

Millennium Cohort Study

PARENTING



Taken from Chapter 5 of *Millennium Cohort Study Second Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings*

Kate Smith

The Survey

The Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) offers groundbreaking large-scale information about children born into the new century and the families who are bringing them up in all four countries of the United Kingdom. It lays the foundation for a major new research resource.

For the first survey, conducted in 2001-2002, we interviewed the families of nearly 19,000 children aged nine months. A disproportionate number of these children came from families living in areas of high child poverty, and, in England, from areas with relatively high minority-ethnic populations¹. This survey looked at the circumstances of pregnancy and birth, as well as the social and economic background of the families into which these children were born.

The second survey marks the beginning of a series of follow-up surveys. Conducted in 2003-2005, it records how nearly 16,000 cohort children are developing at the age of three. For the first time, researchers have been able to chart the changing circumstances of families and relate children's outcomes at age three to earlier circumstances and experiences. This summary reveals some of the results from the second survey concerning the information given by parents about their parenting.

Introduction

The Millennium Cohort offers a rich resource of data on different aspects of parenting, particularly in relation to fathers. Both resident parents (where there were two) were asked about their activities and behaviours with their children and their different parenting styles. This information provides a unique picture of what parents do with their children, and also how well they felt they were managing as parents.

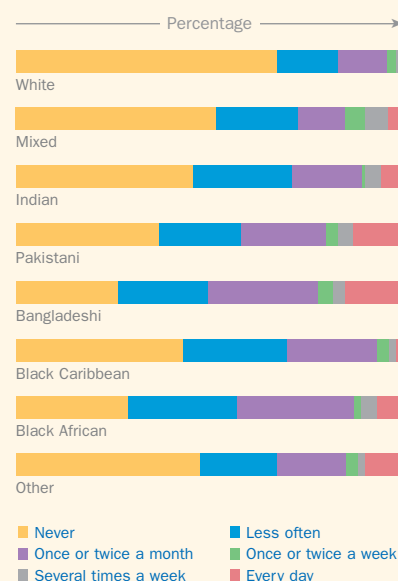
Time with child

- Two-thirds of mothers and one-quarter of fathers said that they had plenty of time with their child.
- Five per cent of mothers and 15 per cent of fathers felt that they had not nearly enough time with their child, with the majority stating that this was because of long working hours.
- Nearly nine out of ten Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers felt that they had plenty of time with their child, compared to only half of the Black Caribbean mothers.

Family activities

- Mothers and fathers were asked about a range of activities they took part in with their children.
- The majority of mothers read to their children every day (62 per cent) and almost all (92 per cent) read to them at least once a week.
 - White mothers were more likely to

Mothers reading with child by ethnicity



say that they read to their child every day (64 per cent) than Pakistani (37 per cent), Black African (29 per cent) and Bangladeshi (26 per cent) mothers.

- Fathers were far less likely to read to their children every day (23 per cent), though 83 per cent did manage to read to them at least once a week.
- Four in five fathers (78 per cent) said they played with their child every day and 94 per cent said they played with them at least a few times a week.

¹ Percentages reported here have been re-weighted to be representative of the population as whole.

PARENTING

Rules

About a third of mothers (31 per cent) reported that their family had lots of rules, 42 per cent did not have many rules and 27 per cent said that their policy varied. Almost half (49 per cent) added that the rules they did have were strictly enforced. Black Caribbean mothers were most likely to report that they had lots of rules (39 per cent) while Bangladeshi mothers were the least likely (17 per cent).

Parenting style

- The majority of parents reported that their style was either 'firm rules with fun' (42 per cent of mothers and 54 per cent of fathers) or 'doing my best' (50 per cent of mothers and 33 per cent of fathers).
- Mothers in Northern Ireland were less likely to say they had strict rules. They were more likely to report 'doing their best for their child' (63 per cent) than mothers in England (47 per cent), Wales (50 per cent) and Scotland (51 per cent).
- Only 30 per cent of Bangladeshi fathers reported 'firm discipline with lots of fun' as a parenting style, compared with 60 per cent of Black Caribbean fathers.

Parenting competence

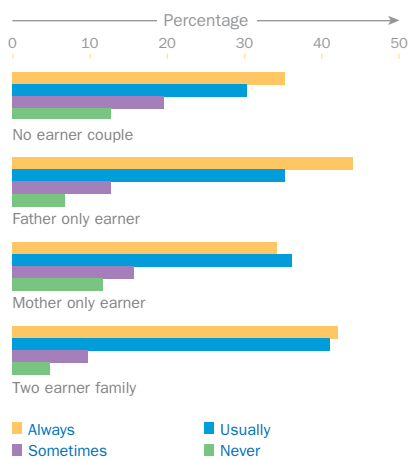
- Thirty-six per cent of fathers and 31 per cent of mothers thought that they were very good parents.
- Bangladeshi and Black African mothers and fathers were much more likely than average to report that they were very good parents.

Regular bedtimes and mealtimes

- Eighty per cent of children usually had a regular bedtime.
- Mothers with a partner who was not in paid work were more than twice as likely to report that their children never, or almost never, had a regular bedtime as mothers in couples where both parents had paid work (12 and 5 per cent respectively).

- Almost all mothers reported that their children usually had regular meal times (92 per cent).

Regular bedtimes by couples' employment status



Parenting beliefs and values

Parents were asked about values they would like their child to acquire. The series of questions was only put to those who spoke English, as ad hoc translations in the field might not have been adequate.

- Mothers tended to select 'think for themselves' as the most important quality they would like their children

to have. White mothers were more likely to say this (52 per cent) than Pakistani (17 per cent), Bangladeshi (18 per cent) and Black African (20 per cent) mothers.

- Learning religious values was selected as most important by 30 per cent of Black African mothers and 24 per cent of Pakistani mothers but only by 2 per cent of White mothers.
- Nearly twice as many mothers in Northern Ireland (20 per cent) thought it was most important 'to obey parents' as in other UK countries.
- The vast majority of mothers in Northern Ireland (85 per cent) put some importance on their child having religious values, compared with around 50 per cent in other countries. Asian and Black mothers were keener to instil religious values (90 per cent) than White mothers were (54 per cent).
- The majority of older mothers wanted their children to adopt religious values (65 per cent of mothers aged 35 and older) but only a minority of mothers under 25 (38 per cent) felt they were important.

Conclusion

On most measures of parenting, working mothers were no different from other mothers. In fact, two-earner families were the group most likely to read to their child regularly, which provides indirect evidence that maternal employment does not eliminate 'quality time' with the child.

There were many similarities in parenting practices and beliefs across mothers and fathers and also across types of families and ethnic groups. However, there were also clear

differences in parenting style across different groups of mothers and fathers, whether employed or not. An interesting question is whether these systematic and individual differences will be differentially related to the child's behaviour and achievement later on. This is something that MCS data will be able to reveal.

Millennium Cohort Study Second Survey: A User's Guide to Initial Findings is available at www.cls.ioe.ac.uk