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Are Poor Parents *Poor* Parents? The Relationship between Poverty and Parenting among Mothers in the UK

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Abstract

Low-income parents have long been demonised in both political discourses and mainstream media, portrayed as lacking in parenting skills not just financial resources. Using the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) this article examines to what extent there are differences in the parenting of low-income mothers by examining parenting behaviours of low-, middle- and high-income mothers. The findings show that where there are negative differences in the parenting of low-income mothers these are often part of a broader income gradient that extends all the way up the distribution, rather than unique to low-income mothers. Furthermore, there are some positive differences in parenting among low-income mothers compared to middle-income mothers. These findings have important implications: low-income parents are not an unusual or deviant group parenting differently to everyone else. The findings suggest more attention ought to be given to parenting differences higher up the income distribution. In focusing on low-income parents only, existing evidence exaggerates differences and wrongly identifies low-income parents as problematic.

Keywords

child development, concerted cultivation, disadvantage, income, Millennium Cohort Study, parenting, poverty

Introduction

> Over the last few decades, attention and concern has focused on a particular sort of mother. She is portrayed as irresponsible, immature, immoral, and a potential threat to the security and stability of society as a whole. While this type of mother is accused of bad parenting, it is her status as poor and marginalised that sees her located at the centre of society's ills. (Gillies, 2007: 1)

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The demonisation of parents from low-income backgrounds has a long history. Lewis (1980) for example, describes how in the early 1900s working-class mothers were 'educated' in order to reduce infant mortality. Concerns surfaced about changes in family structure in the 1960s and 1970s (Gillies, 2007: 5) and theories of an 'underclass' and 'culture of dependency' in the 1990s (Lister, 1996). More recently the English riots in 2011 predictably led to accusations of bad parenting, with then Prime Minister David Cameron highlighting 'The question people asked over and over again [. . .] was "where are the parents?"' and concluding that 'Either there was no one at home, they didn't much care, or they'd lost control' (Cameron, 2011).

Writing about social class and parenting in the USA, Lareau (2003: 13) highlights how mainstream the demonisation of working-class parents is, not just in the media and politicians' speeches, but also in the endorsement by teachers and other professionals of middle-class parenting while 'the strategies of working-class or poor families are generally denigrated and seen as unhelpful or even harmful to children's life chances'.

In this context this article examines whether there are indeed negative differences in low-income mothers' parenting and importantly whether such differences are specific to low-income mothers, in other words whether low-income mothers are deviant as these discourses suggest. This research contributes new evidence on this topic, as most existing research focuses on parents in poverty only.

Parenting in Poverty as Different, not Deficient

A number of sociologists have challenged the notion that low-income parents are deficient in their parenting practices as political and mainstream media discourses suggest. From her ethnographic study of parenting in the USA, Lareau (2003) identified different cultural logics of childrearing across social class backgrounds. Lareau describes the parenting style of middle-class parents as a process of 'concerted cultivation', aiming at developing the child into a successful adult and cultivating skills through organised activities. By contrast, the parenting of poor or working-class parents aims at the 'accomplishment of natural growth', focusing on meeting the child's needs and looking after their well-being; aiming for children to be healthy and happy. While Lareau acknowledges that society's institutions tend to reward children whose parents' childrearing logic is of 'concerted cultivation' she argues that this approach to parenting is not superior, and indeed emphasises some of the negative consequences of this approach and some of the positive consequences of parents focusing on the 'accomplishment of natural growth'. Importantly, Lareau (2003: 5) highlights these different childrearing approaches are in part due to the economic context in which parenting takes place: ensuring children's basic needs are met is challenging in a context of economic disadvantage. Additionally, it is worth observing that many of the activities that fit with the middle-class approach Lareau describes also require financial resources, such as paying for sports clubs, music lessons and cultural trips out.

The work of Gillies (2007) also seeks to challenge the deficit model of low-income parenting. Through depth interviews with parents in England and Scotland, Gillies (2005) demonstrates how parenting is shaped by economic, cultural, social and emotional capital. Gillies (2005) documents the ways in which middle-class parents in her sample view their children as exceptional and entitled to special attention, and draw on different types of capital to protect their privilege and pass on educational advantage. By contrast, Gillies found that working-class parents did not expect special treatment for their children, had a more difficult relationship with their child's school and less access to resources including social and cultural capital. Despite this Gillies highlights the great efforts working-class parents went to in helping their children navigate their disadvantaged positions. Like Lareau, Gillies describes different aims of working-class parents for their children, based on the reality of the disadvantages they face.

Finally, work by Daly and Kelly (2015) based on semi-structured interviews with low-income parents in Northern Ireland also highlights the commitment of low-income parents to be 'good parents', though this is in the context of being constrained by resources and might look different to notions of good parenting shared by parents who are better off. Daly and Kelly (2015: 193–194) describe children as being the most important focal point of the family and parents often going without in order to provide for them as well as going to great efforts to protect their children from the family's struggles and the disadvantage they faced in the outside world.

Though employing different sociological frameworks, what is common among these works is the emphasis on characterising low-income parenting as different rather than deficient – but acknowledging there are differences to be explained nonetheless. In their own qualitative research the authors justify the logic of these differences and challenge the idea that low-income parenting is problematic.

Quantifying Differences in Low-Income Parenting

The qualitative studies described above offer insight into how low-income parents approach parenting and what processes shape this, as well as importantly revealing processes that shape the parenting of those who are financially better off. However, in order to understand *how much* difference there is in low-income parenting in the first place we need to look to quantitative evidence. There is little quantitative evidence on parenting within the sociological literature; most of the evidence on poverty and parenting analyses parenting as a mediator between poverty[1] and children's outcomes (Burgess et al., 2006; Dickerson and Popli, 2016; Gutman and Feinstein, 2010; Violato et al., 2011). Experience of poverty has been found to be associated with a number of differences in parenting, including children being read to less frequently, a lower likelihood of library visits, lower maternal warmth and irregular meal and bedtimes (Holmes and Kiernan, 2013). In terms of the size of the effect a number of studies find that parenting explains around 40–50% of the negative relationship between poverty and children's outcomes (Holmes and Kiernan, 2013; Kiernan and Huerta, 2008; Kiernan and Mensah, 2011).

One important exception to this body of evidence, which is sociologically orientated, is the work of Dermott and Pomati (2016) which analyses the importance of poverty, education and time for parenting practices. The authors included seven measures of parenting, related to educational activities, leisure activities and family meal times. They found that poverty, whether measured objectively (less than 60% median income) or subjectively (feeling poor) is *not* significantly related to parenting. There were two exceptions to this which can be interpreted as positive differences: parents in income poverty were more likely to watch television with their child and more frequently eat evening meals with their child. The authors concluded that 'despite the frequently made association between poverty and a lack of appropriate parenting, there is no clear evidence for this relationship in our findings' (2016: 135).

An important limitation of the existing evidence, including that of Dermott and Pomati (2016), is that it focuses on parents in poverty rather than analysing parenting across the income distribution. This is problematic for two reasons; first, in focusing on parents in poverty it potentially obscures differences in parenting further up the income distribution, perhaps also exaggerating differences between parents in poverty and all other parents. Second, and more fundamentally, focusing only on those who are disadvantaged can contribute to problematizing those who are disadvantaged (Dean and Platt, 2016).

There are also a number of other gaps in existing evidence: there is no attempt to distinguish whether differences reflect low-income parents behaving in ways we would consider to be inadequate for children's healthy development or whether the differences are actually an artefact of the benchmark being pushed up by the most advantaged parents. It is also unclear how much diversity there is in low-income parenting; whether most parents experiencing poverty are parenting differently, or whether these differences are actually driven by an extreme minority. Finally, existing studies focus on a narrow range of parenting behaviours preventing analysis of whether low income is related to different types of parenting behaviours in different ways. For example, Lareau's work would lead us to expect minimal differences in meeting children's physical needs but bigger differences when it comes to extra-curricular activities which are associated with a concerted cultivation approach to parenting. This article seeks to address these gaps.

