



Centre for Market and Public  
Organisation



# Explaining the gap in educational attainment between children from rich and poor backgrounds

**Report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

**Edited by**

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**Contributors from IFS, CMPO and University of Oxford**

# Background and Motivation

- Children growing up in poor families end up with lower educational attainment than children growing up in rich families
- Strong contributor to patterns of social mobility
  - Low income → poor attainment → low income
- Gaps start very early in life, but tend to widen throughout school
- Increasing focus on how development of **non-cognitive skills and traits** might improve outcomes for children from poor backgrounds, particularly as they get older and IQ becomes less malleable

# What we do

- Chart how socio-economic background affects educational attainment across childhood
- Investigate contribution of parent and child behaviours, attitudes to education and aspirations to this:
  - **Early years:** home learning environments, parenting styles, health-related behaviours
  - **Primary school:** lasting influence of early years, maternal aspirations, child's own ability beliefs
  - **Teenage years:** young person's own attitudes and behaviours; lasting influence of parents; material resources in the home
  - **Intergenerational factors:** parents' and grandparents' attitudes; transmission of ability
- Assess implications for policy

# Preview of findings

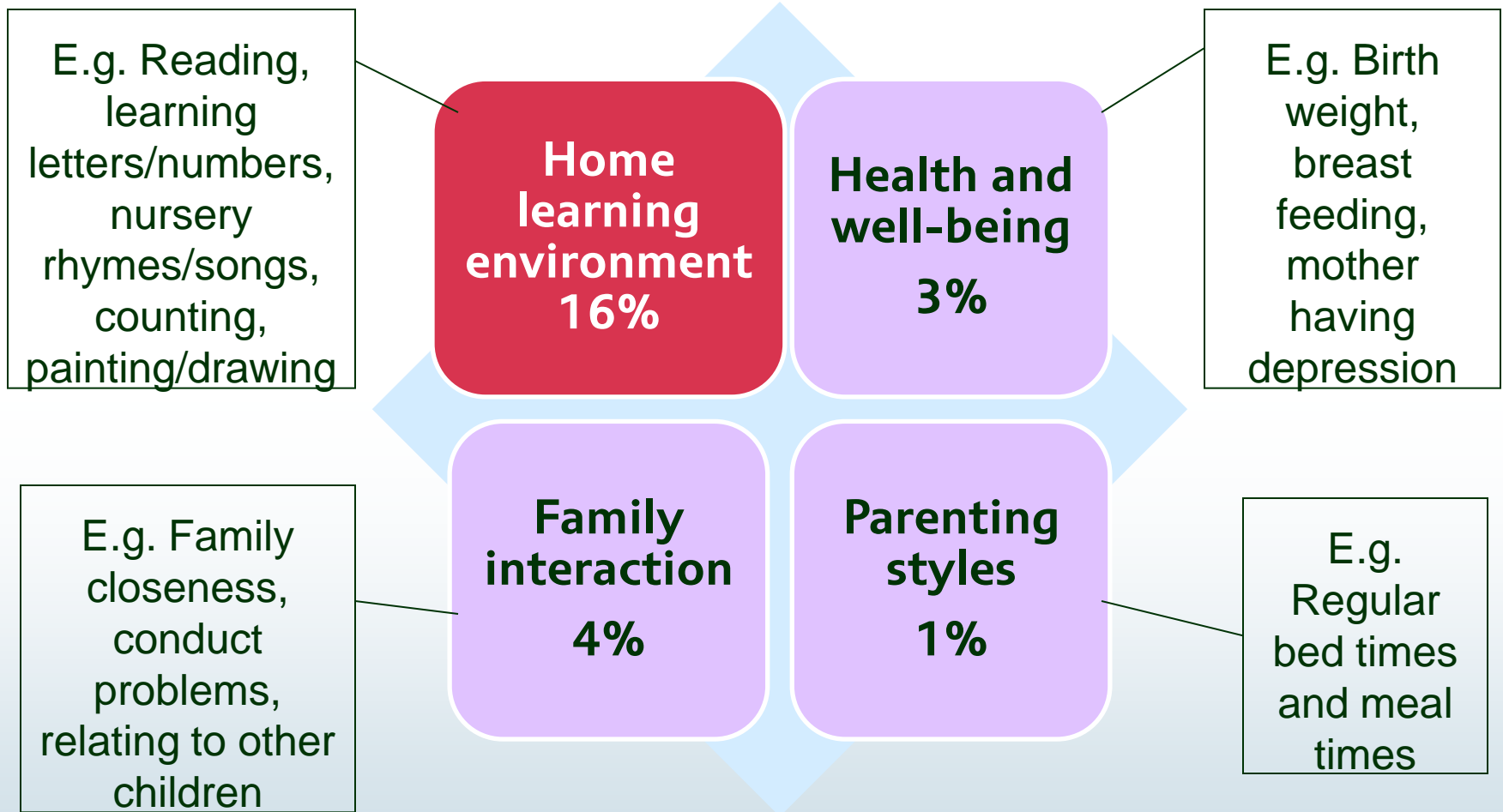
- Gap between rich and poor children already large at age 3
  - Continues to widen until age 14
- Factors which seem to play important part in this:
  - Early home learning environment
  - Expectations/ aspirations for education
  - Beliefs in own actions making a difference
  - Behaviour (conduct disorder, hyperactivity, anti-social behaviours etc)
  - Material factors (less heavily measured)
- Potentially important role for policy *if* it can be shown that:
  - More positive attitudes and behaviours *cause* higher attainment *AND*
  - Attitudes and behaviours can be influenced cost effectively

