

“Parents are the  
principal architects  
of a fairer society..”

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## BUILDING CHARACTER

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Richard Reeves





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# Brief for the Equality and Human Rights Commission

Demos was contracted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission to undertake original research on the development of character capabilities contributing to life chances and the factors influencing their development. The research, undertaken between December 2008 and March 2009, consisted of a literature review of the field, description of existing related policy initiatives, a new statistical analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study (MCS), and a preliminary assessment of related policy initiatives.

The views in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Equality and Human Rights Commission.



# 1 Character as capability

## The idea of character

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* was written to set out the ways in which people can become better, or more able to pursue what is good. But the closest translation to the Greek *ta ethika* is not in fact 'the ethics', but rather 'matters to do with character'. The Greek words '*ethike arete*' or '*arete*' occur often in Aristotle's writing to indicate 'excellence of character', or simply 'excellence'.

One of Aristotle's modern editors and interpreters, Jonathan Barnes, has questioned whether the *Ethics* is a work of 'moral' philosophy at all. 'It may, perhaps, seem either pedantic or imbecile to ask,' he writes.<sup>1</sup> But Barnes is right to ask. Aristotle refused to distinguish between 'moral' and 'technical' goodness. For him, being good was a skill – or set of skills – applied to a certain end, rather than a fixed, moral attribute. Ronaldinho is a good football player and Yotam Ottelenghi is a good chef because of their skills in football and cooking. For Aristotle, the same tests apply to being a 'good' person, or having a 'good' character.

Being of 'good character' means excelling at the task of pursuing a good life. This of course raises the question of what is a good life – or our definitive task as people. Aristotle described the ultimate human goal as the one which we seek for itself – for no further end. For him, our definitive task is the pursuit of *eudaimonia*: 'happiness' or, better, the project of living a 'flourishing' life. Aristotle was first and foremost interested in what makes us successful, flourishing people. In this sense, his account of being good had an explicitly self-interested slant. But he also believed that being 'good' in the more altruistic sense, or acting in 'virtuous' ways, was what delivered that success. It just so happens that what makes us happy often fits in with our conception of what makes us 'good': developing caring, positive

relationships, committing ourselves to our work, learning and educating ourselves.

Contemporary moral philosophies conceptualise the ‘good person’ in a very different way. They are built on moral prescriptions, set out clearly by some authoritative figure or institution (eg Kant’s categorical imperative and the divine authority of religions). Twentieth-century conceptions of the ‘good’ person describe a self-sacrificing, altruistic individual. But this is an incomplete conceptualisation. A good life is one that is good for ourselves, too.

Work in the economics and sociology of happiness, or subjective wellbeing – especially by Richard Layard, Daniel Nettle and Andrew Oswald<sup>2</sup> – has drawn attention to the need for a richer understanding of the nature of a successful life.

Although seen by many as a new utilitarianism, this burgeoning research area can be seen as neo-Aristotelian philosophy in its focus on individual flourishing, and the skills that a flourishing life requires. Aristotle’s *Ethics* and the new ‘happiness economics’ both articulate a psychological philosophy as well as an ethical one. What is missing from contemporary debates is a clear idea of the character attributes underpinning a good life. Seen in this light, ‘character’ represents a set of life skills rather than a moral disposition. Character is used here as a useful and readily understood shorthand for a set of personal *capabilities* that research shows to be associated with good life outcomes. What are labelled in this report *character capabilities* are crucial ingredients in enabling people to pursue and achieve their own individual wellbeing.

The traditional view of character as a set of qualities unique to individuals – encompassing their chosen values and beliefs or their natural and unalterable personality – positions it as a private matter, lying outside the realm of public policy. But to the extent that certain elements of character impact equality, opportunity and fairness, it ought to be a concern for policy makers interested in those outcomes. Given that these character capabilities are overwhelmingly developed in childhood, there is a strong case for public policy interest, especially if a child will not develop these character capabilities without further support.

In political and policy circles the Aristotelian idea of a good life informs contemporary concerns with social mobility and life chances. Policy makers have developed a modern language for describing a flourishing, good life, but there is no established terminology for describing the personal qualities necessary for such a life. The goal of creating a society in which individuals reach their potential – in a neo-Aristotelian sense – will be assisted by a similar updating of the idea of character.

This report investigates how parenting style influences the development of character in the early years. Using a typology that measures four different parenting styles – tough love, laissez-faire, authoritarian and disengaged – we found that ‘tough love’ children are more than twice as likely to display strong character capability in the early years than those with ‘disengaged’ parents. Conversely, children with ‘disengaged’ parents are more than three times as likely to display weak character capability in the early years than children with ‘tough love’ parents (see Figure 9).