Analytical Approach

I approach this analysis differently from previous research in a number of ways. First, instead of comparing those in poverty with all other parents, I analyse parenting behaviours across income quintiles. This is for two reasons: first, to allow for comparisons between parents with low incomes and parents with middle incomes. This is important because poor parents are often represented as being deficient in their parenting compared with parents who are not poor (Magnuson and Duncan, 2002: 104; Taylor et al., 2000). Middle-income parents are therefore the implicit reference group in the dominant discourses. It may be the case for instance that low-income parents parent differently to high-income parents or the rich, but not compared with those on median incomes. When comparisons are made between low-income parents and everyone else, including the rich, differences may be exaggerated.

Second, using income quintiles enables an assessment of the association between income and parenting behaviours across the income distribution. This will identify whether any differences in parenting between mothers on low and middle incomes are because low-income parents are a distinct group that are uniquely different (again suggested in some discourses), or whether any differences are part of a broader pattern, of which the lowest-income parents might do worst, but the median-income parents still parent differently to those at the top.

Additionally, if there are significant differences in the parenting behaviours of mothers in the lowest- compared to the middle-income group, this analysis seeks to examine how common these differences are among low-income parents and whether they indicate low-income parents merely do less of the ‘ideal’ parenting behaviours (e.g. reading with their child four times a week instead of five times a week), or whether their parenting behaviours would actually give cause for concern.

Finally, this analysis will distinguish between different types of parenting behaviours allowing for any differences in the relationship with income by type of parenting behaviour to become clear.

Using this analytical approach this article aims to answer the following research questions:

- Do low-income parents parent differently compared with middle-income parents?
- Are low-income parents a unique group behaving differently from all other income groups?
- Are low-income parents less likely to parent in ways that are considered to be ‘ideal’ or are they more likely to parent in ways that are considered to be ‘poor’?

What Is ‘Good’ Parenting?

The concept of parenting is complex and multifaceted and what counts as *good* parenting is contested: professional parenting advice is constantly evolving and critics have highlighted that traditionally white middle-class definitions have been favoured presenting working-class parenting or parenting across different ethnic groups as inferior (Coll and Pachter, 2002; Magnuson and Duncan, 2002: 104; Taylor et al., 2000). A further difficulty in defining good parenting is not only is there diversity in parenting practices across different contexts but the same parenting practices have been found to have different effects depending on a range of factors including the gender and ethnicity of the child (Deater-Deckard et al., 1996; Gutman and Feinstein, 2010). Nevertheless, there is a wealth of evidence which suggests certain parenting behaviours tend to have positive/negative associations with children’s outcomes, though there is a lack of consistency in the measures of parenting used. In order to take a transparent and comprehensive approach to measuring parenting I first briefly review the main theories and evidence of what is good parenting before proposing my own conceptual framework for measuring parenting based on children’s outcomes and the associated goals and practices that relate to these outcomes.

There are three main theories that explain the relationship between parenting and children’s outcomes. The first is Baumrind’s (1966, 1991, 2005) typology of parenting styles based on two dimensions: levels of demandingness (behavioural control and monitoring) and levels of responsiveness (warmth, support and reasoned communication). Studies that conceptualise and measure parenting in this way have consistently found that an authoritative parenting style, characterised by both high demandingness and high supportiveness, is associated with better outcomes for children and adolescents compared with other parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991; Baumrind and Black, 1967; Chan and Koo, 2011).

A second dominant theory of parenting is that of attachment theory, which posits that the bond between children and their main caregiver is crucial for children's development and later outcomes. Having a 'secure' or healthy attachment with the parent provides children with a 'secure base' from which they can comfortably leave and explore (Bowlby, 1979: 132) and provides a template for future relationships with others (Holmes, 1993: 77). In terms of parenting behaviours that foster this secure attachment, this theory emphasises the importance of sensitivity and responsiveness, for example holding and comforting a child when they cry, which enables the child to feel secure and also teaches them they can 'safely express negative emotion' and the parent will respond in a way that makes them feel better (Moullin et al., 2014: 9). Studies informed by attachment theory have found that children who have a secure bond with their main caregiver develop healthier psychological dispositions (such as trusting others, not being overly dependent or self-reliant) (Bowlby, 1979) as well as better physical health, cognitive and language outcomes (Moullin et al., 2014: 11).

Finally, social learning theory maintains that children learn through positive and negative reinforcement of their actions. When a child's actions have a positive effect, for example they are rewarded for their behaviour; this provides an incentive to repeat that behaviour in the future, and when a child's actions have negative consequences such as punishment, they avoid repeating these actions again (Bandura, 1977: 17). In terms of children's early socialisation this means if children are not taught to respond to social stimuli the child will fail to develop social behaviours (Patterson, 1969: 343). Because both positive and negative reinforcement are important to this theory the parenting behaviours that are emphasised are again responsiveness but also discipline.

Taken together these three theories provide useful frameworks for thinking about what ought to be included in any measure of parenting, though there are other aspects of parenting not included that evidence suggests are important for children's development. For example, there is much evidence on the importance of the home learning environment for children's cognitive development (Melhuish et al., 2008; Washbrook, 2010). In terms of health outcomes children's diet and the amount of physical activity they do is important (Janssen and LeBlanc, 2010). Shouting at the child, smacking, having an irregular bedtime and watching more hours of television have negative associations with children's outcomes (Hobcraft and Kiernan, 2010; Jones et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2013; Scott et al., 2014). As we would expect there is evidence that different parenting behaviours are important for different types of outcomes, for example Washbrook (2010) found that the home learning environment was particularly important for children's cognitive development, parental sensitivity was important for children's socio-emotional outcomes and parents' health behaviours were important for children's health outcomes.

Taking into account the main theories and evidence on parenting it is clear that a range of different parenting behaviours are important for children's development, though many studies of parenting do not give explicit justification for the parenting measures they focus on. The aims for this conceptual framework for measuring parenting are to be theoretically informed, comprehensive in including all parenting practices likely to be important for children's development and organised conceptually into parenting domains that are both policy-relevant and replicable in other research. Given that this article is concerned with parenting in terms of what parents do to promote their child's well-being, I begin by considering children's outcomes and work back to which parenting practices are likely to be important for these.

Children's outcomes can be broadly grouped into physical health, social and emotional well-being and cognitive development (Waldfogel, 2006: 11). From these I consider the overall parenting goals that relate to each of these outcomes, for example the practice of feeding a child has the overall goal of meeting the child's physical needs.

Specific parenting practices are organised under one of the four parenting goals outlined in Table 1, although many parenting behaviours will contribute to multiple goals simultaneously. For example, reading to a child will be cognitively stimulating but is also likely to contribute to a more positive parent–child relationship. Specific practices will change as the child ages but arguably they are still aimed at the same overarching goals. For example, facilitation of learning may take the form of play when the child is a baby and as the child ages this will change to teaching letters and numbers and eventually include activities such as helping with homework.

The conceptual framework outlined here will be used to inform the measurement of parenting in this article, with specific measures mapped onto the following four parenting domains:

1. meeting the child's physical needs;
2. the parent–child relationship;
3. discipline and routine;
4. cognitive stimulation.