# **Birth to age 5**

**Lorraine Dearden and Luke Sibieta (IFS)**  
**Kathy Sylva (University of Oxford)**

# Attainment gap among 3 year olds

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## Discussion

**How does this fit with your experience?**

**How successful is the work that is already being done in this area?**

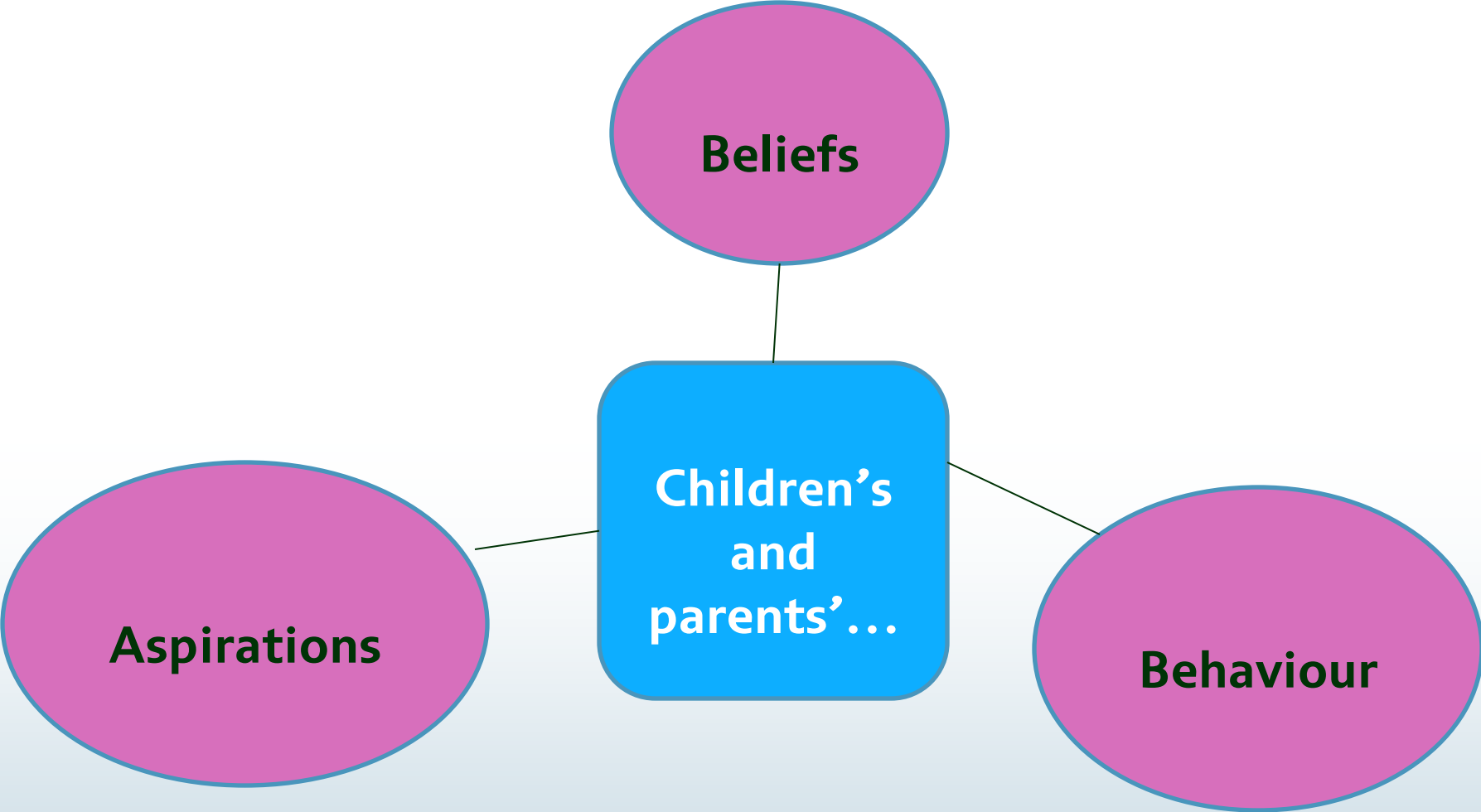
**What are the barriers to more effective action?**