### Character as a hard skill

The skills that strongly predict life chances, which are the focus of this report, are variously described as ‘soft skills’, ‘behavioural traits’, ‘non-cognitive skills’ or ‘emotional resilience’. But the key character traits under consideration are far from ‘soft’. They have significant cognitive elements, underpin achievements in literacy and numeracy, and take years to acquire. The division between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills is of doubtful value, but to the extent that it holds, character capabilities should be considered ‘hard’ skills.

Equally, the traditional distinction between ‘cognitive’ and ‘non-cognitive’ skills should be questioned when considering the development of children’s character capabilities. There is a rich evidence base for the importance of skills which are typically described as ‘cognitive’. Cognitive skills are those that are used in the process of acquiring knowledge, perception, reasoning and intuition. However, there is a lively debate among psychologists about how far the ‘cognitive’ versus ‘non-cognitive’ distinction holds. This is not the place to enter these

arguments in detail, but it is clear that character capabilities have cognitive dimensions and also provide a foundation for the acquisition of other, more visible and measurable skills such as numeracy and literacy. As one influential study concluded:

*As children learn to read and write, they continue to improve these skills, making them more purposeful and deliberate. Deliberate attention is required to differentiate between letters, even if they look alike, and to isolate specific portions of a word for encoding or decoding it. Children must remember the previous words as they decode the subsequent words in a sentence. If they do not make a purposeful attempt to remember, they cannot extract what the sentence means.<sup>3</sup>*

It is also important to stress that while character capabilities are becoming more important for life chances, separately from their contribution to learning, the more typical basic skills of literacy and numeracy still matter hugely – and are unevenly distributed. Ability in childhood in these fields powerfully predicts subsequent earnings in the labour market, occupational attainment and the level of educational qualification attained.

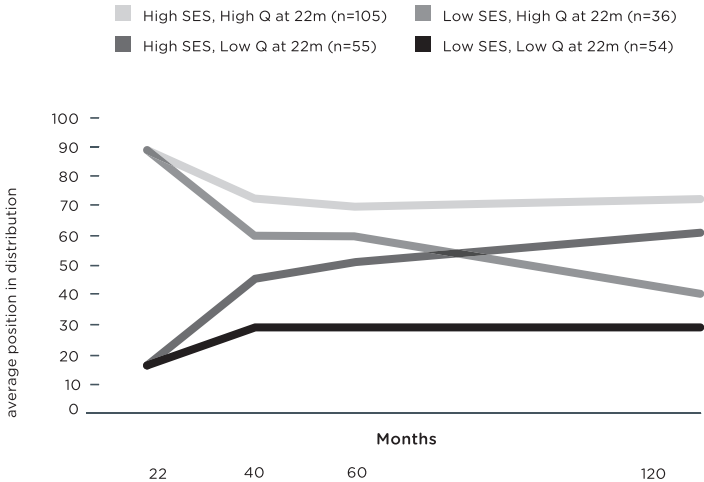
A substantial research literature shows that the development of these skills is influenced by socio-economic background, with children from poorer families faring worse than children from middle class families.<sup>4</sup> The gap in ability is measurable from an early age. But over time, the gap between children from different backgrounds becomes even starker. Children from poorer backgrounds scoring highly at 22 months are overtaken by lower-scoring children from affluent backgrounds by the age of six or seven (see Figure 1).

Recent research confirms the role of parents in developing these skills, and in particular preparing children for school. A study by Jane Waldfogel and colleagues suggested that half the gap between affluent and poorer households in the USA was explained by the home environment and quality of parenting. Waldfogel made the case for early years ‘compensatory education programmes’ to help narrow the gap.<sup>5</sup>

The development of skills in reasoning, literacy and



Figure 1 **Average rank of test scores at 22, 40, 60 and 120 months by socio-economic status of parents and early rank position**



Source: Feinstein, L, 'How early can we predict future educational achievement? Very early' from CentrePiece, summer 2003 and based on Discussion Paper 404, which can be found at the Centre for Economic Performance.

Q=quartile; SES=socio-economic status: high SES - father in professional/managerial occupation and mother similar or registered housewife (307 obs.); low SES - father in semi-skilled or unskilled manual occupation and mother similar or housewife (171 obs.); medium SES - those omitted from the high and low SES categories (814 obs.). Thus, children whose mothers were housewives were categorised by the SES of fathers.

numeracy, and related policy initiatives has understandably generated a considerable research literature. There has been less attention paid to the specific, distinct contribution of character capabilities. But factors developing at a very young age such as self-regulation, application and empathy have a significant effect on children's eventual chances in life. The next section outlines the specific character capabilities of interest in this report.

