

Diversity, complexity and change in parenting

Findings
Informing change

July 2008

This study examined parenting during early and middle childhood within different social and cultural groups in Britain, using a 'parenting score' derived from different measurements of parents' relationships with their children. The study was based on parents' reports of attitudes, feelings and behaviour recorded in response to specific questions relating to parenting. The study also assessed changes in parenting across time.

Key points

- Parenting did not vary systematically according to the age, educational level or ethnic group of mothers or fathers.
- As children got older, parents' confidence in looking after them decreased. Parents were also more likely to perceive a lack of time for themselves and to dislike the mess surrounding their children.
- Deterioration in financial circumstances predicted a modest reduction in parenting scores, but improvements in financial circumstances were not associated with improved parenting scores.
- A reduction in the level of social support over time predicted a reduction in parenting scores, but there was no improvement in scores when social support improved.
- The largest changes in parenting scores were associated with changes in the mother's health:
 - deteriorations in physical or mental health were associated with a reduction in parenting scores
 - in contrast to all other variables, improvements in physical or mental health predicted increases in parenting scores.
- Changes in marital status and housing tenure were not associated with changes in parenting scores, whether these circumstances improved, remained stable or deteriorated.

The research

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Background

Parenting attitudes and behaviours are influenced by characteristics of parents and children as well as by family and social characteristics. Parent-child relationships change over time and through alterations in circumstance. Aspects of parenting which predict outcomes for children include sensitivity and attunement in infancy, parenting styles (including authoritative, authoritarian, neglectful and permissive parenting), the management of children's behaviour and more general aspects of parent-child relationships such as warmth, rejection, hostility and support.

This study investigated aspects of parenting not covered in many other studies. These related primarily to the quality of relationship between parent and child, rather than more commonly explored facets such as discipline and opportunities for learning.

Calculating 'parenting scores'

The study used data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) to examine similarities and differences in parenting. It also looked at how maternal parenting changed across early childhood.

The researchers combined maternal responses to 8 ALSPAC questions into a single score embracing mothers' attitudes, feelings and behaviour towards the child. Although not precise measures, these indicators correspond to many aspects of parenting identified by previous research as important for children's development, including warmth, support, acceptance/rejection and control.

The validity and reliability of the parenting score were established statistically and the score's ability to predict child outcomes up to age 7 was examined. This scoring system made it possible to compare the data collected when children were aged 8 months and 33 months and to examine changes in parenting associated with changes in family health and social circumstances.

Parental age, education and ethnic group

Differences in parenting as a function of age, education or ethnic group were few and far between. With regard to the age of parents when the child was born, younger parents were more likely to be ambivalent about the timing of the child's arrival. Older mothers were more likely to feel less fulfilled and that they had less time for themselves. Mothers who had spent fewer years in formal education felt less confident in caring for their child and were less likely to spend time teaching the child.

It is difficult to draw any firm conclusions regarding the effects of ethnic group on parenting. Although the ALSPAC cohort is ethnically diverse, numbers for ethnic minorities are very small and any observed differences were small.

Socio-economic status and health

General changes in parenting over time

The study examined the way in which the parenting provided by mothers changed from when the child was eight months old until it was 33 months old. During this period, there were reductions in parenting scores for most families, regardless of changes in their socio-economic or health status (see Figure 1). This may have been a function of the increasing age of the child: at eight months, children are still relatively immobile, often asleep and very much dependent on their carers. By 33 months, children are in a period anecdotally labelled 'the terrible twos' where they are mobile, relatively independent and increasingly concerned with their own autonomy.

During this period between infancy and the toddler stage, maternal confidence with the child decreased. Mothers were more likely to perceive a lack of time for themselves and to dislike the mess surrounding the child.

Changes in parenting due to changes in circumstance

There were associations between parenting scores and financial adversity (see Figure 2). Higher parenting scores were evident in better financial circumstances, but differences in parenting as a function of financial circumstance were small. Deterioration in financial circumstances predicted a modest reduction in parenting score. Most importantly, improvements in financial circumstances did not predict an increase in parenting score.