Data and Methods

This analysis makes use of the third wave of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) when children are aged five years.[2] The MCS is a birth cohort study of around 19,000 children from England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland (Hansen, 2012). The sample is clustered geographically and includes boosted samples of families from areas of high child poverty in England. The survey started in 2001/2002 when the children were nine months old, and there have since been six more waves when the children were three, five, seven, 11, 14 and the most recently collected data in 2018 when the children were 17 years old. For all analyses the sample used is restricted to natural mothers only (who are 97% of the original sample). This is because of expected differences in parenting between mothers and fathers, as well as parenting of step, foster and adoptive parents or grandparents/ other relatives. Twins and triplets are also excluded from the sample. The effective sample size is therefore reduced from 15,246 to 14,595.[3] For analysis and discussion of item non-response see Appendix 2.

Table 1. The relationship between child outcomes, parenting goals and parenting practices.

Child outcomes	Parenting goals	Examples of associated parenting behaviours
Physical health	Meeting the child's physical needs	Feeding, washing, physical activity
Social and emotional development	Meeting the child's emotional needs	Warmth, affection, responsiveness. These types of parenting behaviours are also likely to foster secure parent–child relationships as described in attachment theory
	Socialising the child's behaviour through discipline and structure	Enforcement of rules, styles of discipline, routine, supervision and monitoring. These types of parenting behaviours incorporate some of the focus from the parenting style typology as well as social learning theory
Cognitive development	Facilitation of learning and cognitive stimulation	For example, teaching, reading, playing and other activities that are cognitively stimulating such as talking to the child

The wave when children are aged five was chosen because the early years period has not only received a lot of political attention (e.g. Allen, 2011; Field, 2010), but there is also evidence which suggests that this is an important period because development at these early ages occurs at an accelerated rate and also influences development at later ages (Feinstein and Duckworth, 2006). Therefore, children's environments and experiences at this age are of particular significance.

The analysis focuses on unadjusted raw differences in parenting by income quintile. It does not control for any factors associated with low income because it is important to adequately establish whether there are differences in parenting in the first place, before attempting to unpick what contributing factors may explain some of these, such as maternal education or work hours. Given that both the range of parenting measures and the comparison across the income distribution has not yet been explored, estimating the bivariate relationships is a substantial task in itself.

I estimate binary logistic regression models to assess the relationship between income quintile and 'ideal' and 'poor' parenting behaviours. Income is measured using the derived Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) equivalised household net income quintiles, which takes into account differences in household size (Hansen, 2014: 86). Sample weights are used for all analyses, to adjust for the stratified cluster sample design used (more information about can be found in Plewis, 2007a, 2007b).

Measuring Parenting

There are 38 measures of parenting as well as one measure of how good a parent respondents think they are, all of which are included in the analysis presented here. Throughout the analysis these parenting measures are organised into the parenting domains outlined in the conceptual framework. A number of parenting behaviours could fit into two or more of these categories simultaneously, but to save repetition each parenting measure is grouped into one primary parenting domain (see Table 2).

The majority of the parenting measures are ordinal with five or more categories. However, in order to answer the research question ‘Are low-income parents less likely to parent in ways that are considered to be “ideal” or are they more likely to parent in ways that are considered to be “poor”?’ the measures were recoded into two sets of binary variables, one concentrated on the ‘ideal’ end comparing the best categories to the rest, and one binary variable to capture what would be considered as ‘poor’ parenting compared to all other categories (see Appendix 1 for details).

Some might object to these categorisations of parenting as being inherently biased towards middle-class parenting. Idealising the top categories arguably endorses intensive (or ‘helicopter’ parenting), typically associated with the middle classes (Bristow, 2015). However, for the purpose of exploring differences in parenting behaviours it seems clear that doing more positive behaviours (such as reading to their child) and less of the behaviours that are negative (such as shouting), can be evaluated as better or worse comparatively (though precisely where to draw the line is not always clear). The analysis is also restricted by the data themselves, which, while rich with many parenting measures, could be critiqued for mostly including measures which reflect typically middle-class ideals of parenting, for example focusing on activities that are characteristic of ‘concerted cultivation’.

In the absence of evidence-based guidelines two approaches could be taken for deciding which categories to include in the ‘ideal’ and ‘poor’ parenting measures. A distribution-based approach could be used, taking a certain proportion of the sample from the top and bottom to define ‘ideal’ and ‘poor’ (e.g. top 30% and bottom 30%). The problem with this is that many measures are skewed towards the ‘ideal’ end of parenting behaviours, often with more than 50% of the sample represented in the top category (see Appendix 1 for the distributions of all parenting measures). An alternative approach is to use the categories themselves, simply selecting the top and bottom categories as representing ‘ideal’ and ‘poor’ parenting. However, this approach faces the same issues of a skewed distribution with the lowest categories often including less than 1% of the sample; this would make comparisons of ‘poor’ parenting less meaningful if categories were constructed that applied to almost none of the respondents. It would also place undue emphasis on the scales constructed for each question. I therefore use a combination of both approaches: behaviours were categorised as ‘ideal’ by taking the top categories that included the top 5% of the sample (as mentioned this was often much more than 5%, so in most cases amounted to taking the top category). Behaviours were categorised as ‘poor’ by taking the bottom categories that included the bottom 5% of the sample (this often meant taking the bottom two or three categories). This allowed for a consistent approach to recoding the measures and minimised the subjectivity of the process. Appendix 1 presents descriptive statistics for each of the binary parenting measures alongside the distributions of the original measures they are based on.

A couple of caveats to the measures are worth observing; since this approach is based on the assumption that a higher frequency of good parenting behaviours is always better (and a lower frequency of good behaviours is worse), this has meant that often extreme categories are counted as ‘ideal’. However, it is questionable whether the most extreme

Table 2. Measures of parenting from MCS wave 3 mapped onto the conceptual framework.

Parenting domain	MCS wave 3 parenting measures
Meeting physical needs	How many days a week does [child] usually eat breakfast? On a typical day, how many portions of fresh, frozen, tinned or dried fruit does [child] eat? How often do you play sports or physically active games outdoors or indoors with [child]? On average how many days a week does [child] go to a club or class to do sport or any other physical activity like swimming, gymnastics, football, dancing? How often do you take [child] to the park or to an outdoor playground? How often do you [or your partner] take part in physical activities (e.g. swimming, walking) with [child]?
Parent–child relationship	Overall, how close would you say you are to [child]?
Discipline and routine	How often do you do the following when [child] is naughty? – Send to bedroom/naughty chair, etc. – Take away treats – Tell [him/her] off – Try to reason with [him/her] – Smack [him/her] – Shout at [him/her] – Bribe [him/her] (e.g. with sweets, or a treat) – Ignore [him/her] When you give [child] an instruction or make a request to do something, how often do you make sure that [he/she] does it? On weekdays during term time, does [child] go to bed at a regular time? Does [child] have meals at regular times?
Cognitive stimulation	Over the past 12 months, which, if any, of the places on this card has [child] been to? 1. Play, pantomime, music concert, circus or other live show 2. Art gallery, museum or historical site 3. Zoo, aquarium, wildlife reserve or farm 4. Theme park or funfair 5. Cinema 6. Professional sporting event as a spectator 7. None On a normal weekday during term time, how many hours does [child] spend watching television, videos or DVDs? On a normal weekday during term time, how many hours does [child] spend using a computer or playing electronic games outside school lessons? How often do you read to [child]? How often do you tell stories to [child] not from a book? How often do you play music, listen to music, sing songs or nursery rhymes, dance or do other musical activities with [child]? How often do you draw, paint or make things with [child]? How often do you play with toys or games indoors with [child]?