## The character capabilities

There is a considerable body of research on the development of character capabilities, especially agency ('locus of control'), application, responsibility or empathy and self-regulation. In Chapter 2 the evidence for the importance of these character capabilities is reviewed.

This study draws on data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) to assess the development of character capabilities in five-year-olds. A 25-point survey, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), has been used as the primary 'early indicator' for the development of character capabilities in the MCS children. The SDQ has been used in a significant number of studies and has been subject to considerable testing. It is weaker on some aspects of character capability – for example agency and creativity – than others, but its reliability outweighs these disadvantages.

The SDQ captures data on the development of three key character capabilities: application, self-regulation and empathy. These are described more fully below. (See the end of this section for evidence on the relationship between character capabilities and SDQ indicators.)

### Application

Application is about sticking with things. It describes one's ability to concentrate, discipline and motivate oneself to persist with and complete a task. Strong application is underpinned by a sense of self-direction or free will, what psychologists often term agency or 'locus of control'. It is an executive function, the impetus itself which pushes you to apply yourself to an activity, task or project. Locus of control is understood as a spectrum from an *internal* locus of control to an *external* locus of control – the former implying that an individual feels a sense of control over their environment, that they are setting the course for their life, the latter implying an individual's attitude toward external factors as largely determining his or her life course.

### Self-regulation

Self-regulation represents an ability to regulate emotion. It is about emotional control and also emotional resiliency – an ability to bounce back from disappointment, conflict and distress. Children who have effective strategies for dealing with these losses are much more likely to overcome adversity than those whose reactions overtake them, push them to overreactions, tantrums or violence. Individuals acting in a social world will respond with *propensities* (individual traits) to *triggers* (outward stimuli). Self-regulation determines an individual's *propensity* towards overreaction or violence when triggered by an upsetting or conflict-laden situation.

### Empathy

Empathy is an ability to put yourself in another person's shoes – and to act in a way that is sensitive to other people's perspectives. Empathy develops as a direct result of attachment between a child and their primary carer.<sup>6</sup> From birth to age three, the number of synapses (neural connections) in the brain multiplies by 20 – and most are formed as the result of experience in their new environment.<sup>7</sup> Synapse pathways are reinforced by repeated early experience; the effect is that this early learning becomes extremely resistant to change. The more nurturing and responsive an infant's environment is and the more attuned carers are to the infant's needs, the stronger the infant's sense of empathy will become.<sup>8</sup> Empathy leads to pro-social behaviour. It is ultimately a *relational* capability and underpins a set of social skills that allows individuals to interact and communicate with each other effectively.

Table 1 illustrates the specific measures within the SDQ that capture aspects of these three key character capabilities.

The SDQ serves as the outcome measurement in the data analysis conducted for this report, and hence as a proxy for the key character capabilities outlined above. The SDQ was designed to measure five types of behavioural indicators: hyperactivity, emotionality, conduct, pro-social behaviour and peer-to-peer relations. These measures also serve as good 'early indicators' for the three key character capabilities described in

Table 1 **The measures within the SDQ that relate to the three key character capabilities**

Character capabilities	SDQ measures
Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sees tasks through to the end, has good attention span</li> <li>• is restless, overactive and cannot stay still for long</li> <li>• cannot sit still, is constantly fidgeting or squirming</li> <li>• is easily distracted, attention wanders</li> <li>• cannot stop and think things over before acting</li> </ul>
Empathy and attachment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shows concern for other people's feelings</li> <li>• is happy to share with other children</li> <li>• is helpful if someone is hurt, upset or feeling ill</li> <li>• is kind to younger children</li> <li>• often volunteers to help others</li> <li>• tends to play alone, is rather solitary</li> <li>• has at least one good friend</li> <li>• is generally liked by other children</li> <li>• is picked on or bullied by other children</li> <li>• gets on better with adults than other children</li> </ul>
Self-regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• often complains of headaches, stomachaches or sickness</li> <li>• has many worries, often seems worried</li> <li>• is often unhappy, tearful or downhearted</li> <li>• is nervous or clingy in new situations; often loses confidence</li> <li>• has many fears; is easily scared</li> <li>• often has temper tantrums or hot tempers</li> <li>• generally obeys, often does what adults ask</li> <li>• often fights with other children or bullies them</li> <li>• often argues with adults</li> <li>• can be spiteful towards others</li> </ul>

Chapter 1: empathy (peer-to-peer relations and pro-social behaviour subscales), self-regulation (emotionality and conduct subscales) and application (hyperactivity subscale). Although the link between the character capabilities and the SDQ subscales is not tried and tested, there is a wealth of psychological research – referenced through out this report – that strongly links the behaviours measured by the SDQ to the development of empathy, application and self-regulation. The next chapter examines the theoretical basis for the role of character capabilities in influencing life chances, and summarises evidence from previous research.



