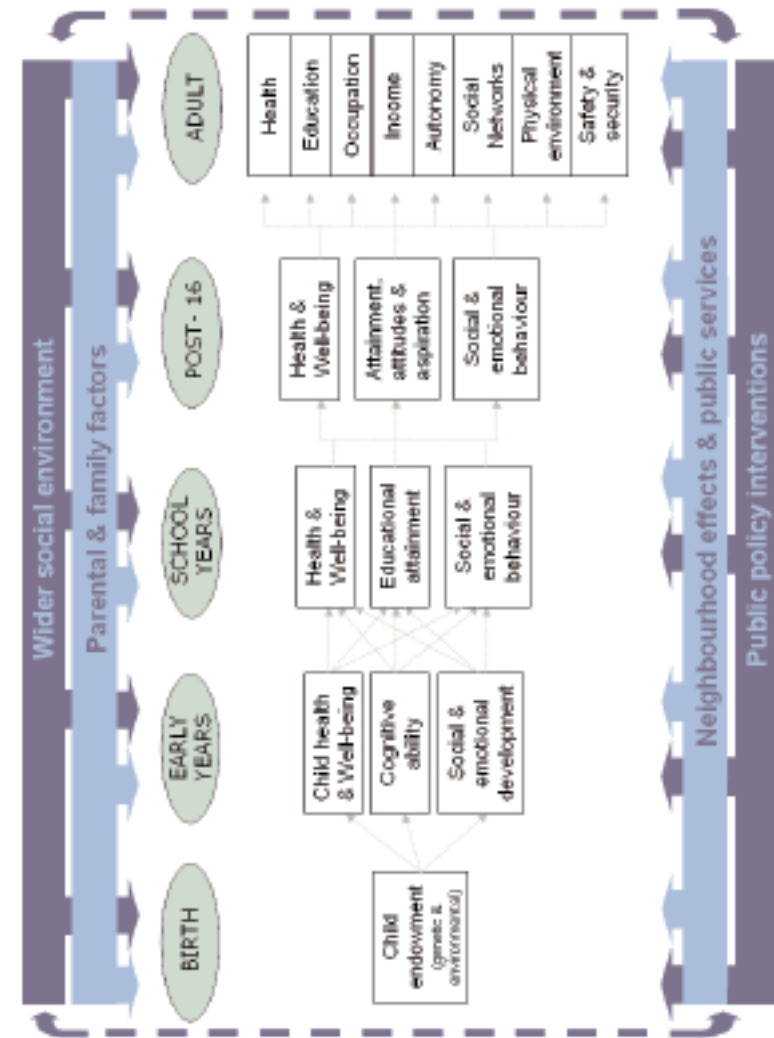


Figure 1
The life chances framework

For each phase of development we thus set out the key issues from a life chances perspective, examine parental and family influences on these, and then neighbourhood and policy effects. We then try to draw out the policy implications that will inform our recommendations in Part Three. We also draw upon the findings of some of the original qualitative research conducted for the Commission to illustrate the analysis. Where appropriate, we highlight what can be learned from people with direct experience of poverty about the way that poverty impacts upon children's development and also compare the experiences and outlooks of families on low incomes with those not living in poverty.

Finally, having charted the journey from infancy to childhood and into adulthood, in section 2.6 we turn to the question of how people's life chances are affected by wider inequalities, including inequalities of income, wealth and in the wider social environment, such as one's relative position in the social hierarchy.

A note of caution

It is important to sound a note of caution at this stage. There are a number of reasons why we do not have as clear an understanding of the causes of good and bad life chances, and of the effectiveness of specific policy interventions, as we would like. The first relates to the political context of the years from 1979 to 1997. On the one hand, at this time there was a lack of funding for research into childhood poverty and disadvantage, reflecting the low priority given to these issues by the governments of the day. On the other hand, social policy researchers found it necessary to devote their efforts to the more basic task of proving, in the face of ministerial reticence, the existence of problems such as social class gaps in health and education outcomes rather than researching the possible solutions.²

A second difficulty, and one which still applies in the currently more benign political climate, is the methodological problem of establishing causal relations rather than simply correlations in a very complex environment. Sophisticated techniques are needed to identify and separate the relative effects of different influences and to control for unobservable factors.³ In many cases, the effects of related factors may be impossible to disentangle, and the long-term effects of early childhood are

difficult to establish, not least because of the difficulties of investigating sensitive areas such as the nature of family life and family relationships.⁵ Part of the difficulty for researchers is that some outcomes are due to internal causes rather than external or environmental factors. For example, an outcome of interest such as child cognitive development may be correlated with two observable factors (such as parental income and parental education) which may both in turn be related to a third, internal factor, which is unobservable to the researcher.

As well as the complexity and sensitivity of the processes by which experiences in childhood affect outcomes in later life, an additional problem is the length of time it takes for effects to appear. In some cases, for example, we might specifically be interested in the effect of childhood interventions on adult outcomes such as employment rates. There is a necessary trade-off to be made therefore between charting these developments over time and being able to show the effects of contemporary policy decisions. In many cases this means that there is a lack of definitive evidence about the effectiveness of policy interventions, especially those that have been made since 1997. It is therefore usually necessary to act on the basis of the balance of probability, applying the available evidence within a reasonable theoretical framework. If we wait for certainty before taking action we may have to wait forever.