



# Parenting and the different ways it can affect children's lives: research evidence

**Policy-makers and commentators often blame 'bad parenting' for children's and young people's troublesome behaviour. What can research tell us about the influence of parenting, especially the parent-child relationships in millions of 'ordinary' families?**

This paper:

- Summarises findings from seven reviews of existing research that were commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to inform its own Parenting Research and Development programme.
- Considers parenting from the perspectives of mothers, fathers and children themselves, as well as those of black and minority ethnic parents and families living in poverty with restricted access to support services

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## Key points

- Differences in child temperament, among other factors, demonstrate that flexible, adaptable parenting is more likely to be effective than a 'one size fits all' approach.
- The quality of parent-child relationships shows considerable stability over time. Some dimensions of parenting are important in children's lives irrespective of age, especially whether relationships are warm and supportive or marked by conflict.
- Warm, authoritative and responsive parenting is usually crucial in building resilience. Parents who develop open, participative communication, problem-centred coping, confidence and flexibility tend to manage stress well and help their families to do the same.
- Young children's relationships with their mothers typically affect their development more than father-child relationships. But teenagers' relationships with their fathers appear especially important to their development and achievement in school.
- Children's perspectives show that what young people 'think' is not necessarily what parents 'think they think'. Parents tend to underestimate their own influence, but are also prone to take insufficient account of children's feelings at times of emotional stress.
- There is no clear-cut, causal link between poverty and parenting. However, poverty can contribute to parental stress, depression and irritability leading to disrupted parenting and to poorer long-term outcomes for children.
- Policy, practice and research on parenting have made simplistic assumptions about parenting in black and minority ethnic communities. Stereotyped misunderstandings about 'tradition' and 'culture' have contributed to failures to protect children from abuse.
- Parents most in need of family support services are often the least likely to access them. Evidence suggests that engagement can be improved by: accessible venues and times for service delivery; trusting relationships between staff and users; a 'visible mix' of staff by age, gender and ethnicity; involving parents in decision-making; and overcoming prejudices concerning disabled parents, parents with learning difficulties and parents with poor mental health.

## Introduction

As part of the planning process for its research and development programme on parenting, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation commissioned a series of background papers, including seven overviews of existing research literature. Political interest in parenting has tended to focus on links between ‘problem’ behaviour by children and young people and dysfunctional families. Partly for that reason, the JRF programme has been chiefly concerned with parenting in ‘ordinary’ families, seeking a better understanding of diversity in parenting and its implications for family policies and support services. This is reflected in the topics covered by the reviews:

- Parenting and outcomes for children
- Parenting and resilience
- Fathers and fatherhood
- Parenting and ethnicity
- Children’s views of parenting
- Parenting and poverty
- Barriers to inclusion

## Parenting and outcomes for children

*Thomas G. O’ Connor (University of Rochester) and Stephen Scott (Institute of Psychiatry)*

The ways that parents shape their children’s development have been a long-standing source of theorising by scientists, philosophers and parents themselves. Looking at a wide range of outcome studies, the review concludes that the quality of parent-child relationships is significantly associated with:

- *Learning skills and educational achievement.* Children’s reading ability is associated with the reading environment around them and there is evidence that parental involvement with school is associated with achievement.
- *Social competence* (most commonly studied within peer relationships). Parental warmth, lack of conflict, and control and monitoring appear to play an important role in developing children’s social skills.

- *Children's own views of themselves.* Including their sense of self-worth.
- *Aggressive 'externalising' behaviour and delinquency.* The more extreme the circumstances for parents, the worse the outcomes for children and likelihood of psychological disturbance.
- *Depression, anxiety and other 'internalising' problems.* Including complaints where physical symptoms are related to emotional stress and social withdrawal.
- *High-risk health behaviours.* Such as smoking, illicit drug use, alcohol use, sexually risky behaviour and, in some studies, obesity.

In addition:

- In most circumstances, there is considerable stability in the quality of family relationships over time, especially when there is a secure bond of attachment between children and their parents.
- The quality of parent-child relationships appears to remain influential into adulthood for social and behavioural outcomes (although there have been relatively few long-term studies).
- Some dimensions of parent-child relationships appear important in children's lives irrespective of age, notably whether they are warm and supportive or marked by conflict and hostility.
- Other dimensions are thought to alter in structure and function during children's development. One of the most important may be monitoring and control.
- Some associations between the quality of family relationships and children's well-being appear to differ across sub-populations and cultures – including those in relation to physical discipline.
- Genetic factors are an important influence on individual differences in parent-child relationships. The links between the quality of parent-child relationships and children's psychological adjustment are mediated, in part, by genetic influences.

