

Poverty and Parenting in the UK: Patterns and pathways between economic hardship and mothers' parenting practices

Dr Kerris Cooper

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Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE
CASE enquiries – tel: 020 7955 6679

Key findings

Do low-income mothers parent differently?

- There are some positive differences in the parenting behaviours of low-income mothers compared to middle-income mothers.
- Where there are negative differences in parenting these are not unique to low-income mothers, but part of a broader income-parenting gradient across the full income distribution.
- These findings hold when associated factors, such as mothers' work status, are taken into account.

Is mothers' mental health a mechanism that explains the relationships between economic hardship and negative parenting?

- Mothers' mental health entirely explains the relationship between economic hardship and play activities, discipline and how close the mother feels to the child.
- Mothers' mental health partially explains the relationship between economic hardship and meeting the child's physical needs, routine meal and bedtimes and educational activities.
- Mothers' mental health does not play any role in explaining the relationship between economic hardship and trips outside of the home and hours spent watching TV and playing computer games.

Are changes in economic hardship associated with changes in mothers' mental health?

- Movements into debt, material deprivation and feeling poor are associated with a worsening of mothers' mental health.
- Movements out of debt and feeling poor are associated with improvements in mothers' mental health.

Implications for policy and practice

- Protecting families from hardship by ensuring all families have adequate incomes is likely to have benefits for both maternal mental health and parenting behaviours.
- Identifying families either in debt or at risk of debt, and providing specialist services to help parents reduce debt is likely to be helpful in reducing stress and the negative spillovers this can have on parenting.
- Providing mental health support for mothers of school-aged children (i.e. not only screening mothers of new born children) would also be beneficial, though mothers' mental health should not be addressed in isolation from addressing any financial difficulties.

Introduction

We know that [poverty negatively impacts children's outcomes](#), though less is known about how far parenting is one of the mechanisms that explains these relationships.

This is a controversial topic: There is a long history of [negative representations](#) of low-income mothers in both political discourses and mainstream media, with low-income parenting often presented as inferior to the parenting practices of more advantaged parents.

In this context this research examines to what extent there are differences in parenting across income groups, and whether these differences are unique to low-income parents. It also explores the role of mothers' mental health in explaining differences in parenting, and looks at movements into and out of economic hardship.

The research takes a different approach to existing literature on this topic. Previous studies focus on comparing [parents in poverty](#) with all other parents, which obscures differences in parenting further up the income distribution, potentially exaggerating differences and reinforcing negative representations of low-income parents. Instead this research examines the parenting of low-, middle- and high-income parents and takes middle-income parents as the appropriate reference group when drawing comparisons.

As well as analysing patterns of parenting across income groups, the research also examines relationships between debt, material deprivation and feeling poor and parenting.

In addition to new empirical evidence this paper contributes a new conceptual framework for measuring parenting across four different domains.

Methods and measures

This research is based on analysis of the [Millennium Cohort Study \(MCS\)](#) which has followed a sample initially of around 19,000 children born in the UK in the years 2000-02. The research focuses on parenting when children are aged 5 years, as early childhood is a critical period of development.

A variety of methods are used: first raw differences in parenting are examined across income groups. Second, related factors are taken into account in regression models examining how income-level is associated with parenting, independently of: mothers' work status, education, age, ethnicity, whether there are one or two parents in the household, and how many children are in the household. Next, structural equation modelling (SEM) is used to explore the different pathways between economic hardship, mothers' mental health and parenting. Finally, changes in economic hardship are examined, from when the child is aged 5 to age 7.

A variety of measures are used to capture economic hardship, including low income, material deprivation, debt and feeling poor ([additional analyses](#) not presented here also consider housing quality, overcrowding and local area characteristics). Mothers' mental health is measured using the Kessler scale (a widely used measure of psychological distress based on 6 questions related to symptoms of anxiety and depression over the last 30 days) and life satisfaction is also included as an additional indicator of mothers' wellbeing. [Further analyses](#) (not presented) also considers the role of relationship satisfaction for mothers in a relationship.

The MCS is a rich dataset and all 38 measures of parenting that are captured when children are age 5 are used in the analysis. Parenting is measured across four different domains based on the overarching goals of

different parenting practices. See [here](#) for a fuller discussion of how and why this conceptual framework was developed.