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued)

Parenting domain	MCS wave 3 parenting measures
	How often does [child] spend time with [his/her] friends outside school? How often do all or most of your family spend an evening or part of the weekend at home, doing things together such as watching television or playing an indoor game? Does *anyone* at home help [child] with reading (including a homework book from school)? How often? Does *anyone* at home help [child] with writing? How often? Does *anyone* at home help [child] with numbers, counting and adding up? How often? Over the past 12 months, how often has [child] been to a library (not a school library)? During this school year has anyone at home been to a parents evening or similar event?

categories are necessarily ideal. For example, watching television never or less than an hour a day might be considered less than optimal and moderate amounts of television may be stimulating. Nevertheless, these categories represent the top end of the spectrum in terms of parental input.

Finally, an important limitation is that the parenting measures are self-reported. Inevitably social desirability bias (Krumpal, 2013) will mean that certain behaviours, such as smacking, will be under-reported and others, such as portions of fruit consumed, will be over-reported. Some of the more sensitive questions were answered anonymously using the self-completion questionnaire which should reduce this problem. However, these are still not direct measures of parenting behaviours but are reflections from parents themselves on their own behaviours.

Results

Figures 1–6 present the results in a series of bar charts which show the percentage of parents who report particular ‘ideal’ or ‘poor’ parenting, across the five income groups. Results are only included in the bar charts where there is a significant difference (at 95%) between mothers in the low- and middle-income group. All charts have the same scale from 0–100%; though this makes some of the smaller significant differences less visible this is more transparent and puts parenting differences in context.

Do Low-Income Parents Parent Differently Compared with Middle-Income Parents?

Overall, there are significant differences in parenting between mothers in the lowest- and middle-income groups. Only 11 out of the 72 measures showed no significant difference (at 95%). There are 16 measures of parenting where mothers in the lowest-income group are more likely to report ‘ideal’ parenting behaviours than middle-income mothers, as

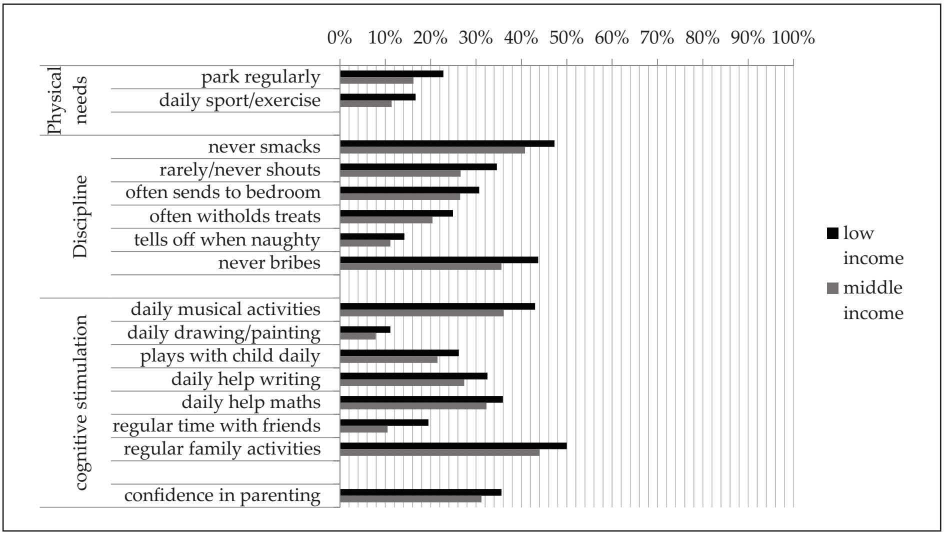

Figure 1. 'Ideal' parenting behaviours that significantly more low-income mothers report doing than middle-income mothers.

shown in Figure 1. These positive differences in low-income parenting are mainly related to discipline and cognitively stimulating activities. For the majority of these measures (12 of the 16) mothers in the lowest-income group have a greater probability than the middle-income group of doing both the 'ideal' and 'poor' type of parenting behaviour; that is, they are over-represented in both extreme categories.

Are Low-Income Parents a Unique Group Behaving Differently from All Other Income Groups?

For over half of the parenting behaviours analysed (45 of the 72) low-income mothers were significantly more likely to be doing worse than middle-income mothers. Importantly, where there are negative differences in parenting the majority of these differences between low-income and middle-income mothers (33 of the 45) are actually part of a wider gradient across *all* income groups rather than differences that are specific to low-income mothers only (see Figures 2–5).[4] That is to say that the probability of being in the 'poor' parenting categories decreases with an increase in income and for the 'ideal' parenting behaviours the probability of doing these behaviours increases with income.

Only 12 of the (45) negative differences in parenting were unique to mothers in the lowest-income quintile. However, as can be seen from Figure 6 although only the differences between mothers in the lowest/two lowest-income groups reach statistical significance compared to middle-income mothers the pattern still clearly shows an income gradient across the full income distribution. Furthermore, the differences are small, for instance, as can be seen in Figure 6, while 60% of low-income mothers report their child always has a regular bedtime this only increases to 64% for middle-income mothers.

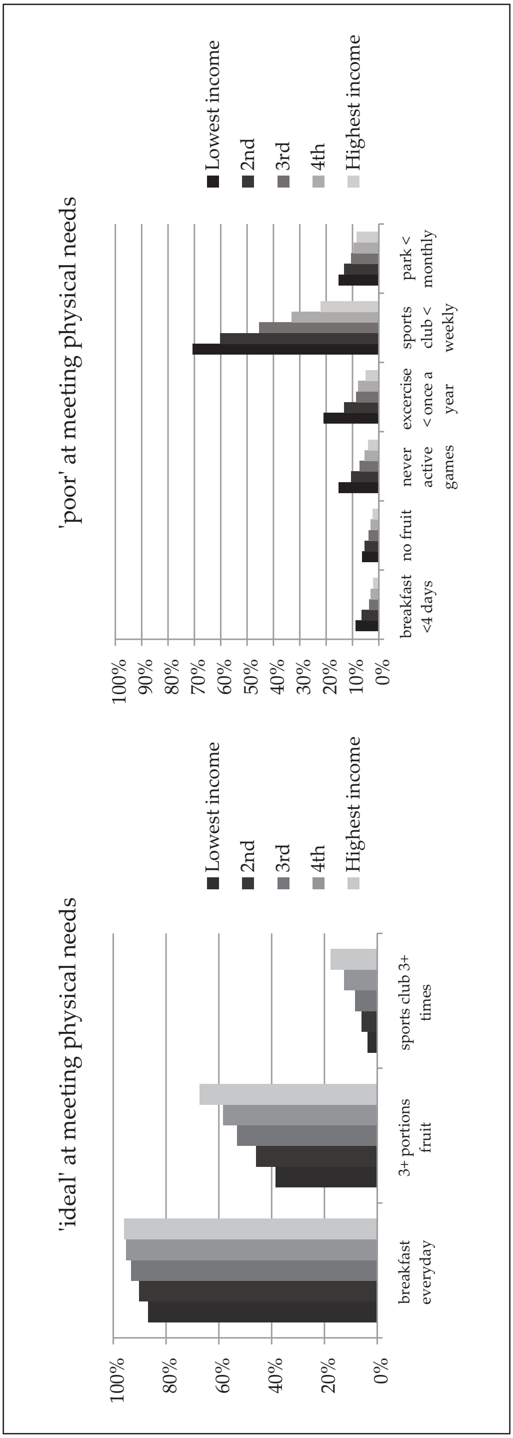

Figure 2. Parenting measures related to meeting physical needs that have a significant income gradient.