- Differences in child temperament, among other factors, demonstrate that a ‘one style fits all’ approach to parenting is not optimal.

The review finds that parenting programmes have increasingly come to be seen as a matter of public health. Improving the quality of parent-child relationships can be expected to have positive effects on individual children, families and society as a whole. However, the wide range of outcomes that are linked with the quality of parent-child relationships needs to be reflected in the way that parenting interventions are assessed.

## **Parenting and resilience**

*Malcolm Hill, Anne Stafford, Peter Seaman and Nicola Ross  
(University of Glasgow) and Brigid Daniel (University of Dundee)*

This review considers parents’ contributions to children’s – and to their own – resilience. ‘Resilience’ occurs when good outcomes come about for individuals or families in the face of adversity, or where problems would normally be expected. Resilience-based practice involves looking for strengths and opportunities to build on, rather than for problems and deficits to remedy or treat.

Resilience can be displayed in several domains – emotional, social, educational and behavioural. It is important, in terms of policy and practice, to consider not only how parental resilience can improve children’s well-being, but also what assists parents to be robust in the face of adversity. Available research suggests that:

- Parents, or alternative caregivers, play a pivotal role in promoting the knowledge, skills and environment that can help children cope with adversity.
- Parents play a vital part in mediating individual and community factors, directly or indirectly. They can buffer children from some of the worst effects of adversity in the surrounding environment.
- Warm, authoritative and responsive parenting is usually crucial in building resilience. Parents who develop open, participative communication, problem-centred coping, confidence and flexibility tend to manage stress well and help their families to do the same.

- When parents are implicated in children’s problems (e.g. family violence and neglect) it can be doubly difficult for children to be resilient. Nevertheless, personal qualities and the support of trusted peers or adults who fit with their needs, wishes and expectations can make a difference.
- Some of the most striking evidence about resilience comes from fostering and adoption. Children with poor health and development commonly make rapid strides once they have gained adoptive parents.
- Research points to ‘problem-focused’ coping by parents being more successful than avoidant or passive responses. This has been found to help parents respond positively when they have a child with a severe disability or health problem.
- Schools can play a central role in promoting resilience in relation to both poverty and family difficulties. This can relate to factors such as academic stimulus, support by teachers, learning opportunities and access to friends and peers.
- Community factors can also promote resilience. Children are likely to find it easier to access support outside the home when they live in cohesive neighbourhoods with formal facilities that encourage participation and achievement.

## **Fathers and fatherhood: connecting the strands of diversity**

*Charlie Lewis (University of Lancaster) and Michael E. Lamb (University of Cambridge)*

This review looks at some dimensions of fathering that need to be considered when understanding the roles played by men in contemporary families. Barriers to a better understanding of fathering and fatherhood include a narrow concentration on men’s roles as ‘providers’ and inattention to less visible aspects of parenting. Fathers have been characterised too readily as either ‘superdads’ or ‘deadbeat dads’.

Men can variously fulfill the roles of biological (reproduction), economic (financial provision), social (care giving) and legal (responsible in law) fathers. Other important dimensions of fathering include cultural and historical circumstances, the social policy context, individual motivation and the quality of relationships with mothers. Better understanding is required of the changing links between all these different roles and their interplay over time.

Fathering issues that have received particular attention in recent research include:

- *Child care and fathering*: While the extent of fathers' child care commitments has grown rapidly since the 1960s, fathers in dual-earner households still do less with their children than mothers. Greater involvement by men does not appear to be associated with increased harmony between partners. Depressed marital satisfaction may, however, reflect general family stress.
- *Paternal involvement*: The warmth of men's relationships with their children appears greater when they have good relationships with the mothers, when the home is 'well-organised', and when the family engages in regular, shared activities. One study found children's developmental progress was delayed when their mothers returned to work before they were 18 months old, but not when fathers were highly involved in child care.
- *Paternal employment*: Fathers in Britain tend to work much longer hours than their EU counterparts. Contemporary couples continue to face the dilemma that they can only enhance their family finances through work at the cost of reduced involvement in child care.
- *Father's influence on child development*: Research with younger children suggests that mother-child relationships typically affect children's development more than father-child relationships. But studies of subsequent attainment suggest that fathers' 'inputs' are consistently linked to measures of children's development once they enter secondary school, unlike those of mothers. There are also consistent associations between father-teenager relationships and a young person's adjustment to adult life.
- *Cohabitation and fathering*: Cohabiting relationships can range from mutual commitment to a shared assumption that the relationship will not last. Studies suggest that even when less steady relationships dissolve, there is often a commitment to maintain father-child relationships, unless there has been a history of violence.
- *Ethnic minority fathering*: There has been considerable speculation about fathering among minority ethnic groups in the UK, but care is needed to interpret data in