**What else would you like to be able to do or see others do?**

# Primary school years

**Paul Gregg and Elizabeth Washbrook  
(CMPO)**

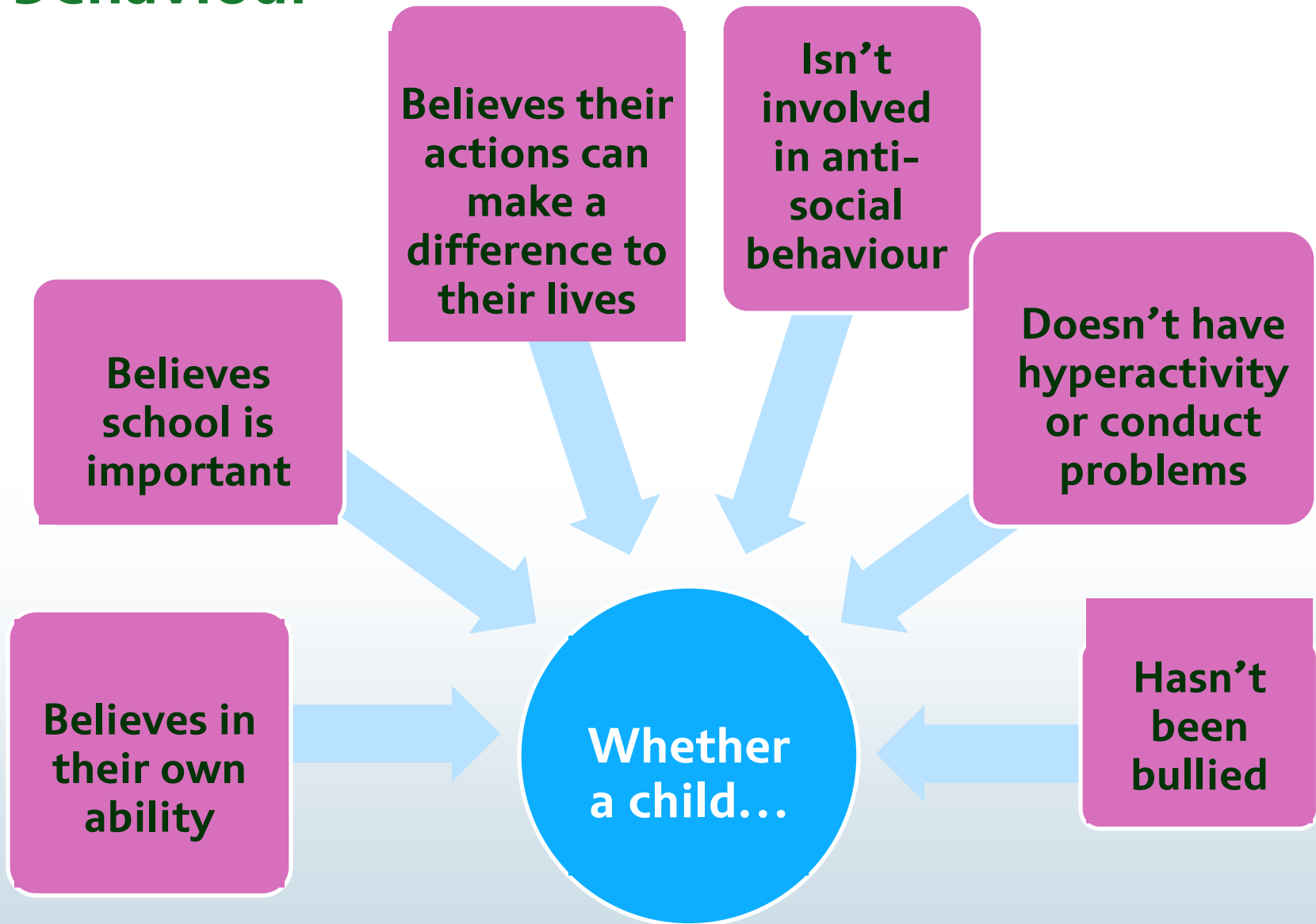
# Late childhood and early teens



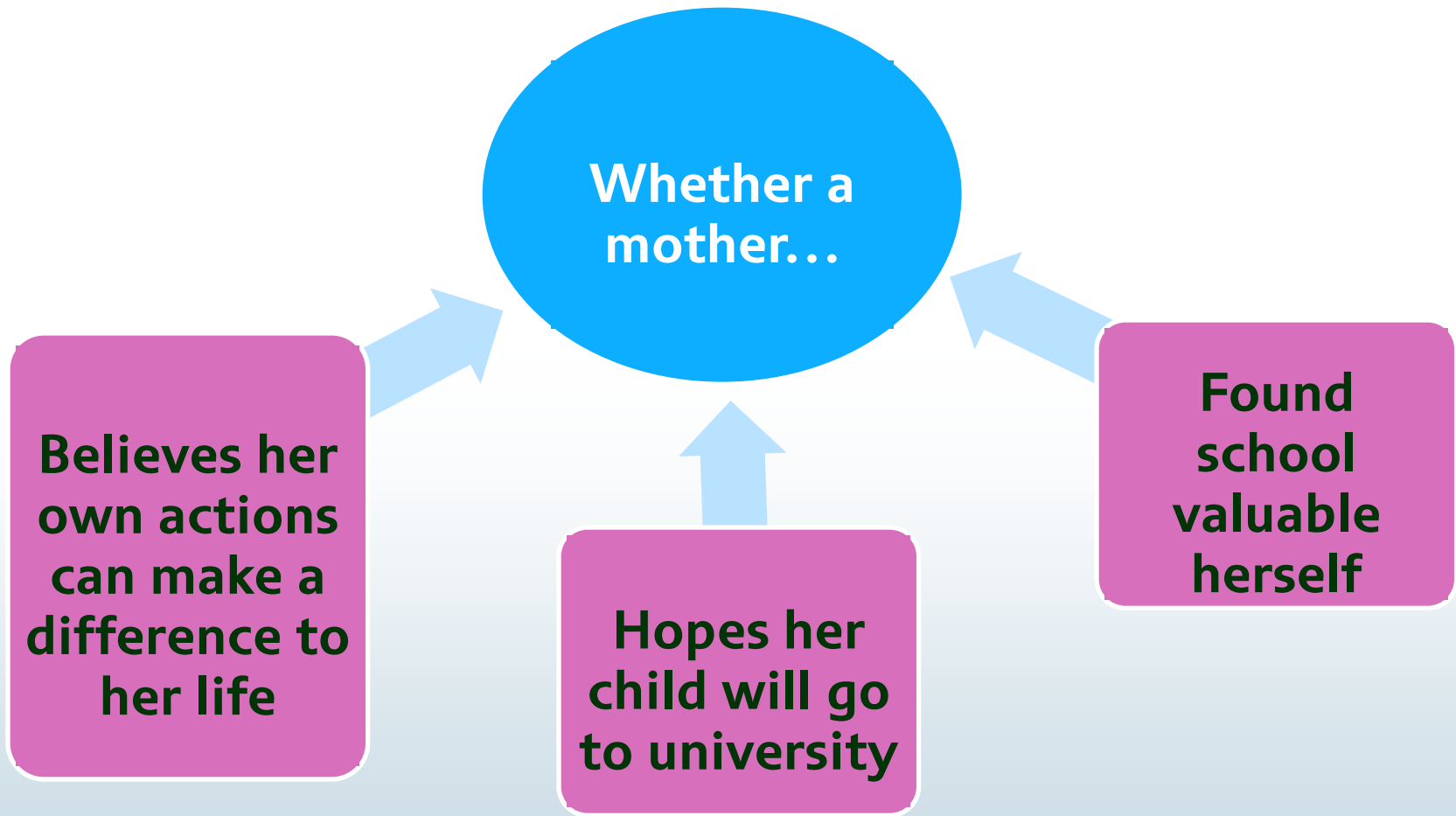
## Seven to eleven year olds

- **Gap between rich and poor widens especially fast in the primary school years**
- **Attitudes + behaviours of mother and child = c. 40% of total gap**
  - **And about 1/3 gap in progress between 7 and 11**
- **Interesting to note the things that aren't there**
  - **E.g. Mothers doing educational activities with children**
  - **By age 9 doesn't vary much by background**

