

## Millennium Cohort Study Briefing 11

# Quality of parental relationship and parenting behaviour

Based on Chapter 4 of *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*

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### About these briefings

This Briefing is one of 14 that distil the key findings of the first three surveys of the Millennium Cohort Study, as collected in *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*.

The study has been tracking the Millennium children through their early childhood and plans to follow them into adulthood. It covers such diverse topics as parenting; childcare; school choice; child behaviour and cognitive development; child and parental health; parents' employment and education; income; housing; and neighbourhood.

It is the first of the nationwide cohort studies to over-sample areas with high densities of ethnic minorities and large numbers of disadvantaged families.

For the first survey, in 2001–2, interviewers visited the families of nearly 19,000 children aged 9 months throughout the United Kingdom. It established the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the families' social background. The second survey recorded how nearly 16,000 cohort children were developing at age 3. The third survey, when they were age 5, involved almost 15,500 children and provided a uniquely

detailed account of their physical, cognitive and social development in the year they entered school.

The study is housed at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London. It was commissioned by the Economic and Social Research Council, whose funding has been supplemented by a consortium of government departments.

*Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*, edited by Kirstine Hansen, Heather Joshi and Shirley Dex, The Policy Press, 2010, can be ordered via [www.policypress.co.uk](http://www.policypress.co.uk)

## Briefing 11: Quality of parental relationship and parenting behaviour

### Introduction

A large body of research suggests that the quality of the relationship between parents not only affects interactions between parent and child but child behavioural and cognitive outcomes. This Briefing uses data from couples in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to examine the self-reported perceptions of relationships between partners, how well they predict later break-up, and whether they are indeed related to parenting behaviours and child outcomes at age 5.

### Literature review

Brody et al. (1996) asked parents to give their perceptions of the level of conflict with their spouses. Higher levels of perceived conflict were related to lower involvement with children and to harsher parenting. Conflict between parents has also been found to be related to lower acceptance of children, less consistency in discipline and greater hostility in parent-child relationships (Gonzales et al. 2000).

Erel and Burman (1995), who reviewed research in this area, concluded that parents who reported lower levels of conflict and greater satisfaction with the marital relationship were less likely to use emotional

forms of control or harsh discipline. Other research has reported that an authoritarian parenting style, characterised by expectations of unquestioning obedience, is associated with overt aggression in children (Sandstrom 2007).

Theoretical models of how marital conflict affects child outcomes include a) modelling b) cognitive-contextual influence c) emotional insecurity d) spillover and e) the compensatory model.

- Modelling theory states that children observe the conflict and hostility between their parents and model those behaviours in their interactions with others.
- In the cognitive-contextual model, children observe the conflict and draw conclusions about its meaning, its cause, its threat to them, and their ability to cope with it. The effects depend on the characteristics of the conflict and how they interpret it.
- In the emotional security model, marital conflict causes children to feel insecure about family stability and their attachment to parents. This lack of secure attachment then leads children to have interpersonal problems, anxiety and depression.

The first three theories are alike in that they rely on children observing conflict and being directly affected by it. However:

- In the spillover model, marital conflict affects parenting behaviour, which then affects children. This does not require that children observe or be aware of the conflict.
- An alternative interpretation – the compensatory model – argues that poor marital relationships lead to more positive parenting behaviours as parents try to compensate for their unsatisfactory relationships.

Past research has lent more support to the spillover model than the compensatory one.

### Data

This Briefing uses data from the first three MCS surveys (MCS1, 2 and 3), conducted when cohort members were aged 9 months, 3 years and 5 years, and is confined to families who took part in all three.

Figure 1 shows the numbers of mothers included in this analysis. Mothers with no partner at sweep 1 are not shown. Those who were in couples at the first sweep may either have stayed with the same partner, changed partner, or were not in a relationship at the subsequent surveys.

The sample analysed consists of 10,505 families – after excluding 471 cases thought to have new partners. Cases with new partners are excluded to avoid complicating the analysis.