## 2 Why character matters

It is hardly shocking to suggest that the ability to stick at a task, to control emotions appropriately and to empathise and socially connect are valuable capabilities in an individual. Anti-social, feckless, egotistical behaviour has rarely been applauded. But there is reason to speculate that certain character capabilities have become more important in recent decades, in so far as they affect wellbeing, income, work, health and sociability.

### Wellbeing

Professor Avner Offer argues that the ‘flow of novelty’ generated by today’s market-based, consumer societies is so strong that higher levels of commitment and self-discipline are needed to ensure that long-term wellbeing is not sacrificed for short-term gratification. As Offer puts it: ‘Affluence breeds impatience, and impatience undermines wellbeing.’<sup>9</sup>

Paying attention – both to others and to a task at hand – becomes vital. Indeed Offer describes attention as the ‘universal currency of well-being’. At any moment ‘it can be spent on’ a pleasant or passive activity or invested in ‘a more difficult activity’ that promises enjoyment and pay off in the future.<sup>10</sup> The skill comes in being able to determine when to invest and when to consume.

Long-term wellbeing comes from relationships and projects pursued and completed. These require investment. Wellbeing is about more than having an abundance of goods and services; it is also about a ‘personal capacity for commitment’.

The trouble is that humans find it difficult to place the longer term on an equal footing with the here and now – a key finding of behavioural economics. Economic Man is not, as it turns out, very rational. People often make self-defeating

choices that we don't always recognise we want, and we almost never have full sets of ordered preferences on which to base our decisions.

The ability to commit therefore becomes an even more important character capability. What Offer calls 'commitment devices' or 'commitment strategies' can help individuals to manage their desires:

*A young student ponders whether to spend the evening revising at her desk, or to go out with friends. Call her Emma. Better marks mean better prospects, but dancing and drink are attractive too. How much to sacrifice tonight for a remote future? When to stop having fun, but also, when to stop being serious?... Conventions, expectations and institutions have built up gradually over decades and centuries, to form a stock of equipment available to deal with her problem... sources and strategies of self-control, both cognitive and social, take time to develop.<sup>11</sup>*

Offer argues that those from more affluent backgrounds are better able to flourish in an environment of continuous temptation, for two reasons.

First, being affluent lowers the cost of failing to commit, because the more affluent have assets and investments (often inherited) to cushion themselves against the consequence of succumbing to short-term desires. Even if the amounts of money involved are greater, the stakes are not as high.

Second, Offer suggests that children growing up in more affluent families often end up being better able to commit to long-term projects. This may be because of the extra support they tend to have in the form of education, family peer groups, cultural expectations and so on. Recent research suggests that people from lower income groups may find it harder to plan over a longer time horizon – although this is a far from established research finding.<sup>12</sup> Offer does not directly address the development of character capabilities in childhood, which is the focus of the data presented in this report. But he does argue that while the better off have better commitment devices and strategies, overall the character capacity to self-regulate is diminishing:



*At any given point in time (for economists ‘in the cross-section’; for historians ‘synchronically’), the capacity and exercise of self-control increases with social standing and wealth. But with the passage of historical time (‘diachronically’), and as affluence has risen overall, the capacity for commitment and prudence has declined.*<sup>13</sup>

Self-regulation and self-control are learned and developed over long periods of time. However, today’s consumer society presents us with endless choices and encourages immediate consumption. Consumer choice is also being extended into childhood, with a rise in marketing aimed directly at children – whose direct consumer power (through increased income) and indirect consumer power (through ‘pester power’ over parents) is rising. Online advertising is growing rapidly and is often embedded in playful content, or ‘advergames’.