# Primary aged children's attitudes and behaviour



# Primary mothers' beliefs and aspirations



## Discussion

**How does this fit with your experience?**

**How successful is the work that is currently being done in this area?**

**What are the barriers to more effective action?**

**What else would you like to be able to do or see others do?**

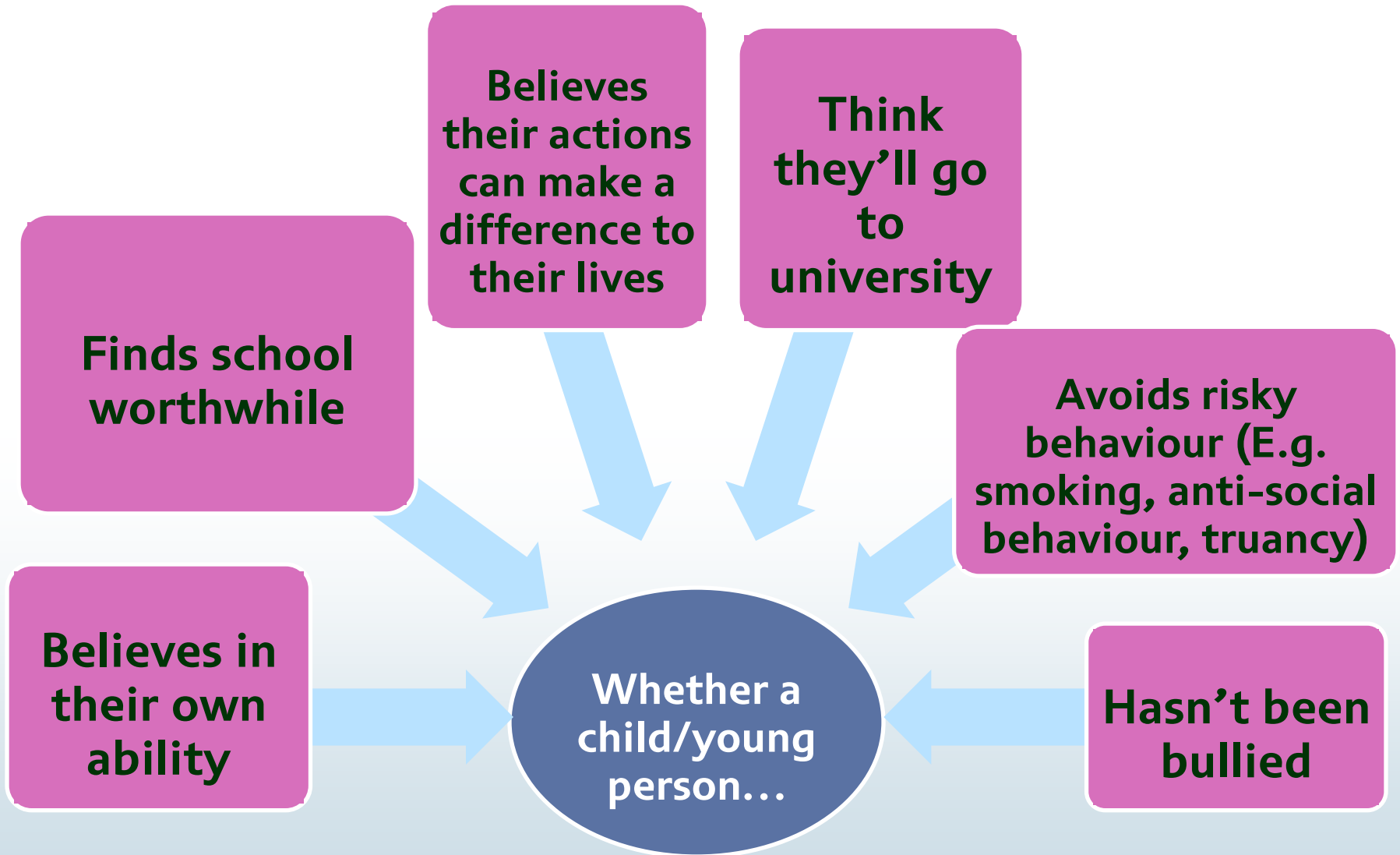
# Secondary school years

Haroon Chowdry, Claire Crawford and Alissa Goodman (IFS)