Figure 1: Changes in parenting during early childhood (proportion of families)

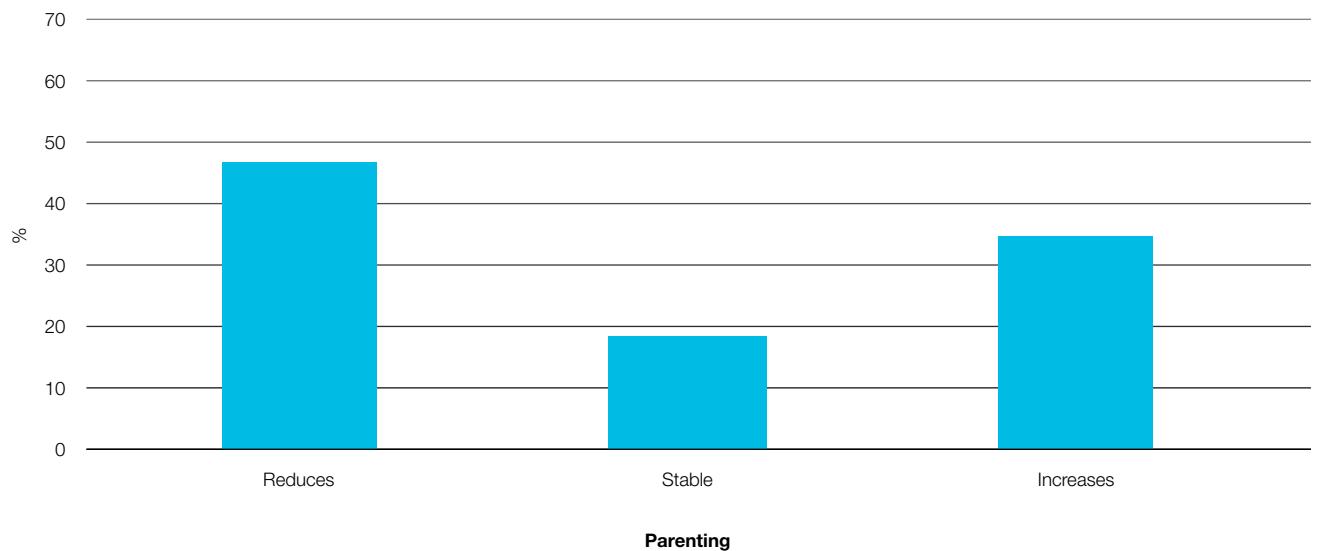
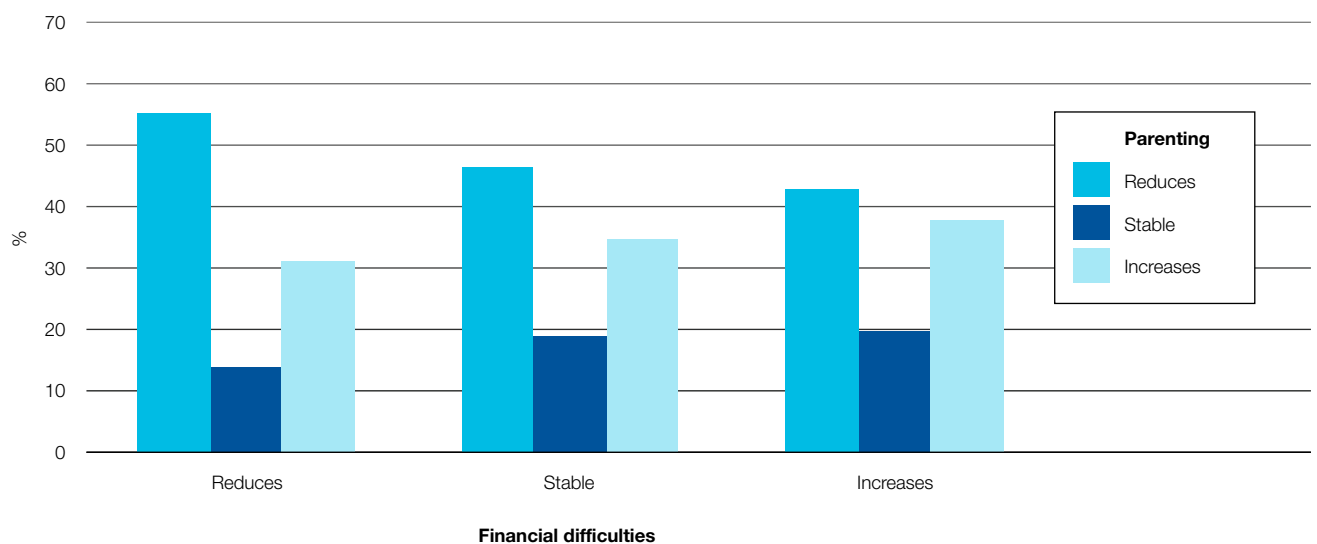


Figure 2: Changes in financial circumstances and associated changes in parenting (proportion of families)



Following the same pattern, a reduction in social support over time predicted a reduction in parenting scores, but there was no improvement in scores when social support improved.

