

4. Factors influencing parenting

The following chapter explores the various factors that can influence parenting behaviours that matter to children's outcomes. Parents' level of income and its effect on resources, as well as time spent with children, the educational background of parents, the structure of the family and stress and mental health of parents are all factors which have a direct influence on the way parents behave with their children.

a. Income

In the United States, much of the research on family income and its impact on parenting has focused on families from a low socio-economic background.⁴⁴ Research demonstrates that children from low-income families suffer a myriad of difficulties, such as food insecurity, residential uncertainty and a lack of adequate health care. These situations do not improve until family earnings are raised above the poverty threshold level.⁶⁷

Material hardship can lead to an increased level of stress among parents, which in turn can hinder parenting responsiveness and sensitivity.⁶⁸ Low-income families may experience financial stress prompted by difficulties with paying bills or a mortgage on time, or ensuring that their children's basic needs are met.²⁴ Parents who experience material deprivation, or who are exposed to complicated or challenging financial circumstances, can be subject to stress as a consequence of struggling to make ends meet. This can mean they experience more negative life events than wealthier families.^{54, 115, 116} Stress from material deprivation may be critical in terms of marital conflict and can lead to the development of psychopathologies, such as depression. Children of parents with high levels of depressive symptoms or marital issues can be at an increased risk of emotional, behavioural, and social problems,^{39, 51} prompted by parents who may become hostile or even withdraw from their children.⁴⁸

From another perspective, the relationship between a family's financial situation and the time allocated to children, specifically parents' engagement with their child's education, has been shown to be related to the resources a family has (for example, time, energy and financial security).⁶³ Phillips conducted research comparing differences between each of the low-income ethnic groups of African American, Latino, Caucasian, and Asian Americans and their middle-income counterparts in the United States.¹³⁹ The research found that affluent parents in each of these groups tended to spend more time with their children in learning activities (on average three more hours per week than families from a lower socio-economic group).¹⁴⁵ Using high-quality childcare or educational trips, for example to libraries, has also been shown to have positive cognitive outcomes for children.

b. Education

Parents' educational background is positively correlated to children's outcomes.⁵⁸ Research suggests that parents with a high level of education, who tend to be from affluent families, have expectations and beliefs that correlate with their children's school performance. Parents from a disadvantaged socio-economic background, on the other hand, tend to have less high expectations of their child's academic performance.⁵⁸ One study conducted at the University of Memphis further demonstrates a connection between mothers with a high level of education and positive child outcomes. The group of mothers in the study were shown to have more realistic expectations of their children's academic performance and provided a home learning environment that was conducive to their child's attainment, resulting in enhancement of numeracy and literacy skills.³⁶ Other studies show that parents' education may be related to a more positive and warm relationship with the child. For example, parents with a higher educational background seem to be more likely to provide higher quality verbal interactions, offer a motivating learning environment and provide learning activities at home, and be more engaged with their children's education.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, both the level of education that mothers reach and their income may be significant predictors of a home learning environment, as well as children's cognitive development and future academic performance.^{1, 36, 140}

The knowledge and attitude parents have towards parenting can also influence children's outcomes. For example, research has shown that parents who believe that they are not good parents or place a low value on their parenting skills are more likely to give up when things become challenging, are less effective in setting firm boundaries and more easily give in to their children's demands. They also tend to be more disengaged in interactions with their children.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, parents who are aware of children's development and place a positive value on their own parenting, tend to be less coercive in their parenting style and are better able to adjust to their child's different developmental stages.¹⁰⁵ Research has also established that parental attitudes impact on parenting skills and interactions between parents and children. For instance, Bugental and colleagues found that mothers who attributed 'intention' to their children's misbehaviours or felt that their children's misbehaviour was intended to displease them, were more prone to either hostile interactions with their children, or were unassertive and unable to set firm boundaries.²⁸ It has been shown that children who receive confusing messages tend to display an impaired or decreased level of cognitive functioning.²⁹ Similarly, parents' ability to think of the child's mental state in an accurate manner, also termed 'mindedness', can influence parenting; a higher level of mindedness can lead to a secure attachment as well as an enhanced child's socio-emotional development.^{15, 81}

c. Family Structure

This section explores the different types of family structures and their impact on parenting, as well as their influence on children's outcomes. Links have been found between the structure of families, in particular the number of parents in a household and the type (step, biological), and children's outcomes, especially in relation to children's later educational attainment, their cognitive outcomes and their general emotional well-being.^{4, 181} Research suggests that children living in two-parent households, whether biological, adopted or step-parent families, fare better in respect to better emotional and physical health, with less behavioural and emotional problems, compared to those living in single-parent households.^{20, 112} Extended families, such as those that include grandparents living in the household, have been shown to provide a source of support for parents, as well as children, and this extra support and reliance can help to improve children's outcomes.⁵²

Current beliefs and attitudes towards single parent families tend to be based on the notion that lone parenthood is bad for children. A number of studies have attempted to evaluate the effects of lone parenthood on children's outcomes in relation to upward social mobility.^{8, 114, 172} Research has highlighted a greater risk of a decrease in psychological well-being for children, an increase in the likelihood of criminal behaviour, and depression, a decrease in chances of high educational attainment and an increased risk of unemployment in later life.^{8, 18} However, the results from these studies are largely inconclusive in respect to lone parenthood as an independent factor for poorer children's outcomes. It is argued that these outcomes are not inevitable for all children and many children thrive in single-parent families.