context. In the US, commentators have made sweeping statements about non-resident African American fathers which more careful research has subsequently showed to be unfounded.

- *Fathers in special circumstances*: Studies have paid particular attention to vulnerable groups for whom targeted social policy interventions may be appropriate, including:
  - *Teenage fathers*: A recent UK study found 60 per cent of young fathers in Bristol remained highly involved with their children.
  - *Professional services for families*: Preschool services for families seldom provide services for fathers. Male workers at day nurseries and playgroups comprise a tiny proportion of staff.

## Parenting and ethnicity

*Ann Phoenix (Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London)*  
*and Fatima Husain (Centre for Economic and Social Inclusion)*

Policy-makers, practitioners and academics have long viewed 'race' as an important factor affecting the parenting children receive. However, differences of 'race' have been treated simplistically and there has been a tendency to make assumptions about parenting in minority ethnic groups on the basis of a few studies consisting of little, or inadequate, data. The review highlights British studies where available and a much larger body of American research.

- Some studies compare minority and majority ethnic groups with an implicit assumption that the majority ethnic group constitutes the 'norm' against which other families are (often unfavourably) compared.
- Simplistic assumptions about parenting are sometimes shared by members of minority as well as majority ethnic groups. For example, one UK study found that Asian, black and white parents often considered that they had few practices or values in common. Many Asian and black parents believed that white parents lacked commitment to parenting, and that white children were undisciplined and lacking respect for their parents.
- Many studies of parenting style and child outcomes have concluded that a

combination of parental responsiveness and behavioural control known as 'authoritative' parenting is preferable to a more 'authoritarian' style. However, these findings have been called into question in recent years in relation to ethnicity, and also social class and gender.

- Supposed 'traditional' traits in the family practices of minorities may be the result of adaptation to particular circumstances. Relatively high levels of employment among black British mothers, for example, not only relate to historical and cultural factors but also structural and economic factors.
- Researchers and practitioners disagree about the place of 'race' in parents' use of physical discipline and its impact on children's development. But assumptions about physical discipline in black and minority ethnic communities can have unfortunate consequences. In the case of Victoria Climbié, an understanding that it was 'culturally appropriate' to punish children severely contributed to the failure to recognise child abuse.
- A preoccupation in research with the effects of 'father absence' on children – with particular reference to African American and African Caribbean fathers – has resulted in little attention being given to fatherhood among ethnic groups in general.
- The notion that fathers are simply 'absent' from their children's lives if they are non-resident can no longer be assumed. One study of British black families identified a range of ways that non-resident fathers contributed to their children's lives, so that some were not considered 'absent'.
- Religion remains an understudied component of family life. Religiosity has been associated with protective factors that strengthen families, but little information is currently available on the beneficial or harmful roles that religion plays in the home.
- Research demonstrates that racial discrimination and abuse impact on everyday practices of parenting, not least because parents try to protect their children from racism. Detailed research knowledge of the ways in which racism affects children and parenting is still limited.

- Parenting in mixed heritage families has received limited attention despite evidence that their children of mixed parentage may face negative ‘racialisation’ by relatives on both sides of their family. It is increasingly clear that children from different mixed backgrounds fare differently.
- Relying on simple distinctions between ‘black’, ‘white’ and ‘Asian’ families is no longer adequate in research analyses when seeking good understandings of social trends. It is also necessary to recognise the effects of ‘race’, ethnicity, class and gender and the ways they intersect with each other.
- A key challenge for future research into ethnic and mixed-heritage parenting will be to place their meanings in context for different families in terms of socio-economic status and social exclusion.

