

## Parenting style influences child development and social mobility

Pregnancy and infancy are now recognised as crucial periods for child development, but parental influences extend well beyond the early months of a child's life. A growing body of research suggests that good parenting skills and a supportive home learning environment are positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing. Hence interventions to improve the quality of home and family life can increase social mobility.

### Key findings

- Before even starting school, differences are found in children's cognitive and behavioural development according to parents' income group. Children from higher income groups have higher cognitive assessments and fewer behavioural problems. An important part of these differences can be accounted for by 'what parents do' in terms of educational activities and parenting style.
  - A supportive home learning environment is positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing and influences social mobility.
  - Changes in parenting behaviours could help close the inequality gap in terms of child development. For example, if, as one study indicates, half or all of the five-year-old children who were read to less than daily were instead read to on a daily basis there would be corresponding ten per cent and 20 per cent reductions in the proportion of five-year-olds with socio-emotional difficulties.
- There are no significant detrimental effects on a child's social or emotional development if their mothers work during their early years. The ideal scenario for children, both boys and girls, is where both parents live in the home and both are in paid employment.
  - Parenting is an important mediator in redressing the effects of poverty and disadvantage, but parenting quality is not a primary cause of poverty in the UK nor will better parenting skills remove the disadvantages of poverty. Parenting skills and poverty both have important but independent effects on children's outcomes.
  - Good quality relationships between parents, and between parents and their children can make a significant difference to young people's satisfaction with their family situation but no-one can yet assert with certainty what actually works in terms of changing behaviours.
  - Early mothers typically come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Women from higher socio-economic groups who have taken up educational and career opportunities tend to delay having children (if they have children at all). Therefore, a child born to a mother who was young when she first became a parent has already inherited a slightly disadvantaged start in life.
  - Fathers' involvement is associated with a range of positive outcomes for children including educational and emotional attainment, and protects against later mental health problems.
  - There is room for developing policy aimed at closing the inequality gap in child development, and to do this programmes need to be more effective in improving developmental outcomes in disadvantaged children compared with their advantaged peers.

## Parenting style makes a difference

*In light of the strong association between parents' household income and favourable parenting practices... parenting in early childhood contributes to the intergenerational persistence in incomes found in many studies*

Differences according to parents' income group in children's cognitive and behavioural development emerge by the child's third birthday, according to a 2008 study based on data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)<sup>1</sup>. Children from higher income groups were found to have higher cognitive assessments and fewer behavioural problems. An important part of these differences, argues researcher Professor John Ermisch, can be accounted for by 'what parents do' in terms of educational activities and parenting style.

Researchers measured 'parenting style' in terms of answers to questions including: are there lots of rules in the family and are rules strictly enforced; does the child have meals and go to bed at regular times; how many hours a day does the child watch TV or DVDs; and how important do you think it is for the family to eat together? The study also considered educational activities including questions on how often someone at home reads to the child, and whether or not anyone takes the child to the library.

Results show that parenting makes an important contribution to differences by income group. "As we know that early cognitive development is strongly associated with the child's educational and economic achievements as an adult, better parenting in early childhood, in terms of educational activities and a more structured parenting style, contributes to the child's lifetime success," Professor Ermisch points out.

## Home environment plays a role in learning

*The role of home learning, family routines and psychosocial environmental factors are potentially important in closing income gaps in early child development*

Among an array of other environmental factors, recent studies have shown that parenting styles and activities

and the parent-child relationship influence early child development. Now, new research by the International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health, based on data from the MCS, confirms that a supportive home learning environment is positively associated to children's early achievements and wellbeing<sup>2</sup>.

For children at ages three and five, researchers examined data on socio-emotional difficulties (eg, conduct problems), cognitive abilities and family income as well as a range of indicators exploring the home environment including learning at home, routines and psychosocial environmental factors.

Based on these indicators, findings show that the highest income families are most likely to have favourable home learning, family routines and psychosocial environments compared with lower income families. Children in the highest income group were less likely to have socio-emotional difficulties compared with those in the lowest income group at three and five years (2.4 per cent vs 16.4 per cent and 2.0 per cent vs 15.9 per cent, respectively) and had higher mean scores at ages three and five on 'school readiness'; and greater verbal, spatial and non-verbal abilities. At ages three and five years, children from the lowest income families were approximately seven and eight times, respectively, more likely to have socio-emotional difficulties compared with children from the highest income families.