The majority of children in the UK recognise Coca-Cola and McDonald’s picture brands before they can count to five or recognise their own written name.<sup>14</sup> There is some evidence that children from the poorest social groups are the most concerned with brand.<sup>15</sup> This may be because brands offer status to those who lack economic resources. But there is also some concern that advertising can undermine parental authority, portray parents as ‘uncool’ and out of touch. Research shows that the more young people were drawn in to consumer culture, the more negative they were about their parents and more likely they were to fight and disagree with them.<sup>16</sup>

## Finance

The character capacity for commitment (or self-regulation) also impinges on financial issues, especially savings and debt. One of the causes of the 2008 crash was the high level of indebtedness of Western nations, especially the USA and the UK. Mortgages and credit cards offered with time-limited discounts play directly to human frailty in the shape of short-termism. Debt is now essential to understanding modern economics. Recent figures show that 93 per cent of house repossessions in the USA in 2007

were from owners who had just come off a two-year discounted rate mortgage.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of ‘financial capability’ has been of interest to policy makers in recent years, not least because of the significant rise in the complexity of personal financial management and a huge expansion of financial products and services offered to consumers. But there is some evidence that the skills to navigate this landscape have not kept pace with the financial services market, with potentially devastating consequences, individually and collectively. Atkinson and colleagues find that ‘even accounting for age, affluence and experience, young people are faring worse on all indicators of financial capability’.<sup>18</sup>

Although financial capability is clearly dependent on ‘hard’, cognitive and numeracy skills, there is a further dimension based on the capacity to delay gratification, resist impulse buys and plan ahead for the long term. More choice and interaction with the market for younger generations is of course liberating on a number of dimensions, but there are distributional concerns. If children in more affluent families are able to learn about planning ahead through the example of their parents, and develop better capacities to self-regulate, this could put them at an even greater advantage over children from poorer families and exacerbate inequality of opportunity.

## Work

The long-term shift from a manufacturing economy towards a service economy puts an increased premium on certain soft skills, and in particular on social skills, including empathy. The ‘feminisation’ of the labour market – female employment rates rose from 46 per cent in 1955 to 70 per cent today – has occurred in the service sector.<sup>19</sup> And the rise in female employment also created a ‘feedback effect’<sup>20</sup> by raising demand for domestic services. The UK has one of the most service-oriented economies in the world.<sup>21</sup>

The workplace has become more personal, with increased interpersonal interaction and growing emphasis on customer experience. At the same time, shifts away from hierarchical

structures put a higher premium on the ability to work well in a team: currently employers report a soft skills ‘gap’, which would put a premium on their possession – although it is too early to tell what impact the recession will have on these shortfalls. The reduction in the number of ‘stepping stone’ positions, providing a path from the bottom to the top, and related drop in levels of intra-career upwards mobility, have likewise increased the importance of motivation, agency and application. To the extent that careers are more internally driven than externally determined, the range of internal capabilities becomes more important.

### Health and social capital

In health, too, the role of personal decision-making has become more important. ‘Lifestyle diseases’ related to obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption make up a rising proportion of health problems and health spending. There is evidence of a socio-economic gradient in the prevalence of related conditions as principal drivers of health inequalities, which are widening in spite of a significant increase in health spending.<sup>22</sup> Alterations in diet, level of exercise or lifestyle require the character capabilities of self-regulation and application.

The behaviour of people towards each other is influenced by the capacity to understand the impact of one’s actions on another – or empathy. The dynamics of ‘pro-social’ or ‘anti-social’ behaviour is a complex area of research and policy, and outside the scope of this report, which is focused on opportunities and life chances for individuals. But it is likely that the character capabilities under consideration here relate to social behaviour, too.

### Social mobility

There are, then, theoretical grounds for suggesting that character capabilities will impact directly on life chances in relation to the outcomes discussed in the previous section. But there is limited research on the link between the development of these character capabilities and later adult outcomes. What evidence there is

suggests a strong, probably growing, link. Leon Feinstein's work has demonstrated the relative importance of academic, psychological and behavioural attributes in childhood. Feinstein finds that non-cognitive abilities – character capabilities – at age ten have substantial implications for adult outcomes. 'Conduct disorder' in boys, for example, predicts later adult unemployment – whereas 'self-esteem' predicts earnings. For women, 'locus of control' – or agency – is a particularly important predictor of labour market success.<sup>23</sup>

There is some evidence that character capabilities have become more important in recent decades. In an influential report, *Freedom's Orphans*, Julia Margo and colleagues at the ippr compared longitudinal studies from 1958 and 1970 and found that 'in just over a decade, personal and social skills became 33 times more important in determining relative life chances'.<sup>24</sup> The same study reported that measured capability for application at the age of 10 has a bigger impact on earnings by the age of 30 than ability in maths.

The increased importance of character capabilities does not in itself have implications for social mobility or equality of opportunity. But there is also evidence that the development of these character capabilities is related to economic background. Over the past couple of generations, material deprivation – and specifically income – has become a strong predictor of a deficit in social and emotional skills.