## **Children’s views and experiences of parenting**

*Nicola Madge (Brunel University) and Natasha Willmott (National Children’s Bureau)*

The focus of this review is research with children rather than research about children. Based on an examination of the literature, consultations with experts in the field, and two focus groups with young people, it explores children’s accounts of parenting where ‘added value’ is gained from including their views.

The review concludes that:

- Gaining children’s perspectives greatly increases understanding of the parenting process. What young people ‘think’ is not necessarily what adults ‘think they think’. Parents tend to underestimate their own influence compared with friends and peers; but children’s accounts also suggest that parents often fail to understand what they are going through at times of serious emotional disturbance.
- Children are frequently perceptive about the behaviours, attitudes and feelings of their parents and carers. They commonly acknowledge that they, as well as their parents, have an impact on their upbringing.
- Parents and families are of central significance in most children’s lives. Some surveys suggest younger children report more positive relationships with their

parents than older children. However, one recent study of older teenagers found most felt their relationships with parents had become more equal and companionable.

- Children tend not have rigid ideas about parents or families, although they often perceive mothers and fathers as fulfilling rather different roles. In some surveys children have been more likely to see mothers as dealing with childcare and home maintenance, and fathers as financial providers.
- Most teenagers in the UK appear to hold positive views of family life. However, girls are more positive than boys. Teenagers of either sex tend to feel closest to their mothers. Young people generally dislike feeling over-protected.
- Children value good relationships, love and support, and dislike conflict within the family. Close supportive links with parents, other family members (e.g. grandparents), and trustworthy friends were among the factors they identify as making it easier to cope with parental separation.
- Young people whose parents' relationships break down want more information on what is happening, and greater consultation on issues like where they will live and what contact they will have with their non-resident parent. A lack of information adds to anxieties and can affect relationships with parents.
- Surveys suggest that only one in ten English children and young people regard their upbringing as 'very strict', although boys at primary school are twice as likely as girls to say this. Young people report that most parental discipline is based on reasoning, explanation and non-physical punishments.
- Children tend to respect the authority of parent figures, and their 'right' to discipline and punish them – even if they also adopt strategies for negotiating decisions.
- Children have views on most things and like to have a say in longer-term decisions as well as day-to-day matters. 'Being consulted' is generally more important to them than having things 'their own way' or taking the final decision.

- Experiences of parenting affect attitudes and long-term behaviour, including expectations of parenthood and later parenting. In one study, adults who had received little or no physical punishment as children reported bringing up their children in the same way. Those who had received frequent punishment, although in theory more tolerant, appeared to administer more punishments in practice.

## **The relationship between parenting and poverty**

*Ilan Katz (University of New South Wales) Judy Corlyon, Vincent La Placa and Sarah Hunter (Policy Research Bureau)*

Understanding is limited regarding whether, and how far, ‘good’ parenting mediates the effects of poverty on children. This review considers the extent to which poverty itself affects parenting, or whether other characteristics of parents living in poverty, such as their mental health, personalities, education, and family structures, are likely to affect their parenting and their economic circumstances.

The overall conclusion is that there is no clear-cut, causal link between poverty and parenting. Rather, it is likely that different individuals respond in different ways to financial hardship. Factors such as family structure, neighbourhood and social support interact with parents’ temperaments, beliefs, and their own experiences of parenting.

The main influence of poverty on parenting seems to be that it causes some parents to be more stressed, depressed or irritable, and this in turn disrupts their parenting practices and styles. It is the disrupted parenting, rather than poverty itself, which appears to be the major factor affecting outcomes for children. For example:

- Problems have been shown to increase when low-income families suffer stress such as absence of a supportive partner, depression or drug use, and to improve when families enjoy social support from family friends or neighbours.
- Parents who are stressed are less likely to be able to provide optimal home circumstances and more likely to use coercive and harsh methods of discipline. Even so, some theorists maintain that stress is less important than a ‘culture of poverty’ among parents, reinforced by low educational expectations, lack of commitment to the labour force and harsh parenting practices

The chain of events suggested by research should not be seen as deterministic. At each step, there are possibilities for resilience and for positive outcomes (see above). Many parents living in poverty manage to deal effectively with adversity and parents are often prepared to sacrifice their own needs to meet those of their children. Conversely, the available evidence does not support assumptions that tackling material deprivation through welfare to work, benefit increases or other programmes will inevitably lead to improved parenting capacity.