Children from poor households, the study shows, are less likely to benefit from home learning activities like numbers/ counting, learning songs, poems and rhymes, drawing and painting as well as being read to than their peers in wealthier homes. In simple terms, this study suggests that changes in parenting behaviours could help close the inequality gap in terms of child development. If, for example, half or all of the five-year-old children who were read to less than daily were instead read to on a daily basis there would be corresponding ten per cent and 20 per cent reductions in the proportion of five-year-olds with socio-emotional difficulties.

"There is room for developing policy aimed at closing the inequality gap in child development, and to do this programmes need to be more effective in improving developmental outcomes in disadvantaged children compared with their advantaged peers," says researcher Professor Yvonne Kelly.

<sup>1</sup> Ermisch, J. (2008) Origins of social immobility and inequality: parenting and early child development. *National Institute Economic Review*, 2 05: 62 – 71

<sup>2</sup> Kelly, Y., Sacker, A., Del Bono, E., Francesconi, M. and Marmot, M. (2011) What role for the home learning environment and parenting in reducing the socio-economic gradient in child development? Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study, *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, vol. 96: 832-837

## Working parents prove ideal scenario

*There is no evidence for a longer-term detrimental influence on child behaviour of mothers working during the child's first year of life*

New research conducted at the ESRC-funded International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health finds no significant detrimental effects on a child's social or emotional development if their mothers work during their early years<sup>3</sup>. The ideal scenario for children, both boys and girls, was shown to be where both parents lived in the home and both were in paid employment.

For children living with two parents, the impact of the working life of the mother may partly depend on the father's own working arrangements. However using data from the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), the researchers discovered that the relationship between behavioural difficulties and employment of the mother was stronger for girls than for boys and that this was not explained by household income, level of mother's education or depression in the mother.

While boys in households where the mother was the breadwinner displayed more difficulties at age five than boys living with two working parents, the same was not true for girls. Girls in traditional households where the father was the breadwinner were more likely to have difficulties at age five than girls living in dual-earner households.

Researcher Dr Anne McMunn has said: "Mothers who work are more likely to have higher educational qualifications, live in a higher income household, and have a lower likelihood of being depressed than mothers who are not in paid work. These factors explain the higher levels of behavioural difficulties for boys of non-working mothers, but the same was not true for girls."

As previous research has indicated, children in single-mother households and in two-parent households in which neither parent was in work were much more likely to have challenging behaviour at age five than children where both parents were in paid employment. Household income, however, and maternal characteristics can mitigate the effects of this.

## Poverty and parenting both matter

*Despite the best efforts of parents, children living in poverty and relatively disadvantaged circumstances still remain behind their wealthier, well-parented peers*

How far does positive parenting mediate the effects of poverty and disadvantage? New research from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, based on the MCS, examined how far poverty in early childhood disadvantages children at the start of their school careers as well as the extent to which positive parenting behaviours and attitudes mediate these disadvantages<sup>4</sup>.

Findings show that 60 per cent of children who had never experienced poverty achieved a 'good level of achievement' in their first year at school as assessed by their performance on the Foundation School Profile. By contrast, only 26 per cent of children in persistent poverty reached this level. Clearly, poverty matters and persistent poverty is even more detrimental for children's attainment.

Researchers created a composite index of parenting, which took into account many aspects of the care and investment parents made in their child's development. Analysis reveals that the quality of parenting was an important factor in how well children were doing at school and that positive parenting improved the odds of children living in more disadvantaged circumstances doing better. About half of the effects of child poverty may be accounted for by the quality of parenting the child has received in early childhood. Parenting is therefore an important mediator in redressing the effects of poverty and disadvantage, but a substantial part of the gap still remains unexplained. It would seem that despite the best efforts of parents, children living in poverty and relatively disadvantaged circumstances still remain behind their wealthier, well-parented peers.

Crucially, researchers found some evidence that the effects of poverty and parenting are independent. In other words, children's achievement can be adversely affected by poor parenting. Achievement can also be adversely affected by poverty. Directing efforts at only poverty or parenting, to the exclusion of the other, is unlikely to close the attainment gap.