Evidence presented in *Freedom's Orphans* suggests that although the development of character capabilities among children born in 1958 was not related to income, it was strongly associated with income among those born in 1970.<sup>25</sup> The implications of these findings are potentially profound, since it appears that the opportunities to develop character capabilities narrowed in lower-income households, just as those capabilities became more important to life chances.

The evidence for inequalities in the development of character capabilities is particularly striking against a backdrop of slowing social mobility. Levels of intergenerational mobility – children doing better than their parents – rose until the 1970s, at which point mobility stagnated. A study that analysed birth

cohorts from 1900 to 1960 found that the importance of family background on getting a better job declined<sup>26</sup> through to the 1970s but since that time has remained relatively constant.<sup>27</sup> Using income as a measure confirms the overall picture with parental income becoming a more important determinant of the adult income of people born in 1970, compared with those born in 1958.<sup>28</sup>

Data from the early 2000s indicate that social mobility measured by occupation may be ticking upwards a little.<sup>29</sup> But the international picture is not encouraging: the USA is the only country with consistently lower levels of mobility than that of the UK.<sup>30</sup>

The growing importance of character capabilities has not been lost on policy makers and other stakeholders. As well as *Freedom's Orphans*, there have been other influential reports including *Early Intervention: Good parents, great kids, better citizens* by Graham Allen MP and Iain Duncan Smith MP, and *A Good Childhood*, published by the Good Childhood Inquiry in 2009.<sup>31</sup>

A raft of recent public policy initiatives also demonstrates a growing interest in early years parenting and development and increasing government support for early intervention and early education policies. Related initiatives include:

- Sure Start local programmes and community centres
- the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme, an entire curriculum framework introduced in 2006 and covering seven key themes in a school year<sup>32</sup>
- pilot programmes in the UK of the Penn Resiliency Programme under the guidance of psychologist Martin Seligman<sup>33</sup>
- the establishment of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners in 2006 to research and disseminate best practice in approaches to support parents

But although government has done much to emphasise the importance of early years development in public policy, the success of these policies is far from clear. This is partly because government has yet to approach early years policy in a clear and streamlined way. At the moment, early years strategy is broaden-

ing in its focus on everything from child care to early education, getting parents back into employment, and providing family support. What it should do is focus clearly on delivering initiatives that support the development of key character capabilities. Achieving this will require a greater understanding in public policy of what factors contribute to the development of these character capabilities as children grow up.







### 3 Influences on the early years

There is a range of influential factors that affect the development of character capabilities in children – leading to better and worse life chances for children. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the relative importance of these different factors. There are three main categorical factors that influence the development of character capabilities in the early years, relating broadly to *structural circumstances*, *parenting style* and *psychology*:

- 1 *Structural factors*: Material poverty, parental background, family structure, ethnicity, gender, disability and the other structural circumstances of children's early lives all form the background to their development and exert an influence on that development. This is the kind of 'visible' disadvantage which is most obvious to policy makers, and which drives many policy priorities in this area.
- 2 *Parenting style and confidence*: Parents' approach to their children – their level of warmth, responsiveness, control and discipline – are strongly influential on children's character capability development. Parents' perceived view of their competence or ability to parent well is also an important influence on the development of children's character capability.
- 3 *Psychological vulnerability*: Genetic, pre-natal and very early environmental factors can affect children's early psychological development. Some children, as a result of these varying factors, have a temperament that makes them more susceptible to weaker parenting or a less nurturing environment, or less susceptible to better parenting or more nurturing environments. These children are found across the socio-economic spectrum, but suffer more in low-income households; in this sense they are doubly disadvantaged.

## Structural factors: income, family structure and parental background

The character capabilities and competence of children are shaped by countless relationships and interactions, with their primary caretaker, immediate and extended family, peers and class mates, teachers and adult role models. However, children are also influenced by their wider community, by social norms and culture in society, and increasingly by global networks that they come into contact with online or through travel.

Contemporary development theory attempts to locate individual development in these multi-faceted and changing contexts. Perhaps the most prominent contemporary theorist is Uri Bronfenbrenner, who developed a model of human development able to take these different influences into account.<sup>34</sup> Bronfenbrenner explains human development as a series of increasingly complex interactions between an individual and the dynamic 'actors' in their environment. A child's healthy development depends on the success of these interactions.

The first and most important of these actors is the child's primary caretaker, typically though not necessarily a parent. The set of interactions taking place between parent and child are referred to as *proximal* processes – the immediate, daily interactions that the child experiences that form the primary mechanism for the child's development. Examples of these proximal or intimate processes include the warmth and affection with which parents respond to their children as well as the discipline, control and enforcement practices that parents employ in the home. Parents' attitudes towards learning and education, as well as conversation in the home, also fall into this category.