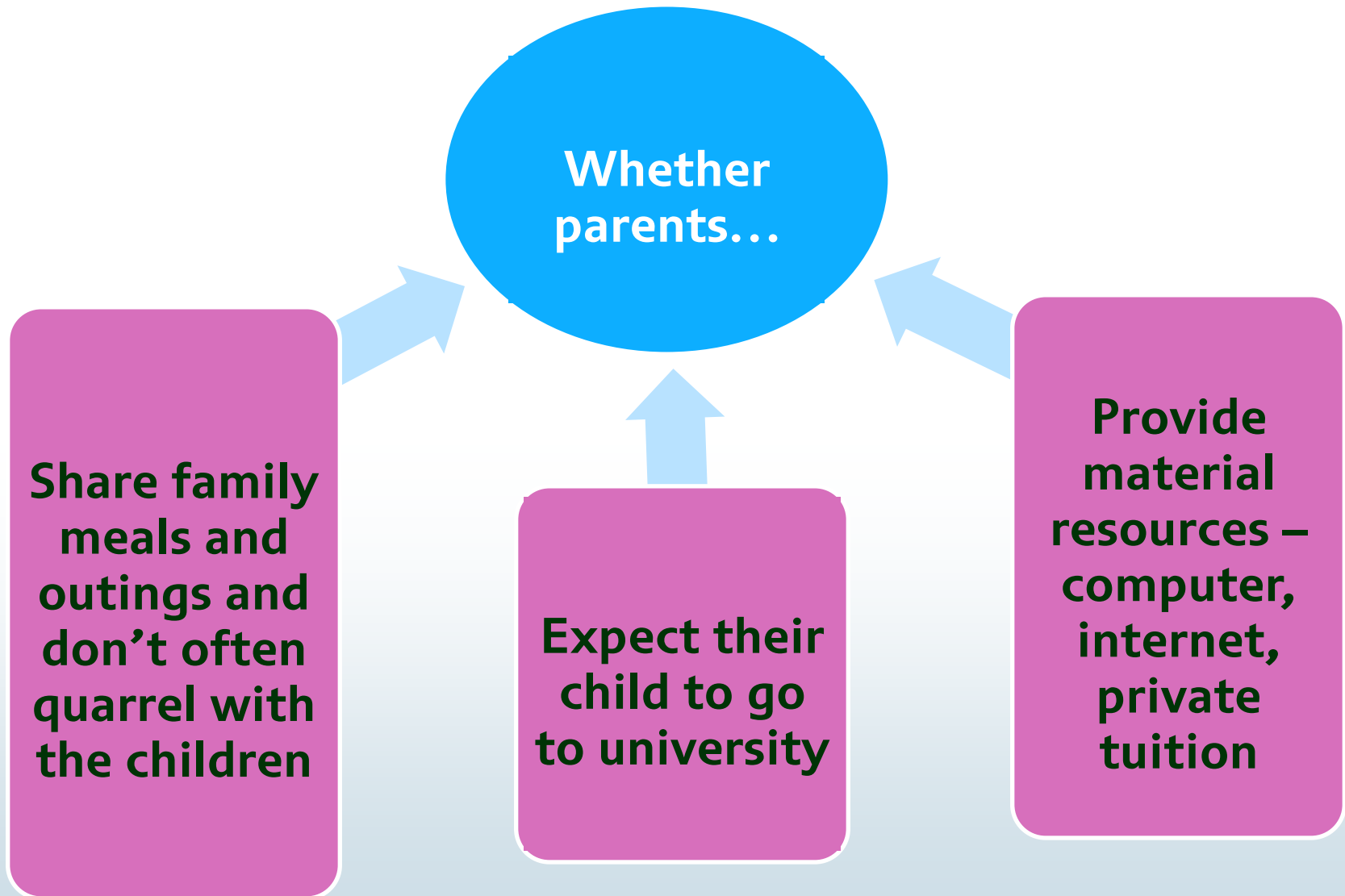
## Secondary school years

- **Attainment gap very big by 11**
- **Decisions and investments earlier in life = main drivers of teenagers' attainment**
- **But rich-poor gap does widen a bit more in secondary school**
- **Parents' and children's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour = 23% of the gap**
  - **And most of the increase**

# Young people's attitudes and behaviour



# Parents' expectations and behaviour



# Self belief and aspiring to university

- **Believing in your own abilities**
  - **Poorer young people have lower belief**
  - **But compared to test scores don't underestimate themselves**
- **Aspiring to higher education**
  - **Poorer young people have lower aspirations**
  - **But aspirations high across the board**
  - **Far more want to go to university than do so**

## A big drop around 14...

- Drop in HE expectations is part of a wider picture
- Decline in lots of attitudes and behaviours for all soc-ec groups between 14 and 16
  - But greater decline for poorer young people
- One big exception = anti-social behaviour
  - Falls between 14 – 16
  - Especially among poorer young people

## Discussion

**How does this fit with your experience?**

**How successful is the work that is currently being done in this area?**

**What are the barriers to more effective action?**

**What else would you like to be able to do or see others do?**

# Policy Challenges

- Research does not lead directly to policy solutions
- Provides a sense of:
  - Where to look for the answers
  - Areas to focus on for each age group
- Key questions for each area
  - Is it changeable?
  - If it changed for low income families, would attainment go up?

# Current policy

- Policy exists in all of the areas highlighted, e.g.
  - Parenting and early childhood experiences
  - Children’s attitudes and behaviours
  - Raising attainment among specific groups
- But mixed evidence of impact on attainment
  - Best for intensive, high need programmes
  - Weaker for large numbers of low income families

## Final discussion

- **Out of all the areas we have discussed**
  - **Which is most important for us to focus on in future work?**
  - **Which are already well understood and covered by policy?**
  - **Which are newer/less well understood/addressed by current policy?**
- **Are there are issues that we should be considering more in order to reduce the attainment gap between richer and poorer children?**

**END**