Studies suggest, in any case, that most parents living in relative poverty (like those living in relative affluence) possess adequate parenting capacity. Those whose economic deprivation is combined with a lack of parenting capacity may be in that situation for different reasons. For example:

- Some may lack parenting capacity because of personal characteristics or their own background. These factors also make them less successful in the labour market, making it more likely they will be financially disadvantaged.
- Others may be able to parent adequately in circumstances of relative affluence but, on falling into poverty and deprivation, experience mental health difficulties or other problems that affect their parenting.
- Others still may parent adequately according to the norms of their neighbourhood or cultural group, but be judged as 'inadequate' on the basis of assumptions made by mainstream (middle-class) society.

It follows that parents living in poverty should not be treated as a distinct group simply because they are materially less affluent.

There is much still to be learned about the dynamics of lifting families out of poverty and the consequences for families. One notable gap in the literature is a lack of gender differentiation: the vast majority of the participants in parenting studies have been mothers. Despite a clear link between poverty, parental stress and negative outcomes for children, there are also unresolved questions about the direction of causality. The evidence that lifting families out of poverty improves outcomes for children is not particularly strong. But even where there is evidence of improved outcomes it is not clear how far this is a factor of improved parenting capacity or better access to resources such as housing or childcare – or, more likely, a combination of all of them.

## **Barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in mainstream services**

*Ilan Katz (University of New South Wales), Vincent La Placa and Sarah Hunter (Policy Research Bureau)*

Engagement and inclusion are particularly important for preventive services such as those delivered through schools, family centres and children's centres. Unlike 'crisis' services where there is a degree of compulsion, preventive services usually rely on parents actively seeking help. Yet parents most in need of services are often the least likely to access them.

This review examines what is known about the barriers that parents face in engaging with mainstream support services, and considers ways that services – including health, education, social services, youth justice and leisure – have successfully overcome them. There are continuing gaps in understanding what persuades parents to participate and the available evidence is not extensive. But a number of useful messages can be identified:

- Common reasons for limited engagement by parents include:
  - a lack of knowledge of local services and how they could help
  - unsuitable or inconvenient locations
  - difficulties reaching services (including transport, time pressures and accessibility of venues)
  - costs (fees are a self-evident disincentive)
  - suspicion and stigma (including perceptions of the organisation providing the service and fear of being labelled a 'bad parent' – or even a 'child abuser')
  - fears over privacy and confidentiality (including concerns about sharing their problems with other parents in groups)
  - unco-ordinated services
  - the overall culture of some services (including a 'risk averse' focus on protocols, targets, financial constraints and fears of adverse media attention)
  - resistance to services arising from particular needs (such as mental illness, substance misuse or criminal records).

- Groups of parents that are less likely to access support services than others include:
  - Fathers
  - Disabled parents
  - Parents of teenagers
  - Black and minority ethnic (BME) families
  - Asylum-seeking parents
  - Homeless or peripatetic families
  - Rural families.

The issue of access for *disabled parents* has received greater recognition as a result of the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act. Even so, the number of disabled parents accessing support groups is low.

Families from *black and minority ethnic communities* face a number of barriers accessing services. For example, a study of Home-Start family support services found access was a particular problem for Asian women who were isolated by factors that included problematic family relationships and a poor grasp of English. It has been argued that some parenting programmes apply white middle-class values that do not automatically recognise cultural differences.

There is also evidence that mainstream preventive services fail to engage *fathers*. Many men appear to perceive that available services are not relevant to them – a conclusion that may be justified given evidence that most parenting services are framed around mothers.

*Parents living in poverty* with the greatest needs are commonly the parents least likely to access support – whether formal or informal. They are more likely to be stressed and depressed, and this may hinder them from accessing services.

Research into ‘good practice’ suggests that policy-makers and practitioners can aim to improve service delivery and engagement with parents through:

- choosing accessible venues and user-friendly times for service delivery
- trusting relationships between front-line staff and service users
- an interactive style, involving parents in decision-making
- a ‘visible mix’ of service delivery staff, including age, gender and ethnic diversity

(more important than achieving a precise match between the characteristics of service users and staff)

- overcoming prejudice, especially in relation to disability and poor mental health (assumptions that mental illness and learning difficulties are risk factors for child abuse and neglect have created a disincentive for parents to engage with services)
- use of trained staff in parenting support services
- promotion of informal social networks among service users as well as formal support through services
- providing information for parents which is locally, contextually and culturally specific and targeted towards different communities.

Full versions of all the reports summarised here are available for free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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