These primary interactions are mediated by a set of background or *distal* factors that reflect the social, economic and demographic environment that the child is growing up in. Examples include the family's income or poverty level, the family structure, and parents' educational level or occupation. A holistic picture of children's development must take into account the different influences on a child's intimate and extended day-to-day life.

One of the most difficult challenges for the production of a truthful and productive narrative about good parenting is to acknowledge the importance of these distal influences on

children's development, without automatically consigning disadvantaged or unconventional families to an 'at risk' group. While extended background factors can have a profound effect on proximal factors, it is important to recognise that distal factors are not determinants of outcomes, nor do they automatically predict parents' ability to care well for their children. Proximal factors are the most important processes in children's healthy or poor development.

### Income

From an equality of opportunity perspective, the relationship between poverty and child development is obviously critically important. If the children of low-income families are less likely to develop character capabilities, this may act as a further disadvantage in terms of their life chances. There is some existing evidence that such a link exists.

An Australian longitudinal study found an association between poverty and behaviour problems – specifically – in children at age five.<sup>35</sup> A series of US studies have reached similar conclusions, using a range of measures to suggest that being born into deprived circumstances has a negative effect on child outcomes and life chances.<sup>36</sup>

There are two main theoretical perspectives that aim to explain the effect of income on children's outcomes:

- *The family investment model* focuses on the inability of deprived or poor parents to provide their children financially with the materials, environment, services or experiences that would benefit their cognitive and behavioural development.<sup>37</sup>
- *The family stress model* points to the detrimental effect that low income, poverty and deprivation has on parents' mental health and general wellbeing, and ultimately on their ability to parent well. The result is that poorer parents are less able to parent well and support their child's development.<sup>38</sup>

One of the factors complicating research in this area is the strong relationship between material and financial deprivation,

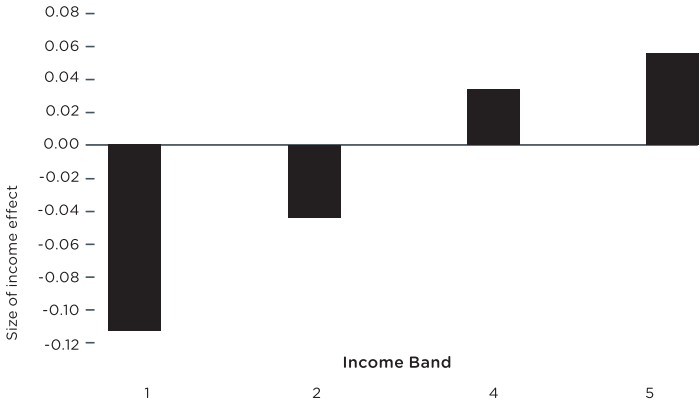
adult mental health problems and child outcomes. Teasing out the causal relationships is necessarily a difficult exercise. A very sophisticated study, undertaken by Kathleen Kiernan and M Carmen Huerta, found that poverty and maternal depression – themselves strongly related – both impacted on the cognitive development and emotional wellbeing of children.<sup>39</sup> Part of this effect, the authors suggest, is the result of less responsive and warm parenting from parents who have fewer emotional and economic resources. A further study from Kiernan, co-authored with Fiona Mensah,<sup>40</sup> found that financial poverty is more closely tied to poorer cognitive development and maternal depression is more strongly related to children's behavioural problems.

But while the association with poverty is well established, it is not just low income children who have behavioural problems, especially among older children. Teenagers from upper-middle-class families in the USA, in some circumstances, were more at risk of drug and alcohol abuse, anxiety and depression due to lack of time and attention from parents as a result of their parents' high income and successful careers.<sup>41</sup>

Analysis of the Millenium Cohort Study undertaken for this report shows that higher income is related to better behavioural outcomes overall – in line with previous research. But there is little evidence from the current study that there is any consistent relationship between income and attachment.<sup>42</sup>

As expected, lower income is negatively associated with behavioural outcomes, as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) at age five (Figure 2). But again, in line with previous research, it is a relatively weak association.<sup>43</sup> It explains only a modest proportion of the difference in the development of character capabilities in children.

Figure 2 tells us that, on average, a child from a family in the lowest income band (1) will have an outcome score ~0.12 points below a child from a family in the median income band, ~0.04 points below a child from a family in the second lowest band (2), and so on. Each income band in this graph represents 20 per cent of the population, from the lowest (1) to the highest (5).