Figure 1 Conceptual framework for measuring parenting

Parenting domains	
1. Meeting child's physical needs <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nutrition• Physical exercise	2. Parent-child relationship <ul style="list-style-type: none">• How close the mother feels to the child
3. Discipline and routine <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Authoritative discipline• Harsh or permissive discipline• Routine meal and bedtimes	4. Cognitive stimulation <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Educational activities• Play activities• Trips outside of the home• Hours of TV / computer games

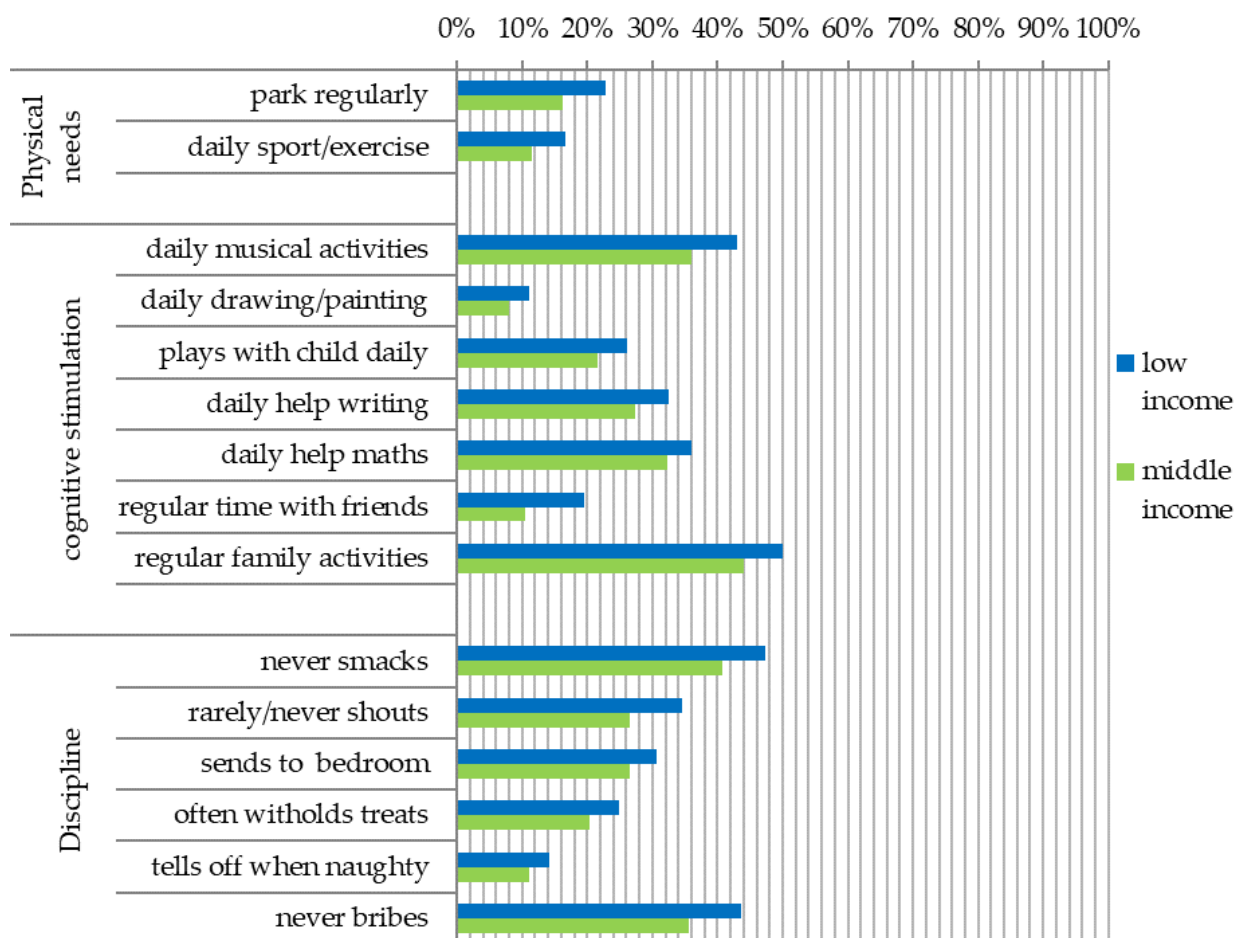
The analyses focus on the parenting behaviours of birth mothers (who represent 97% of the original sample) and excludes twins and triplets. Along with attrition from Wave 1, this results in a sample size of 14,595.

Findings

1. There are some positive differences in the parenting behaviours of low-income compared to middle-income mothers

For example, children in the lowest-income group are more likely to have someone at home helping with maths and writing every day, and more likely to have regular family activities, paint/draw, and do musical activities with their mother every day.