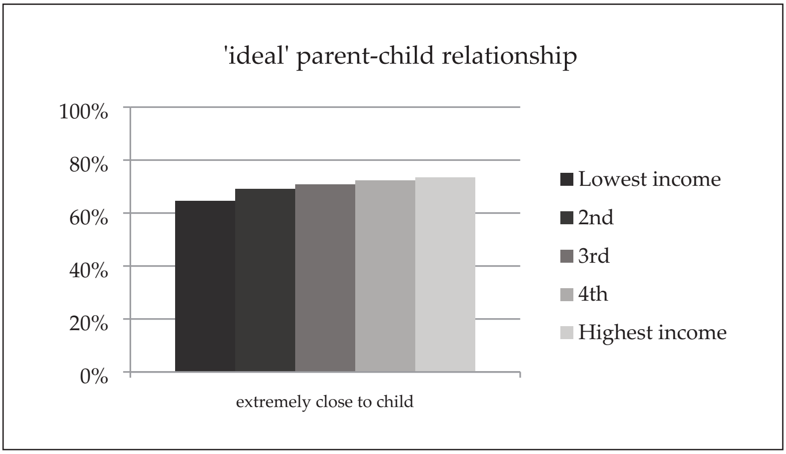

Figure 3. Measure related to the parent–child relationship that has a significant income gradient.

Given the attention that low-income parenting receives it is a striking finding that most differences in parenting are not specific to parents on low incomes, rather there is a gradient across all income groups. Further, almost half of the differences that are specific to low-income parents only relate to positive differences in parenting of mothers in the lowest-income group.

Are Low-Income Parents Less Likely to Parent in Ways That Are Considered to Be 'Ideal' or Are They More Likely to Parent in Ways That Are Considered to Be 'Poor'?

Where there are significant negative differences in parenting between mothers in the lowest- and middle-income group, the majority of these (27 of the 45) relate to mothers in the lowest-income group being over-represented in the 'poor' parenting categories. It is worth reiterating however, that it is still a minority of low-income mothers who report 'poor' parenting as can be seen from Figures 2, 4, 5 and 6.

Discussion and Conclusion

The qualitative literature on poverty and parenting has focused on explaining low-income parenting as different rather than deficient and illuminating the processes that shape these differences. This article addresses a gap in the quantitative evidence on parenting and poverty, by analysing to what extent there *are* differences in parenting across income groups and the size of any such differences. The findings demonstrate that although there are significant differences in parenting between low- and middle-income mothers, there are important qualifications to these differences. First, most of these differences were

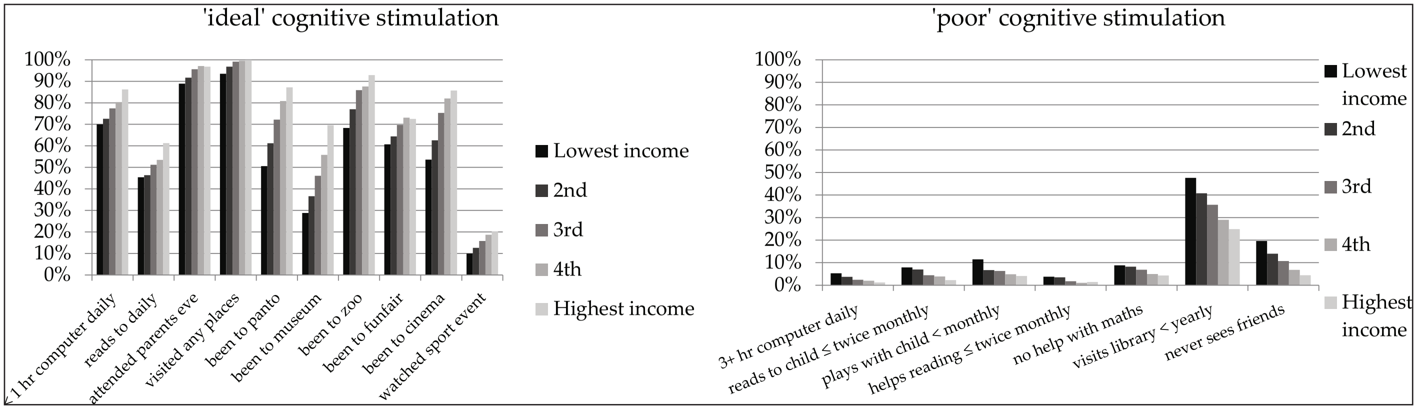

Figure 4. Parenting measures related to discipline and routine that have a significant income gradient.

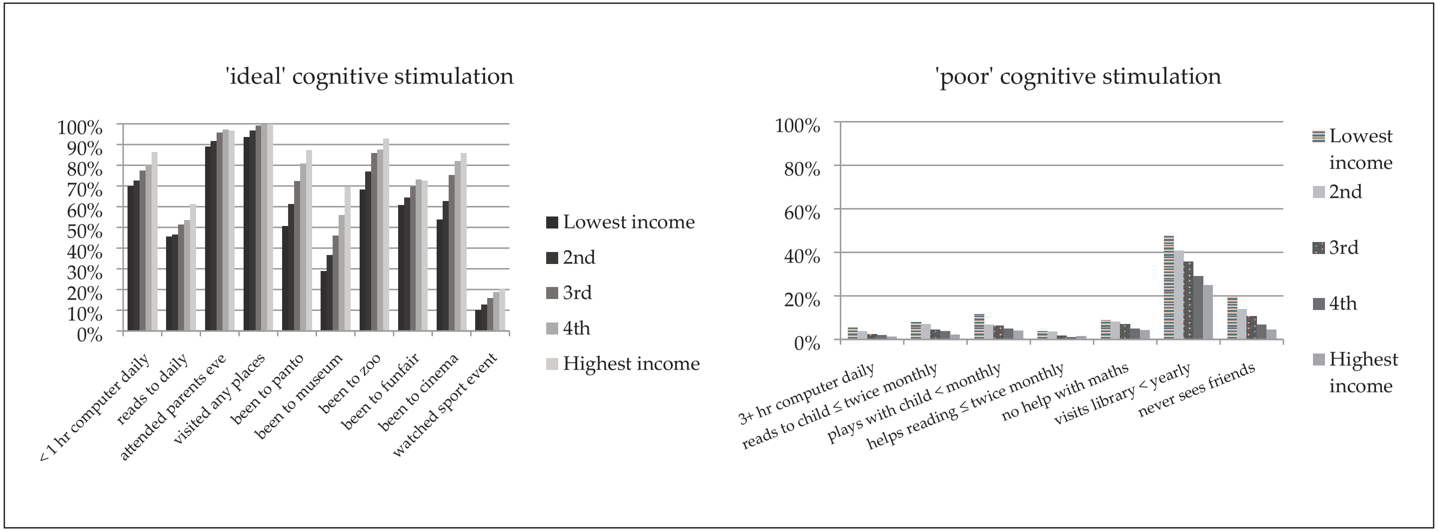

Figure 5. Parenting measures related to cognitive stimulation that have a significant income gradient.