<sup>3</sup> McMunn, A. and Kelly, Y. and Cable, N. and Bartley, M. (2011) Maternal employment and child socio-emotional behaviour in the UK: longitudinal evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. *J Epidemiol Community Health*

<sup>4</sup> Kiernan, K.E. and Mensah, F.K. (2011) Poverty, Family Resources and Children's Educational Attainment: The Mediating Role of Parenting. *British Journal of Educational Research* Vol. 37, No. 2, April 2011, pp 317–336; Kiernan, K. (2010) Poverty and Parenting: Both Matter. *Kohort: CLS Cohort Studies Newsletter*, Spring 2010

## Fathers' involvement makes a difference

*Good father-child relations are associated with an absence of emotional and behavioural difficulties in adolescence and greater academic motivation*

Being an 'involved' father makes a concrete difference to child outcomes, according to researchers Professors Eirini Flouri and Ann Buchanan<sup>5</sup>.

An 'involved' father, as defined in their research, is a father who reads to his child, takes outings with his child, is interested in their education and takes a role equal to the mother in managing his child. He may or may not live with the child's mother, and may or may not be the child's biological father.

Findings show that, generally, the higher the level of a father's education, the greater is the likelihood of his being involved with his children. Good father-child relations are associated with an absence of emotional and behavioural difficulties in adolescence and greater academic motivation. When children grow up those who have felt close to their fathers in adolescence are more likely to have satisfactory adult marital relationships.

The study further shows that children with involved fathers are less likely to be in trouble with the police and that early father involvement protects children in separated families against later mental health problems. Father involvement is also strongly related to children's later educational attainment.

## Good quality relationships important to child development

*Parents' relationships between each other and with their children are important for children's cognitive and emotional development and the stability of families*

Good quality relationships between parents and between parents and their children can make a significant difference to young people's satisfaction with their family situation.

Relationships clearly matter to children, according to research based on Understanding Society – the UK's Household Longitudinal Study<sup>6</sup>. While 60 per cent of young people said they were 'completely satisfied' with their family situation, satisfaction varies with the quality of the parental relationship. For example, in families where the child's

mother is unhappy in her partnership, only 55 per cent of young people say they are 'completely happy' with their family situation compared with 73 per cent of young people whose mothers are 'perfectly happy' in their relationships.

Of the variables that affect young people's wellbeing, researchers find two to be particularly important: the frequency with which children quarrel with their parents; and the extent to which they discuss important matters with them. Children who don't quarrel with either parent more than once a week, and who discuss important matters with one or other of their parents at least occasionally, have a 74 per cent chance of being completely happy with family life. Children who quarrel more than once a week with their parents and don't discuss important matters with their parents have only a 28 per cent chance of rating themselves completely happy with their families.

UK social researchers and policymakers recognise that parents' relationships with each other and with their children are important for children's cognitive and emotional development and the stability of families. Understanding more about what works best for children could lead to higher child wellbeing.

## Disadvantage not age is the problem for teenage mothers

*Policies that successfully discourage early motherhood would have some, probably modest, further benefit for the development of the next generation*

Early motherhood, particularly teen motherhood, is increasingly associated with poorer child outcomes and greater risk of family poverty. But new research based on the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) finds that this is less to do with age per se as with the characteristics of those who tend to become 'young mothers'<sup>7</sup>.

Early mothers typically come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Women who have had more favoured origins and have taken up educational and career opportunities tend to delay having children (if they have children at all). Therefore, a child born to a mother who was young when she first became a parent has already inherited a disadvantaged start in life. Does having a young mother compound this disadvantage?

Researchers from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies examined children's development, in terms of cognition and behaviour at age five. Much of the difference between

<sup>5</sup> Flouri, E. and Buchanan, A. (2004) Early fathers' and mother's involvement and child's later educational outcomes. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 74, 141-153

<sup>6</sup> Ermisch, J., Iacovou, M. and Skew, A. (2011) Family Relationships, in McFall (ed.), *Early Findings from the First Wave of Understanding Society, the UK's Household Longitudinal Study*. Available online: [www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2011/02/27/the-first-steps-to-understanding-society](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/2011/02/27/the-first-steps-to-understanding-society)

<sup>7</sup> Hawkes, D. and Joshi, H. (2011) Unequal entry to motherhood and unequal outcomes for children: Evidence from the UK Millennium Cohort. CLS Cohort Studies Working paper 2011/3

the children of young and older mothers was found to be attributable either to their mothers' social origins or inequalities (in for example, education) that had earlier origins. The developmental penalty left to be attributed to the mother's age per se is, at most, modest. These findings

are consistent with, though not proof of, the hypothesis that early motherhood compounds disadvantage in one generation into the next – to a modest rather than a major extent.