Figure 2: Positive differences in parenting practices of mothers in the lowest compared to the middle income group



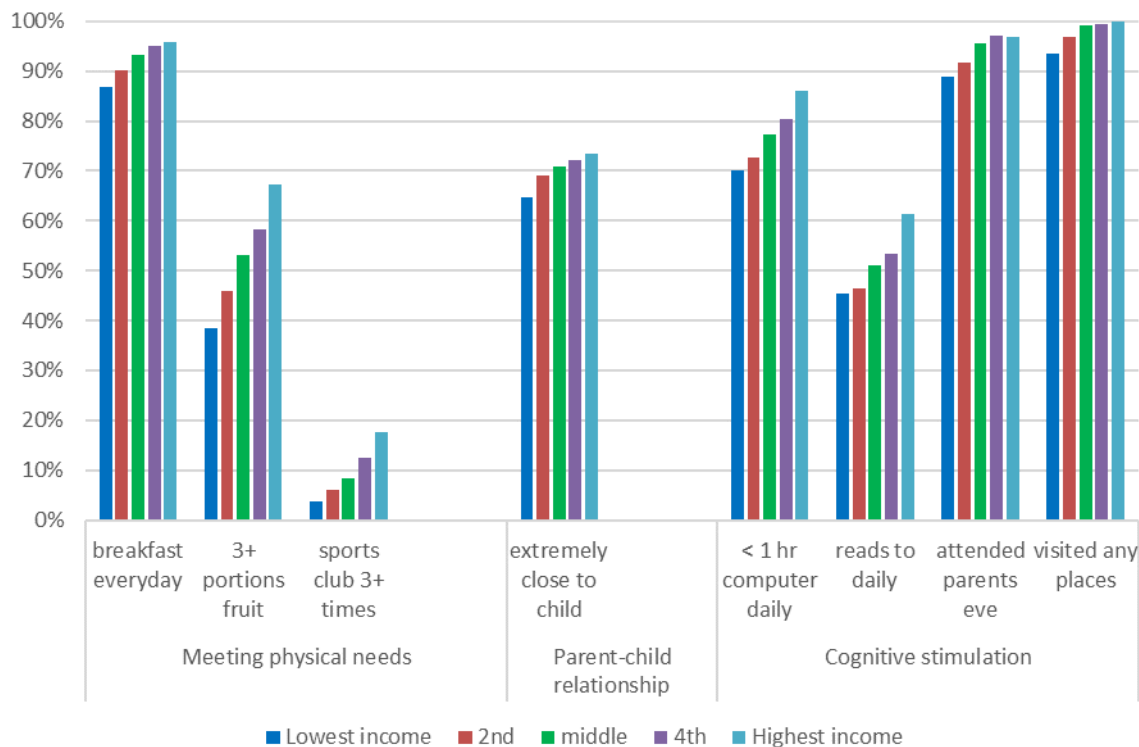
Source: Millennium Cohort Study wave 3. Income is measured by OECD equivalised income quintiles. All differences are significant at $p < .05$.

2. Negative differences in the parenting of low-income mothers are part of a broader income-parenting gradient

When all income groups are included it becomes clear that negative differences in parenting are not unique to low-income mothers, but are part of a broader pattern across income groups. For example, whilst mothers in the middle income group are more likely to report feeding their child 3+ portions of fruit a day than mothers in the lowest income group, mothers in the highest income group are even more likely to report this. Importantly, this linear income-parenting pattern suggests that differences in parenting across income groups are due to differences in income itself. Though this is not causal evidence, this interpretation of the results is consistent with [other evidence](#) on the impact of income on parenting, which is causal.

When other factors, such as maternal education and work status are accounted for in regression modelling, some of the differences in parenting across income groups lose significance, but where significant relationships remain the same pattern holds, with an income-parenting gradient. This is the case for meeting the child's physical needs, routine, trips outside of the home and hours of TV and computer.

Figure 3: Parenting behaviours that have a significant income gradient



Source: Millennium Cohort Study wave 3. Income is measured by OECD equivalised income quintiles.

3. Mothers’ mental health is a mechanism through which economic hardship is related to *some* parenting behaviours but not others

Economic hardship (debt, material deprivation and feeling poor) is associated with worse mental health for mothers and this is associated with worse parenting, however how important mothers’ mental health is in explaining these relationships differed across parenting measures.