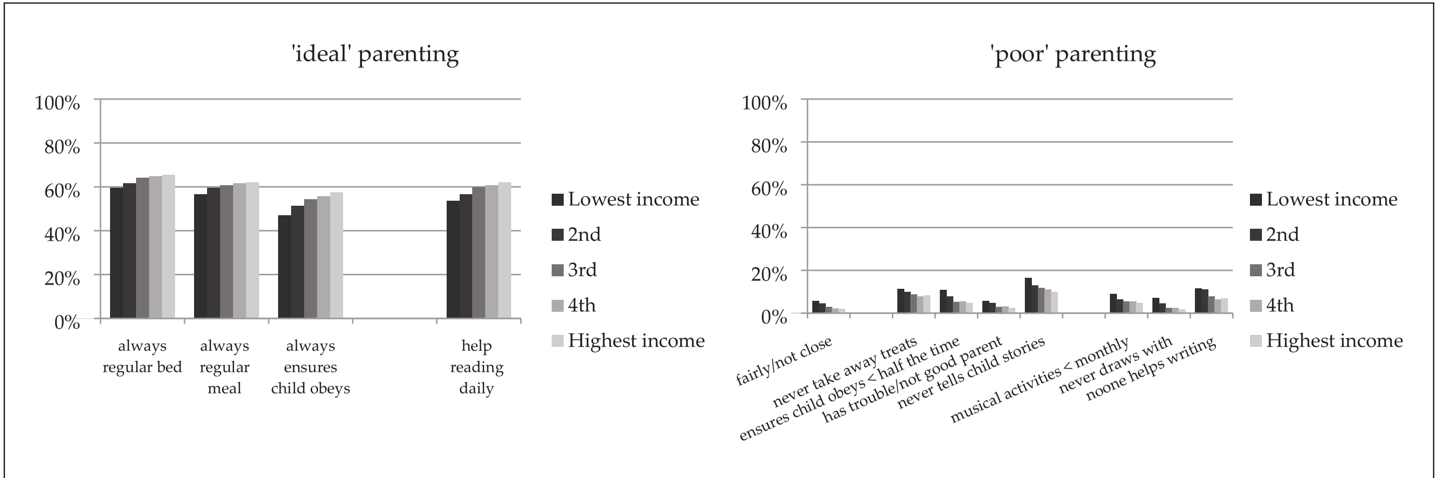

Figure 6. Significant differences in parenting (compared to the middle-income group) that are unique to the lowest-income quintiles only.

found to be part of a broader gradient in parenting across all income groups. Second, although low-income mothers are more likely to report 'poor' parenting behaviours, it is still a minority of low-income mothers that describe their parenting in this way and likewise, still a large proportion (often around 50%) of mothers in the lowest-income group report 'ideal' parenting behaviours. Finally, for some parenting behaviours low-income mothers are actually *more* likely to behave in 'ideal' ways 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 paint/draw, do musical activities and play games with their mother every day. Parents in the lowest-income group are also more likely to report never smacking and never or rarely shouting at their child when naughty. These findings of positive differences are in line with Dermott and Pomati's (2016) analysis which found that parents in poverty were more likely to report having family time with their children. They also support assertions based on qualitative evidence that low-income parents go to great efforts to support and provide for their children (Daly and Kelly, 2015; Gillies, 2005).

This article also developed a new framework for analysing parenting across four different domains: meeting physical needs, the parent–child relationship, discipline and routine and cognitive stimulation. Based on Lareau's (2003) ethnographic research we would expect fewer differences in parenting related to meeting the child's physical needs, as low-income parents would be focused on 'accomplishment of natural growth' and more differences related to cognitively stimulating activities, as middle-income parents aim at 'concerted cultivation'. However, the findings do not neatly map onto this framework, as the positive differences described above demonstrate, which relate mostly to low-income mothers reporting more frequent activities that facilitate cognitive stimulation. Furthermore, a number of negative differences are found in low-income parenting related to meeting physical needs, including how often the child has breakfast and how many portions of fruit the child has per day.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this study is that it relies on self-reported parenting measures and is therefore prone to social desirability bias. Middle-class parents tend to be more familiar with expert advice on parenting (Lareau, 2003: 248), and may therefore be more susceptible to social desirability bias. One implication of this is that differences between low- and middle-income mothers may be over-estimated if middle-income mothers are under-reporting negative parenting practices and over-reporting positive parenting practices more than low-income mothers.

This research has focused on quantifying the extent of differences in parenting across income groups rather than seeking to explore the mechanisms that explain any such differences; as outlined in the literature review qualitative research is much better placed to explore the complex processes at play. However, future quantitative research could contribute to unpicking some of these income-related patterns found in parenting. For example the positive differences in parenting related to cognitive stimulation, whereby low-income mothers are more likely to report helping with maths and writing as well as drawing and musical activities every day, may be explained by the mother having more time with the child and could therefore be related to differences in work hours. It could also be more directly related to financial resources which restrict the kinds of activities the mother can do with the child, resulting in more activities with the child in the home rather than organised activities outside of the home which are likely to cost more. Some of the largest differences that show an income gradient are related to trips outside of the home, which lend support to this suggestion.

The parenting measures could also be further developed in future research. Having been explored individually it would be useful to combine them into domain-specific parenting indices. This would give a better understanding of the overall experience of the child than can be gained from focusing on individual parenting measures. While some behaviours are clearly important in themselves, such as having breakfast every day, other behaviours may be substitutive. For instance, a parent may rarely do painting or drawing with their child but may do many other creative games and activities. Parenting indices would go some way towards addressing this.

Conclusion

This article makes three main contributions to the literature on low-income parenting. In examining parenting behaviours across the income distribution it reveals an income gradient in many parenting behaviours as well as positive differences between low- and middle-income parenting. These findings are not evident in most previous studies, because often the focus is on parents in poverty only, thereby exaggerating differences between low-income parents and other parents and reinforcing the notion that low-income parents are uniquely deviant. Second, unlike previous studies this article distinguishes the ways in which parenting behaviours differ for low-income mothers – specifically whether low-income mothers are doing less ‘ideal’ parenting behaviours or whether they are doing more ‘poor’ parenting behaviours. Finally, this analysis offers a comprehensive overview of the relationship between income and parenting by examining all available measures of parenting in what is a considerably rich dataset. Furthermore, in doing so it has proposed a new framework for measuring parenting behaviours across four domains: meeting physical needs; the parent–child relationship; discipline and routine; and cognitive stimulation.

The findings have important implications for our understanding of the relationship between income and parenting. The demonisation of poor parents that is prevalent in media and political rhetoric is unjustified. While there were significant differences in parenting by income group for most of the parenting measures these differences were small; the majority of parents regardless of income were more likely to report ‘ideal’ rather than ‘poor’ parenting. Furthermore, differences were not always negative. In identifying an income gradient for many parenting behaviours this work has raised important questions about the difference income can make to parenting across the full income distribution and suggests attention should not be concentrated on low-income parents only.

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Notes

1. Often measured as below 60% of median income, though Kiernan and Huerta (2008) measure economic deprivation as a latent variable including income poverty, housing tenure and financial difficulties. Some studies also incorporate measures of the persistence of poverty (Holmes and Kiernan, 2013; Kiernan and Mensah, 2011).
2. The survey for the third wave was completed in 2006 (Hansen, 2014: 43).
3. This is due to excluding 205 twins/triples and 446 households where the main respondent was not the natural mother.
4. I have described the pattern as a gradient when at least one quintile below the middle and one quintile above the middle is significantly different from the middle quintile in opposite directions.

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Appendix 1

Recoding of Parenting Measures in MCS Wave 3 into 'Ideal' and 'Poor' Binary Parenting Measures

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
PHYSICAL NEEDS							
Days per week child has breakfast				child has breakfast every day		child has breakfast 4 times a week or less	
none	148	1	1	no	8	no	95
one	41	0	1	yes	92	yes	5
two	180	1	2	total	100	total	100
three	212	1	3				
four	222	1	4				
five	283	2	6				
six	135	1	7				
seven	13,298	92	99				
total	14,519	100					
Number of portions of fruit per day				child has three or more portions of fruit a day		child has no portions of fruit a day	
none	637	4	4	no	47	no	96
one	2548	16	20	yes	53	yes	4
two	4091	27	47	total	100	total	100
three or more	7240	53	100				
total	14,516	100					
How often main takes child to park/playground				main takes child to park/playground several times a week or more		main takes child to park/playground less than once a month or never	
not at all	478	3	3	no	82	no	89
less often	1187	8	11	yes	18	yes	11
once or twice a month	3802	27	38	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	6330	43	81				
several times a week	2225	15	96				
every day	502	3	99				
total	14,524	100					