## ESRC SOCIAL MOBILITY EVIDENCE BRIEFINGS

This is one in a series of seven briefings that summarise a selection of ESRC-funded research on the topic of social mobility. As well as parenting, the briefings cover health, education, poverty and skills.

An overview of the major ESRC investments covered in the briefings follows overleaf. For a full listing of all ESRC major research investments please see: [www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/what-we-do/our-research](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/what-we-do/our-research)

All information in this briefing is verified to the best of the ESRC's ability. However, we do not accept responsibility for any loss arising from reliance on it.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

The Economic and Social Research Council is the UK's largest organisation for funding research on economic and social issues. We support independent, high-quality research which has an impact on business, the public sector and the third sector.

At any one time we support over 4,000 researchers and postgraduate students in academic institutions and independent research institutes.

Email the ESRC communications team: [comms@esrc.ac.uk](mailto:comms@esrc.ac.uk)

### shaping society

[www.esrc.ac.uk](http://www.esrc.ac.uk)

## RESEARCH COVERED

**The ESRC Centre for Economic Performance (CEP)** examines the determinants of economic performance at the level of the company, the nation and the global economy by focusing on the major links between globalisation, technology and institutions (above all the educational system and the labour market) and their impact on productivity, inequality, employment, stability and wellbeing – [cep.lse.ac.uk](http://cep.lse.ac.uk)

**The ESRC Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health (ICLS)** investigates processes throughout the life course that relate the development of personal and professional skills to health and wellbeing and to patterns of employment and social participation. This research is possible due to the unique longitudinal birth cohort studies that have been carried out in the UK and the availability of comparative national and international data – [www.ucl.ac.uk/icls](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/icls)

**The ESRC Centre for Longitudinal Studies (CLS)** is an ESRC Resource Centre which houses three of Britain's internationally-renowned birth cohort studies:

- 1958 National Child Development Study (NCDS)
- 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70)
- Millennium Cohort Study (MCS)

The studies involve multiple surveys of large numbers of individuals from birth and throughout their lives. They have collected information on education and employment, family and parenting, physical and mental health, and social attitudes – [www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)

**The ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO)** is a leading research centre combining expertise in economics, geography and law. The centre aims to study the intersection between the public and private sectors of the economy, and in particular to understand the right way to organise and deliver public services – [www.bristol.ac.uk/cmppo](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmppo)

**The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS)** promotes effective economic and social policies by increasing understanding of their impact on individuals, families, businesses and the government's finances. The IFS has hosted an ESRC research centre since 1991. The ESRC Centre for the Microeconomic Analysis of Public Policy (CPP) aims to carry out core analytical research that will allow informed microeconomic analysis of major public policy issues, from productivity growth to poverty reduction, and from promoting employment to ensuring sound public finances – [www.ifs.org](http://www.ifs.org)

**The Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER)** is jointly core-funded by the ESRC and the University of Essex. ISER hosts the ESRC Research Centre on Micro-Social Change (MiSOC) and the ESRC UK Longitudinal Studies Centre (ULSC). ISER is also home to *Understanding Society*. The central focus of MiSOC's work is the individual life course and the changing nature of society and its team of world-class researchers and associates come from a range of social science disciplines including economics, sociology, psychology, demography, geography and statistics. The ULSC goal is to ensure the collection of longitudinal data of the highest quality to meet UK social research needs and to promote its widest and most effective use – [www.iser.essex.ac.uk](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk)

**The ESRC Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) in the United Kingdom – the 2011 Survey** project's primary purpose is to advance state-of-the-art theory and practice of poverty and social exclusion measurement. To improve current measurement methodologies, the research will develop and repeat the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey – [www.poverty.ac.uk](http://www.poverty.ac.uk)

*Understanding Society* is the largest household panel survey in the world. It collects information annually from 100,000 people across 40,000 UK households and provides valuable new evidence about the people of the UK, their lives, experiences, behaviours and beliefs. The study allows for deeper analysis of a wide range of sections of the population as they respond to regional, national and international change. *Understanding Society* will greatly enhance our insight into the pathways that influence people's longer term occupational trajectories, their health and wellbeing, their financial circumstances and personal relationships – [www.understandingsociety.org.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.org.uk)