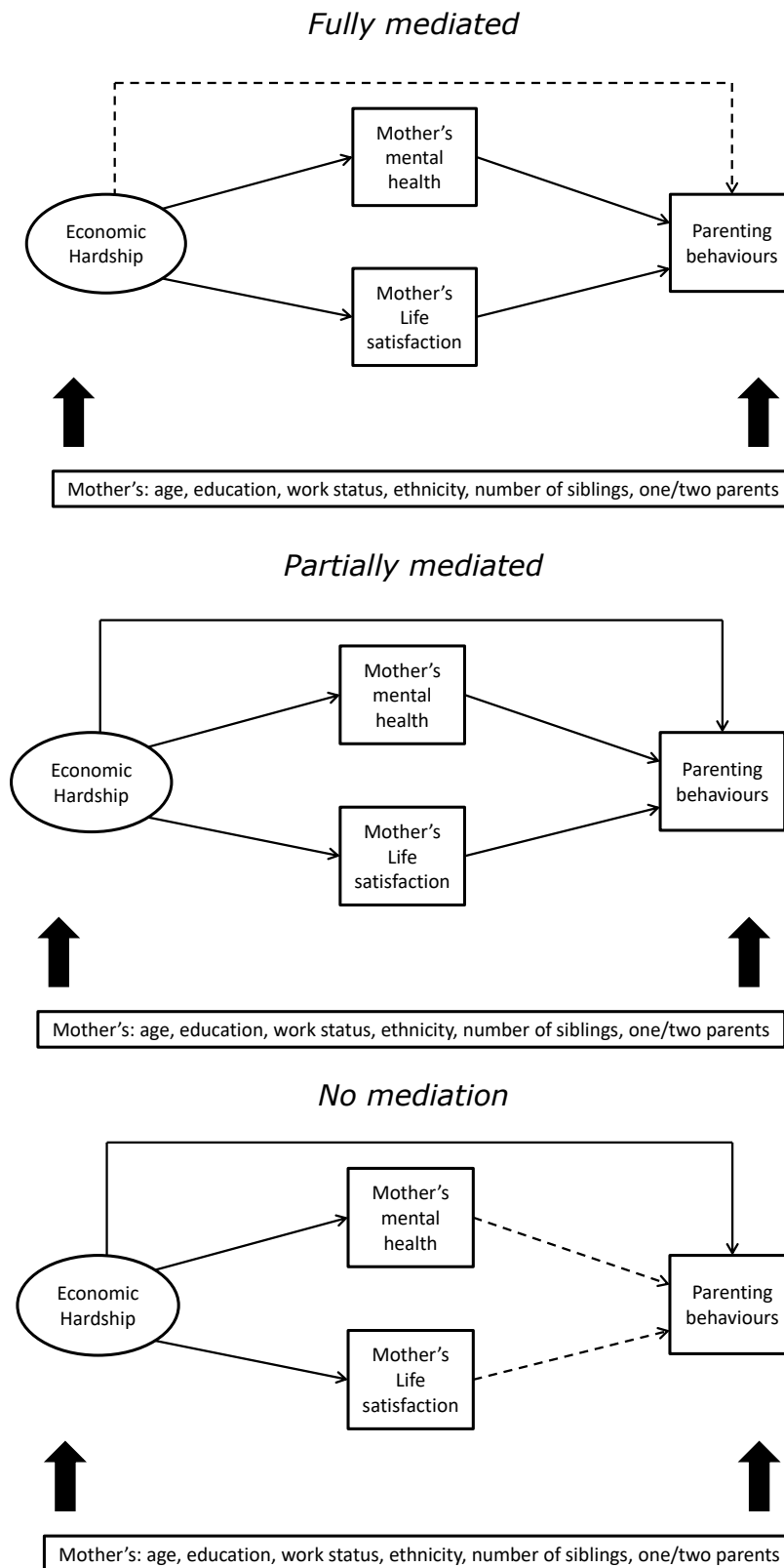
Mothers’ mental health *fully mediated* the relationship between economic hardship and play activities, how close the mother feels to the child and discipline. This means once mothers’ mental health was included in the model the direct relationship between economic hardship and these parenting behaviours was no longer significant. The strong role of

mothers' mental health in explaining these particular parenting behaviours makes intuitive sense, as they can require significant emotional resources.

Mothers' mental health *partially mediated* the relationship between economic hardship and meeting the child's physical needs, routine meal and bedtimes and educational activities. In other words mothers' mental health explained part of the relationship between economic hardship and these parenting behaviours, but the direct relationship was still significant.

Finally, mothers' mental health *did not explain any of the relationship* between economic hardship and trips outside of the home and hours spent watching TV or playing computer games. Mothers' mental health was not a mechanism through which economic hardship was associated with these parenting behaviours. Again these results seem intuitively explicable, as trips outside of the home often require money, including for travel.