However, changes in marital status and housing tenure were not associated with changes in parenting scores, whether these circumstances improved, remained stable or deteriorated.

Maternal health

The mental and physical health of the mother was associated with the greatest changes in parenting (see Figure 3). Deteriorating maternal health predicted reductions in parenting score but – in contrast to all other variables – improvements in health were seen

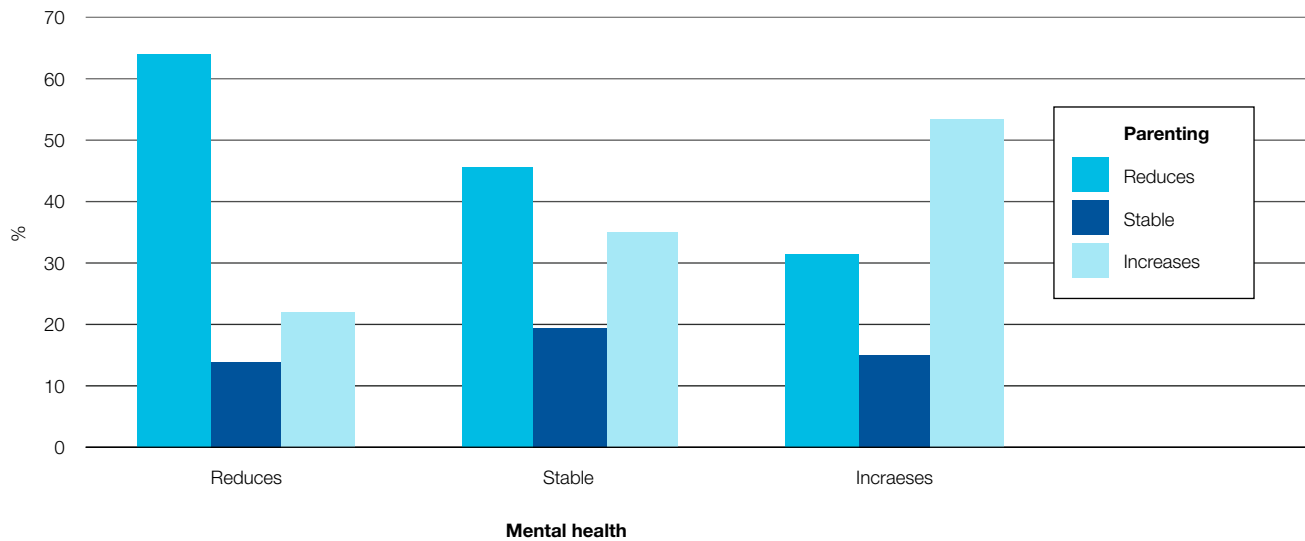
to predict increased parenting scores. The same pattern was observed for changes in the physical health of the mother.

Conclusions

The researchers concluded that:

- Parents were doing a good job in most circumstances.
- Parenting proved more sensitive to changes in maternal health and well-being than to changing socio-economic circumstances.
- The provision of financial and social support to families may prevent large numbers of children being exposed to a reduction in quality of parenting.

Figure 3: Changes in mother's mental health and associated changes in parenting (%)



However, it is unrealistic to expect that moving families out of poverty will, on its own, improve parenting.

- Greater benefit may be seen if parenting policy were to emphasise the promotion of parents' mental and physical health alongside measures to improve parenting and reduce childhood poverty.

to specific questions relating to parenting. Items were included only if they were administered at least twice during the first four years of life. They should be regarded as indicators rather than precise measures of parenting. (All data can be found in full in the appendices to the report.)

The study measured the ways in which maternal parenting changed across early childhood as a function of changes in the mother's health and socio-economic circumstances. Using data collected before the child's fourth birthday, the study developed a derived measure of parenting which contained both positive and negative aspects of the parent-child relationship. Scores for each item produced a measure of parenting available when the child was eight months old and 33 months old. This measure was shown to predict child outcomes at four and seven years of age.

About the project

ALSPAC (www.alspac.bris.ac.uk) is a birth cohort study investigating social, environmental, biological and genetic influences on the health and development of children. Data on the children has been collected bi-annually since birth. Annual data collections on the mothers' health, attitudes and behaviour have also taken place, along with some data from their partners. The current study was based on parents' reports of attitudes, feelings and behaviours recorded in response

For more information

The full report, **Parenting in ordinary families: diversity, complexity and change** by Andrea Waylen and Sarah Stewart-Brown, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Further information about the study can be obtained from: Dr Andrea Waylen, Dept of Oral and Dental Science, Bristol Dental School, Lower Maudlin Street, Bristol, BS1 2LY, UK.

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