One study from the London School of Economics found that 'lone parenthood per se has no substantive effect on any child outcome'.⁷⁷ It is also noteworthy that countries with a high level of social mobility, such as Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, also have the highest number of single-parent families.¹⁷⁶ In some cases, where parental conflict is likely to have an adverse effect on children, lone parenthood is more favourable for children than two-parent families; separation for such parents translates to better and more positive effects on children's outcomes.⁸ One Government paper, *Aiming high for children: supporting families*, suggests that '*how parents continue to engage with each other to support their children after separation can have a major impact on a child's well-being. A low level of conflict between parents, a good quality relationship with the resident parent and high parenting capacity with both the resident and non-resident parent can all minimize the negative impacts that parental separation might otherwise have on children's health, social and educational outcomes*'.⁴⁶

Young parenthood has also attracted attention in research, in relation to its impact on parenting skills and children's outcomes. A study conducted in the United States

suggests that children of teenage mothers tend to show lower readiness for school compared to their peers and lag behind their peers in numeracy and literacy, as well as in communication and verbal skills.²⁶ Studies also suggest that children of teenage mothers tend to have poor outcomes in terms of their social, emotional and physical well-being.^{26, 170} Research has identified health risks to infants of teenage mothers, including a higher risk of premature birth, low birth weight, dyslexia, chronic respiratory issues and hyperactivity.^{69, 102, 155} Studies suggest that the offspring of teenage mothers are at an increased risk of offending, and are three times more likely to serve a sentence in prison during their adolescence and in their twenties.^{91, 155, 170} There is also an intergenerational component to young parenthood, with daughters of teenage mothers more likely to become mothers themselves during adolescence.¹²⁹ Young parenthood can place restrictions on family income, as often young mothers and fathers who have had to leave education early to look after a child have limited employment opportunities.³² Studies have suggested that young mothers tend to experience a much higher rate of both pre-and post-natal maternal depression.^{23, 88, 99}

d. Stress and Mental Health

As mentioned in other sections, stress and mental health can affect parenting in a variety of ways. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that a very high degree of anxiety and stress during pregnancy may lead to a number of negative child outcomes, including, in some cases, a higher risk for the child to develop attention deficit hyper-activity disorder (ADHD), behavioural problems, and impaired cognitive development. This is independent of other factors, such as smoking and alcohol use during pregnancy, maternal education and gestational age.¹⁶⁹ A child's language development is also significantly impacted upon by parents' stress levels. Mothers who report a high level of anxiety and stress show less responsiveness to their child's attempts at verbal communication and other interaction.¹³⁰ Language acquisition is also affected by parental stress levels.⁷ Research finds that financial stress, such as being unable to pay bills, is negatively correlated with a child's language acquisition, behaviour and verbal skills, after controlling for factors such as poverty.⁸⁷

The transition to parenthood can be a challenging and stressful time for couples and involves a significant amount of physiological and psychological change, which both men and women can find difficult.^{78, 149} Accompanying these changes are the loss of sleep, subsequent exhaustion, demands of a new baby, and the lack of focus on the spousal relationship, which can add stress and sometimes lead to the breakdown of a relationship.⁵⁰ An increased recognition of the importance of these changes and their effect on parents can significantly help parents to be prepared before the birth of a baby.¹⁷⁵

The daily demands of parenting can be difficult for many parents, especially those with young children. For example, bed times, meals, toilet training, and tantrums can be challenging for many parents.³⁸ The accumulation of these factors, coupled with other external demands of work, family, and household can result in considerable levels of stress.¹⁴⁸ Morales and Guerra found that cumulative stress experienced by parents is correlated with lower academic achievement of children and also depression among children.¹²⁵ Children can be affected directly through exposure to parental anxiety and, indirectly, by the way parents cope with stress.⁹ The means by which parents cope with stress has a direct influence on their children's environment. For example, parents reporting high levels of stress tend to use harsher forms of discipline and are more punitive in their approach, more irritable and critical, as well as inconsistent in their parenting style,¹²³ which can contribute to a child developing conduct and emotional problems.