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
How often child goes to a club or class for sport				child goes to sports club/class three days a week or more		child goes to sports club/class less than once a week or not at all	
less often or not at all	7033	46	46	no	90	no	54
one day a week	3906	28	74	yes	10	yes	46
two days a week	2208	16	90	total	100	total	100
three days a week	993	7	97				
four days a week	262	2	99				
five or more days a week	131	1	100				
total	14,533	100					
How often main/partner does physical activities with child e.g. swimming				main/partner does sport/exercise with child every day		main/partner does sport/exercise with child less than once a year or never	
less often or never	1701	11	11	no	88	no	89
at least once a year	202	1	12	yes	12	yes	11
every few months	696	5	17	total	100	total	100
at least once a month	2004	14	31				
once or twice a week	5691	40	71				
several times a week	2504	17	88				
every day/almost every day	1734	12	100				
total	14,532	100					
How often main plays physically active games with child				main plays sports or physically active games with child every day		main never plays sports or physically active games with child	
not at all	1346	9	9	no	94	no	91
less often	2002	14	23	yes	6	yes	9
once or twice a month	2507	18	41	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	5142	36	77				
several times a week	2556	17	94				
every day	975	6	100				
total	14,528	100					
PARENT–CHILD RELATIONSHIP							
Overall closeness to child				extremely close to child		fairly or not very close	
not very close	26	0	0	no	30	no	97
fairly close	455	3	3	yes	70	yes	3
very close	3630	26	29	total	100	total	100

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
extremely close	9659	70	99				
total	13,770	100					
DISCIPLINE AND ROUTINE							
How often reasons with child when naughty				reasons with child daily when naughty		rarely or never reasons with child when naughty	
never	328	2	2	no	80	no	90
rarely	1126	8	10	yes	20	yes	10
sometimes (about once a month)	3441	25	35	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	6064	45	80				
daily	2724	20	100				
total	13,683	100					
How often sends child to bedroom/naughty step when naughty				sends child to bedroom/naughty step often or daily when naughty		never sends child to bedroom/naughty step when naughty	
never	1624	11	11	no	74	no	89
rarely	3330	24	35	yes	26	yes	11
sometimes (about once a month)	5325	39	74	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	3133	23	97				
daily	337	2	99				
total	13,749	100					
How often takes away treats when naughty				often or daily takes away treats when naughty		never takes away treats when naughty	
never	1315	9	9	no	79	no	91
rarely	3559	26	35	yes	21	yes	9
sometimes (about once a month)	5984	44	79	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	2652	19	98				
daily	185	1	99				
total	13,695	100					
How often tells child off when naughty				tells child off daily when naughty		rarely or never tells child off when naughty	
never	107	1	1	no	88	no	89
rarely	1532	11	12	yes	12	yes	11
sometimes (about once a month)	4208	31	43	total	100	total	100

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
often (about once a week or more)	6211	46	89				
daily	1674	12	101				
total	13,732	100					
How often makes sure child obeys requests/instructions				makes sure child obeys instructions all of the time		makes sure child obeys instructions less than half the time or never	
never/almost never	237	2	2	no	47	no	93
less than half the time	703	5	7	yes	53	yes	7
about half the time	1336	10	17	total	100	total	100
more than half the time	4110	30	47				
all the time	7264	53	100				
total	13,650	100					
How often smacks child when naughty				never smacks child when naughty		smacks child sometimes, often or daily when naughty	
never	6117	45	45	no	55	no	89
rarely	5961	44	89	yes	45	yes	11
sometimes (about once a month)	1421	10	99	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	202	1	100				
daily	16	0	100				
total	13,717	100%					
How often shouts at child when naughty				never or rarely shouts at child when naughty		shouts at child daily when naughty	
never	416	3	3	no	72	no	95
rarely	3459	25	28	yes	28	yes	5
sometimes (about once a month)	4952	36	64	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	4169	31	95				
daily	743	5	100				
total	13,739	100					
How often bribes child when naughty				never bribes child when naughty		often or daily bribes child when naughty	
never	5172	37	37	no	63	no	90
rarely	4077	30	67	yes	37	yes	10
sometimes (about once a month)	3092	22	89	total	100	total	100

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
often (about once a week or more)	1172	9	98				
daily	213	1	99				
total	13,726	100					
How often ignores child when naughty				never ignores child when naughty		ignores child often or daily when naughty	
never	2826	20	20	no	80	no	81
rarely	3926	29	49	yes	20	yes	19
sometimes (about once a month)	4303	32	81	total	100	total	100
often (about once a week or more)	2165	16	97				
daily	401	3	100				
total	13,621	100					
Regular meal times				child always has meals at regular times		child has meals at regular times sometimes or never	
no, never or almost never	402	3	3	no	40	no	93
yes, sometimes	731	4	7	yes	60	yes	7
yes, usually	4701	33	40	total	100	total	100
yes, always	8697	60	100				
total	14,531	100					
Regular bed times				child always has regular bedtime (term time)		child never has regular bedtime (term-time)	Prop.
no, never or almost never	734	5	5	no	37	no	95
yes, sometimes	820	5	10	yes	63	yes	5
yes, usually	4005	27	37	total	100	total	100
yes, always	8974	63	100				
total	14,533	100					
COGNITIVE STIMULATION							
Whether been to cinema in past year							
no	4239	28					
yes	10,296	72					
total	14,535	100					

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
Whether been to theme park/ funfair in past year							
no	4644	32					
yes	9891	68					
total	14,535	100					
Whether been to gallery/museum/ historical site in past year							
no	7841	53					
yes	6694	47					
total	14,535	100					
Whether been to play/panto/ concert/circus in past year							
no	4489	30					
yes	10,046	70					
total	14,535	100					
Whether been to zoo/aquarium/ wildlife reserve or farm in past year							
no	2830	18					
yes	11,705	82					
total	14,535	100					
Whether been to professional sporting event as spectator in past year							
no	12,242	85					
yes	2293	15					
total	14,535	100					
How often main reads to child				main reads to child every day		main reads to child once or twice a month or less	
not at all	227	1	1	no	48	no	95
less often	221	1	2	yes	52	yes	5
once or twice a month	372	2	4	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	2122	14	18				
several times a week	4122	29	47				
every day	7467	52	99				
total	14,531	100					

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
How often main tells stories to child				main tells child stories every day		main never tells child stories	
not at all	1744	12	12	no	88	no	88
less often	2281	17	29	yes	12	yes	12
once or twice a month	2287	17	46	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	3644	25	71				
several times a week	2648	17	88				
every day	1923	12	100				
total	14,527	100					
How often main does musical activities with child				main does musical activities with child every day		main does musical activities with child not at all or less than once a month	
not at all	427	2	2	no	63	no	94
less often	566	4	6	yes	37	yes	6
once or twice a month	975	7	13	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	3013	21	34				
several times a week	4097	28	62				
every day	5451	37	99				
total	14,529	100					
How often main draws/paints with child				main paints/draws with child every day		main never paints/draws with child	
not at all	598	4	4	no	92	no	96
less often	1237	9	13	yes	8	yes	4
once or twice a month	3033	22	35	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	5347	37	72				
several times a week	3022	20	92				
every day	1294	8	100				
total	14,531	100					
How often main plays with toys or games indoors with child				main plays toys/games with child every day		main plays toys/games with child less than once a month or never	
not at all	347	2	2	no	78	no	93
less often	652	4	6	yes	22	yes	7
once or twice a month	1247	9	15	total	100	total	100