Figure 4: Direct and indirect pathways between economic hardship, mothers' mental health and parenting



Notes: dashed lines indicate pathways that are *not* significant. The box along the bottom shows the factors that are controlled for.

4. Movements into/out of hardship are associated with worsening/improvements in mothers' mental health

Movements into debt, material deprivation and feeling poor are associated with a worsening of mothers' mental health. Movements out of debt and feeling poor are associated with improvements in mothers' mental health.

Changes in income poverty were not significantly associated with changes in mothers' mental health. This is possibly due to measurement error which becomes even noisier when looking at changes in income over time.

Changes in hardship are not significantly associated to changes in most parenting behaviours. This may be because change in parenting behaviours requires more time, compared to changes in mental health.

Figure 5: Analysis of movements into and out of hardship and mothers' mental health

		Mothers' mental health
Income poverty	Moving into	-
	Moving out of	-
Debt	Moving into	worsens
	Moving out of	improves
Material deprivation	Moving into	worsens
	Moving out of	-
Feeling poor	Moving into	worsens
	Moving out of	improves

Source: Millennium Cohort Study waves 3 and 4. Dashes indicate no significant results.

Summary and Conclusions

This research challenges existing evidence and dominant discourses which single out low-income parenting as deficient compared to other more economically advantaged parents. When comparisons are made across all income groups, rather than focusing on parents in poverty, it is revealed that first, there are some positive differences in the parenting of low-income compared to middle-income mothers, and second, where there are negative differences these are not unique to low-income mothers, but part of a broader income-parenting pattern. Mothers' mental health is an important mechanism in explaining the relationship between economic hardship and parenting, though it is more important for some parenting behaviours than others. These relationships are malleable: movements into/out of hardship are associated with worse/better maternal mental health. Whilst these analyses are not causal they are in line with [causal evidence](#) that income has an impact on mothers' mental health.

These findings have important policy implications. They suggest policies aimed at improving children's outcomes via parenting support ought to take into account the economic context in which parenting takes place. Protecting families from hardship by ensuring all families have adequate incomes is likely to have benefits for both maternal mental health and parenting behaviours. Identifying families either in debt or at risk of debt, and providing specialist services to help parents reduce debt is likely to be helpful in reducing stress and the negative spill-overs this can have on parenting. Preventative measures at the structural level could also make a contribution to addressing the negative consequences of debt. For example, advances on benefits, which then have to be paid back out of already low incomes, could be avoided if waiting times for benefits were reduced or eradicated; high interest rates for goods that have to be bought on credit and on payday loans could be regulated, and alternative lower-interest forms of credit provided, to protect families in hardship

from becoming trapped in debt. Finally, while it should not be addressed in isolation from financial difficulties, providing services to support the mental health of mothers of school-aged children (i.e. not only screening mothers of new born children) is also important.

These findings are particularly relevant in the current context, as family incomes and parents' mental health have come under increased pressure. Changes to social security benefits, such as the rolling out of Universal Credit, the Two Child Limit and the Benefit Cap has been accompanied by [increased hardship](#) and a [worsening of mental health](#). The Covid-19 pandemic has also [disrupted work and led to income loss](#) for many families, and repeated school closures have [increased pressure on parents](#). The pandemic has had a negative impact on mental health overall, [particularly for parents of young children](#).

Notes, acknowledgements and further information

Dr Kerris Cooper is a Senior Researcher in the Early Years team at the [Education Policy Institute](#) and Visiting Senior Fellow at the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE).

This briefing is based on Dr Cooper's PhD thesis which was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and can be accessed here <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3633/>

Some of the findings have also been published in an open-access article: [Cooper, K \(2020\) 'Are Poor Parents Poor Parents? The Relationship between Poverty and Parenting among Mothers in the UK', *Sociology*](#)

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Dr Cooper is happy to be contacted with any comments and questions. She also welcomes opportunities for potential collaboration.

Kerris.cooper@epi.org.uk

@CooperKerris

Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion

The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), within the Suntory and Toyota International Centres for Economics and Related Disciplines (STICERD). Our focus is on exploration of different dimensions of social disadvantage, particularly from longitudinal and neighbourhood perspectives, and examination of the impact of public policy.

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For further information on the work of the Centre, please contact the Centre Manager, Annie-Rose Nicholas, on:

UK+20 7955 6679 a.nicholas1@lse.ac.uk sticerd.lse.ac.uk/case

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