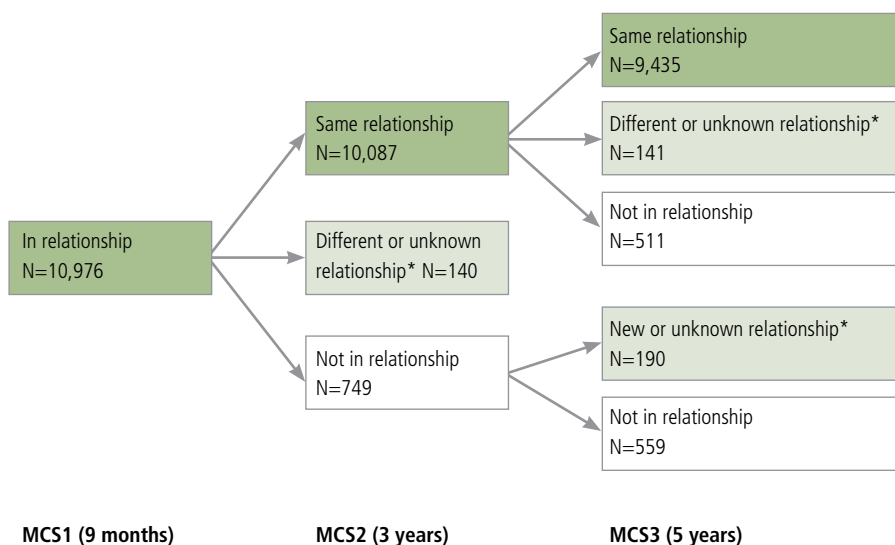
### Relationship status and quality

Both mother and father respondents answered questions about the quality of their relationships with their partners. The box (following page) shows the issues that both respondents were asked about across the three sweeps. These questions were part of the self-completion section of the interview, so the answers could not be overheard. One of these statements was: 'I suspect we may be on the brink of separation'. Each partner's response was examined to assess the accuracy of predictions.

### Parent involvement and discipline

As the box (above right) shows, mother and father respondents were asked about

**Figure 1**  
Mothers in couples at the age 9 months survey



\* These families are not included in the sample analysed in this Briefing. Cases where other information used in the analysis is missing are excluded throughout. Sample numbers are unweighted.

**Relationship Quality at all 3 surveys**

- Partner sensitive and aware of needs
- Partner doesn't listen
- Sometimes lonely even when with partner
- Suspect on brink of separation
- How happy with relationship

**Parental Involvement at age 3**

- How often does someone help cohort member (CM) learn the alphabet?
- How often does someone try to teach CM counting?
- How often does someone teach CM songs poems/rhymes?
- How often does CM paint/draw at home?
- How often do you read with CM?

**Harsh Discipline at age 3 and 5**

- How often do you ignore CM when he/she is naughty?
- How often do you smack CM when he/she is naughty?
- How often do you shout at CM when he/she is naughty?
- How often do you tell off CM when he/she is naughty?
- How often do you bribe CM when he/she is naughty?

their parenting behaviours and activities. The responses to these items were summed to create a scale of parental involvement. Main respondents were also asked about discipline practices when the cohort child was age 3 and 5 to assess the frequency of shouting, smacking, ignoring, bribing and telling off. These responses were used to gauge whether their discipline was harsh.

**British Ability Scales Naming Vocabulary**

The child cognitive indicator used in the analysis reported in this Briefing is the Naming Vocabulary section of the British Ability Scales (BAS), as assessed at the age 5 interview. The children were asked to name pictures of common items. There are 36 items but the number of items a child is shown depends on their performance. The assessment is terminated if five successive items are answered incorrectly. The assessment was not given to a relatively small number of children who did not speak English.

**Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire**

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used to calculate an indicator

of behavioural problems. The SDQ is a questionnaire for 3 to 16-year-olds. It consists of five subscales: hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems, and pro-social behaviour. This analysis used the total difficulties scale which summarises the first four subscales. Scores were based on the computerised self-completion part of the main interview at age 5, which was usually answered by the mother.

**Results at the first two surveys**

Most respondents, whether mother or father, disagreed with the statement: 'I suspect we are on the brink of separation'. The relationship between the mothers' and fathers' answers was statistically significant at all sweeps, but there was a notable level of disagreement. In cases where the mother strongly agreed that separation was imminent, the majority of fathers (85%, 54% and 52% for the three sweeps) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 1 shows the relation between respondents' ratings of the likelihood of separation and actual relationship

break-up. Again, there is a statistically significant relationship between the two but also considerable disagreement. Those who agreed or strongly agreed that they suspected they were on the brink of separation were more likely to break up later than were those who disagreed. However, among those who strongly agreed, the rate of actual break-up was no higher than 35 per cent, meaning that most people who suspected they were close to separating were still together two years later.

To examine how people's perceptions of their partnerships relate to parenting behaviour and their children's outcomes, various regression analyses<sup>2</sup> were carried out. Regression models took characteristics of the child, such as age at assessment and gender, into consideration. Some analyses also controlled for family/parent characteristics such as parental age, ethnicity, employment status, qualifications and occupation, and whether the family income was below poverty level.

Analysing the style of discipline reported at MCS2 in terms of relationship quality at MCS1 showed that the two were related.