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
once or twice a week	4552	32	47				
several times a week	4487	31	78				
every day	3216	22	100				
total	14,528	100					
Frequency of family activities				family does indoor activities together every day or almost every day		family does indoor activities together around once a month or less	
less often or never	147	1	1	no	55	no	96
at least once a year	16	0	1	yes	45	yes	4
every few months	98	1	2	total	100	total	100
at least once a month	361	2	4				
once or twice a week	3127	21	25				
several times a week	4152	29	54				
every day or almost every day	6604	45	99				
total	14,532	100					
How often child spends time with friends outside of school				child spends time with friends outside school every day/almost every day		child never spends time with friends outside school	
not at all	1765	11	11	no	88	no	89
less often	1403	9	20	yes	12	yes	11
once or twice a month	2417	18	38	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	4468	33	71				
several times a week	2321	16	87				
every day or almost every day	2154	12	99				
total	14,528	100					
How often someone at home helps with reading				someone at home helps child with reading every day		someone at home helps child with reading once/twice a month or less	
not at all	346	2	2	no	41	no	98
less often	20	0	2	yes	59	yes	2
once or twice a month	61	0	2	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	1459	9	11				
several times a week	4045	30	41				
every day	8420	59	100				
total	14,351	100					

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
How often someone at home helps with writing				someone at home helps child with writing every day		child receives no help at home with writing	
not at all	1298	9	9	no	73	no	91
less often	159	1	10	yes	27	yes	9
once or twice a month	291	2	12	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	3293	25	37				
several times a week	4939	36	73				
every day	4370	27	100				
total	14,350	100					
How often someone at home helps child with maths				someone at home helps child with maths every day		child receives no help at home with maths	
not at all	1032	7	7	no	69	no	93
less often	143	1	8	yes	31	yes	7
once or twice a month	307	2	10	total	100	total	100
once or twice a week	2981	23	33				
several times a week	5022	36	69				
every day	4868	31	100				
total	14,353	100					
How often has child visited library in past year				child visits library once/twice a week or more		child visits library less than once a year or never	
less often or never	5368	36	36	no	91	no	64
at least once a year	1251	9	45	yes	9	yes	36
every few months	2930	21	66	total	100	total	100
at least once a month	3613	25	91				
once or twice a week	1252	8	99				
several times a week	101	1	100				
every day/almost every day	19	0	100				
total	14,534	100					
Whether someone at home has been to parents evening				someone at home has been to a parents evening this school year			
no	906	6	6	no	6		
not applicable	1017	6	12	yes	94		
yes	12,436	89	101	total	100		
total	14,359	100					

(Continued)

Appendix 1. (Continued)

Original parenting variables	Frequency	Weighted %	Cumulative %	*'Ideal' binary measure*	Weighted %	'Poor' binary measure	Weighted %
Hours watch TV per day in term time				watches TV for less than an hour or never		watches TV for 5 hours or more	
7 hours or more	430	3	3	no	79	no	95
5 hours to less than 7 hours	315	2	5	yes	21	yes	5
3 hours to less than 5 hours	1451	10	15	total	100	total	100
1 hour to less than 3 hours	9281	64	79				
less than an hour	2773	19	98				
none	279	2	100				
total	14,529	100					
Hours playing on computer per day in term time				plays on computer for less than an hour or never		plays on computer for three hours or more	
7 hours or more	101	1	1	no	23	no	97
5 hours to less than 7 hours	78	1	2	yes	77	yes	3
3 hours to less than 5 hours	261	2	4	total	100	total	100
1 hour to less than 3 hours	3016	20	24				
less than an hour	6370	45	69				
none	4702	33	102				
total	14,528	100					
Main parenting competence				feels they are a very good parent		feels not very good or person who has some trouble being a parent	
not very good at being a parent	62	0	0	no	68	no	96
a person who has some trouble being a parent	430	3	3	yes	32	yes	4
an average parent	4952	37	40	total	100	total	100
a better than average parent	3748	28	68				
a very good parent	4516	32	100				
total	13,708	100					

Appendix 2

Analysis of Item Non-Response

Table 1. Number missing from each variable.

Variable	Number missing	Total sample	% missing
Income quintile	98	14,595	0.7
Days a week the child has breakfast	76	14,595	0.5
Portions of fruit per day	79	14,595	0.5
How often take to park	71	14,595	0.5
How often goes to sports club	62	14,595	0.4
How often parents do physical activities with child	63	14,595	0.4
How often mother plays physically active games with child	67	14,595	0.5
How close to child	*825*	*14,595*	*5.7*
How often reasons with child	*912*	*14,595*	*6.2*
How often sends child to bedroom	*846*	*14,595*	*5.8*
How often takes away treats	*900*	*14,595*	*6.2*
How often tells child off	*863*	*14,595*	*5.9*
How often makes sure obeys instructions	*945*	*14,595*	*6.5*
How often smacks child	*878*	*14,595*	*6.0*
How often shouts at child	*856*	*14,595*	*5.9*
How often bribes child	*869*	*14,595*	*6.0*
How often ignores child	*974*	*14,595*	*6.7*
Regular meal times	64	14,595	0.4
Regular bed times	62	14,595	0.4
Whether visited cinema in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
Whether visited funfair in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
Whether visited museum in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
Whether visited play/panto in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
Whether visited zoo/farm in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
Whether visited professional sporting event in the last year	60	14,595	0.4
How often mother reads to child	64	14,595	0.4
How often mother tells stories to child	68	14,595	0.5
How often mother does musical activities with child	66	14,595	0.5
How often mother draws or paints with child	64	14,595	0.4
How often plays indoor games with child	67	14,595	0.5
How often family does activity together	63	14,595	0.4
How often child spends time with friends	67	14,595	0.5
How often someone at home helps with reading	244	14,595	1.7
How often someone at home helps with writing	245	14,595	1.7
How often someone at home helps with maths	242	14,595	1.7

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Variable	Number missing	Total sample	% missing
How often child has visited library in the last year	61	14,595	0.4
Whether someone at home has been to parents evening	236	14,595	1.6
Hours a day child watches TV	66	14,595	0.5
Hours a day child plays on computer	67	14,595	0.5
Confidence in parenting	*887*	*14,595*	*6.1*

Notes: Some of the variables have item non-response (this includes refusal to answer, don't know and not applicable). Kline (2011) suggests missing values are a concern when there is more than 5% of the sample missing. As can be seen from Table 1 the response rate for most of the measures used in this analysis is very good, with less than 1% missing. However, the measures related to how close the mother feels to the child, discipline and mothers' confidence in their parenting ability suffer from higher levels of item non-response (between 5–7% of the sample). As shown in Table 2 respondents who have missing data for these measures are more likely to be concentrated in the low-income groups. This potentially introduces bias into the analysis of these parenting measures – as those missing are more likely to be lower income it may lead to under-estimating the relationship between low income and these parenting measures. These measures are also sensitive questions that we would expect more measurement error even from those who do not have missing data; that is, we would expect mothers to under-report negative discipline practices. There are additional reasons therefore to be cautious when interpreting results related to these measures (closeness to the child, discipline and confidence in parenting). It is therefore important to interpret findings in the context of results related to all parenting measures rather than putting undue emphasis on this subset of parenting measures that we have reason to believe less accurately capture differences in parenting.

Table 2. Cross-tabulating item non-response with income quintile.

	Income quintile					
	Lowest (%)	2nd (%)	3rd (%)	4th (%)	Highest (%)	Total (%)
Full sample	20	20	20	20	20	100
Close missing	53	28	9	6	4	100
Reason missing	50	29	10	7	4	100
Bedroom missing	51	29	9	7	4	100
Treat missing	50	28	11	7	5	100
Tell off missing	51	30	9	7	4	100
Obey missing	48	28	11	8	4	100
Smack missing	51	29	10	7	3	100
Shout missing	53	29	9	7	3	100
Bribe missing	53	28	9	7	3	100
Ignore missing	46	29	11	9	5	100
Confidence missing	49	28	10	9	4	100