

- [Home](#)
  - > [News](#)
    - > [Education](#)
      - > [Education News](#)

# The key to your child doing well at school? Conversation in the home

By **Richard Garner, Education Editor**

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Children from the poorest homes may do worse at school because their parents do not talk to them enough, according to research published today.

A study for the inquiry into primary education led by the Cambridge-based academic Professor Robin Alexander reveals that the average child from a well-off home will have heard 44 million "utterances" by the time they reach the age of four. By contrast, those from the least well-off backgrounds will only have heard 12 million words.

In one of four papers published today, Usha Goswami and Peter Bryant say this works out at 487 utterances per hour in the better-off home but only 178 in the worst off.

The authors stress the significance of hearing language and engaging in pretend play in the classroom as well as direct teaching for motivating children and helping them learn.

In a second paper, Christine Howe and Neil Mercer cite research from the United States which concludes that "the amount and quality of the dialogue children experience at home in the pre-school years correlated strongly with their eventual academic attainment".

They stress that they can find no "direct link" between vocabulary at home and academic performance but argue: "It may be that children's social background influences the likelihood that they will spontaneously engage in reasoned discussion resembling exploratory talk in primary school".

This, they continue, could have an impact on the benefits they gain from being taught in the classroom.

The research also highlights the importance of teachers adopting a conversational style with their pupils to get the best responses out of them, rather than relying on direct teaching in front of the whole class.

Today's research comes just 24 hours after a report from the Sutton Trust education charity revealed that there was less social mobility in the UK than anywhere else in the advanced world.

It showed that children from the poorest homes who did well in tests for three-year-olds were likely to be overtaken at school by the time they were seven by children from more affluent homes who did badly in the same tests.

Today's report says parents with "high aspirations and expectations" often get more out of public services such as education. Those from ethnic minority groups with English as a second language – about 12.5 per cent of all pupils – fail to make progress at school, it adds.

A third paper warns that children with special needs are three times more likely to be excluded from school than other pupils, a move which only exacerbates their problems.