**Table 1 Prediction of separation and later break-up**

Suspect we are on the brink of separation	Broke up by next sweep*	
	Percentage**	Base
<b>MCS 1: Mother</b>		
Strongly agree	20.4	106
Agree	20.1	73
Neither agree nor disagree	23.3	298
Disagree	7.9	1909
Strongly disagree	2.8	7821
<b>MCS 1: Father respondent</b>		
Strongly agree	4.9	105
Agree	29.9	88
Neither agree nor disagree	17.1	283
Disagree	7.0	1842
Strongly disagree	2.5	6784
<b>MCS 2: Mother</b>		
Strongly agree	34.8	119
Agree	29.4	132
Neither agree nor disagree	18.0	416
Disagree	6.3	2113
Strongly disagree	2.5	6649
<b>MCS 2: Father respondent</b>		
Strongly agree	28.6	78
Agree	21.0	109
Neither agree nor disagree	14.1	312
Disagree	9.4	1623
Strongly disagree	3.0	6344

\*Analysis excludes mothers who had a new partner by MCS3.

\*\*Percentages and Base Count are weighted to reflect disproportionate sampling.

### Key statistics

**2 in 3 parents** who strongly agreed with the statement 'I suspect we are on the brink of separation' were still with their partners two years later.

**Only 2 per cent** of the variation in children's vocabulary scores at age 5 could be explained by the quality of the parents' relationship and their behaviour with the child.

**7 per cent** of the variation in the behaviour difficulties score at age 5 could be attributed to the quality of the parents' relationship and their behaviour with the child.

Mothers who were more satisfied with their relationships used less harsh discipline. Other factors that were related to mothers' lower use of harsh discipline included the mother being older, the partner not being in work, the family having an income below poverty level and the child being a girl.

The analysis of parental involvement with the child also showed a statistically significant association with the quality of the parental relationship. Parents in happier relationships spent more time with their children. Higher parental involvement was also related to the partner not being in work, parents having higher qualification levels and the child being a girl.

Mothers who were happier with their relationships also had children with higher BAS Naming Vocabulary scores. Other variables that were related to higher BAS scores were partners being in work, parents having higher qualification levels and/or professional or managerial occupations, and gender (girls scored more highly). Children whose mothers become lone parents after their first year of life have a vocabulary score that is, on average, 3.2 points lower than children whose parents stay together (on a scale of 20–80) allowing also for parenting style. This is a substantial difference, equating to 13 percentage points down in the ranking of children at this age. However, this gap reduces to 0.8 (not significantly different from zero) when account is also taken of other socio-demographic characteristics of the family, mainly parental education.

Mothers who were happier with their relationships had children with fewer behaviour problems. Parents who used

more harsh discipline were less involved with their children, and those with broken relationships had children with more behaviour problems. Parents with higher qualifications had children with lower levels of problem behaviour.

Children whose mothers split from their fathers after their first year of life had a mildly higher behaviour difficulties score, on average, than children whose parents stayed together (1.6 points on a scale of 0–40, allowing also for parenting style). This gap reduces to 0.6 (though still significant) when account is also taken of other socio-demographic characteristics of the family. Harsh parenting and low parental involvement, regardless of whether parents stayed together, were also independently and significantly associated with a slightly higher behaviour difficulties score.

### Conclusions

Although prediction of separation and the rating of relationship quality are associated with actual break-up, in many cases a relationship is well rated and yet couples split. In other cases, separation is predicted, but the couple stays together.

Respondents' perceptions of the quality of their relationships were related to both parental involvement and harsh discipline. Mothers and fathers who rated their marital relationship more poorly were less involved with their children and used more harsh discipline. These findings support the spillover model of marital dissatisfaction rather than the compensatory model.

Mothers' ratings of their relationships were also associated with child cognitive

and behavioural outcomes. Mothers who rated their relationships well had children with better vocabulary and fewer behaviour problems. Fathers' ratings of their relationships were not, however, related to child outcomes. Parental involvement was related to both child outcomes, with children with more involved parents having more positive outcomes.

It should be noted, however, that relationship quality explained only a very small portion of parenting behaviour – 4 per cent on harsh discipline, 3 per cent on parental involvement – leaving the large portion of this behaviour unexplained. Similarly, relationship quality was statistically significantly related to child outcomes. However, parenting factors explained relatively little of the variation in the scores – 2 per cent for vocabulary and 7 per cent for behaviour.

Overall, the research summarised here lends support to that part of the spillover model which states that a good relationship between parents is related to good parenting behaviours, but provides no evidence that the quality of parental relationship affects child outcomes through those parenting behaviours.

### References

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1 Elizabeth Jones, Institute of Education, University of London. This text has been adapted and shortened to suit the format of these Briefings. Responsibility for any errors therefore rests with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies rather than the chapter author.

2 Regression analysis is a technique for modelling and analysing several variables that uncovers the relationship between the dependent variable and one or more independent variables. For further information see Richard A. Berk (2004) *Regression Analysis: A Constructive Critique*, Sage Publications; and David A. Freedman (2005) *Statistical Models: Theory and Practice*, Cambridge University Press (2005).