Figure 2 **Effect of income on child outcomes**

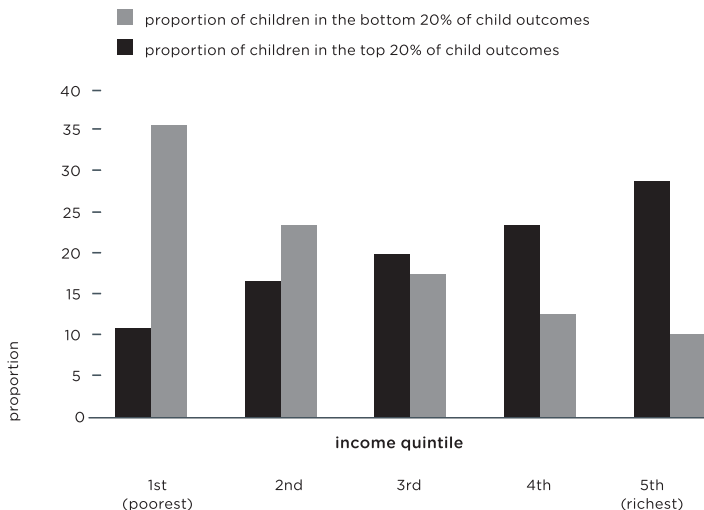
NB the middle quintile does not appear as it was used as the 'baseline' for this calculation.

Figure 3 demonstrates this association in another way. It shows the proportion of children from families in different quintiles of the income distribution (going from the poorest 20 per cent of families on the left to the richest 20 per cent on the right) whose outcome scores were in the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent, respectively.

Figure 3 shows that there is a clear relationship between family income and child outcomes – at least in the 'raw' MCS data, when other factors are not controlled for. Children from the richest income quintile are about two and a half times more likely to be in the top 20 per cent of outcome scores than the bottom 20 per cent of scores. Conversely, children from the poorest income quintile are about three and half times more likely to be in the bottom 20 per cent of scores than the top 20 per cent of scores.

However, most of this difference in raw performance is actually due to the effect of other family characteristics which are correlated with income, rather than income itself. When we

Figure 3 **Proportion of children from families in different quintiles of the income distribution whose outcome scores were in the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent**



control for other characteristics – in particular measures of parental confidence and self-esteem – the differences in child outcomes between richer and poorer families are no longer statistically significant. In other words, parents on a low income, but who are confident and able, are as effective at generating character capabilities in their children as parents on a high income. It is not income itself that causes the different outcomes but other factors which are associated with low income. Stephen Scott, professor of child health and behaviour at King's College London and head of research for the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners, concludes:

*Poverty is a factor, but not a central one... I am fond of saying poverty of what? And actually it seems to be poverty of the parent-child experience... that leads to poor child outcomes rather than poverty of a material kind.<sup>44</sup>*

One of the questions addressed in the analysis undertaken in this report is the role of family structures in creating a good environment for developing key character capabilities. This is the focus of the next section.

### Family structure

A rich research literature demonstrates that healthy psychological development requires nurture, affection, intellectual stimulation, security and stability. These vital ingredients of a good start in life can of course be provided within any family form. However, there is some evidence that lone parents and cohabiting couples do less well in terms of child outcomes than married couples.

But the causal factors at work here are not straightforward. An analysis undertaken by Kiernan of the MCS found that family status was only very weakly associated with children's development, once other factors – like poverty, maternal depression and so on – were controlled for.<sup>45</sup> This echoes previous research using a range of sources finding that family structure has little effect, once it has been isolated from other associated factors.

A consistent finding from previous research is a strong link between the quality of relationships between parents and child development. Parents with a good relationship are more likely to parent well, with warmth and without hostility, anger and disruption. Studies in the USA have linked the effect of a range of familial relationships on parenting. While the relationship between primary carer (usually, in practice, the mother) and child is critical, there are strong influences from parent–parent relationships, as from other carer–child relationships in the home.<sup>46</sup> Young people themselves place considerable importance on the quality of their parents' relationship.<sup>47</sup> Successful relationships foster and rely on individual wellbeing – and depression is unsurprisingly consistently associated with poorer outcomes for parents, and for their children.<sup>48</sup>

In this data used for this study, family status variables are based on information about marital status and the combination

of parents or other primary carers who are living in the household at MCS wave 2. The base category consists of families where both the parents are natural parents who are married to each other. The 'lone parent' category in the analysis captures any household with just one primary carer. The 'cohabiting' category captures households where both natural parents are present but not married. The 'step parent(s)' category captures households with two parents, but where at least one of the parents is not the natural parent of the child. These categories are mutually exclusive – so, for example, married parents with the natural mother and the stepfather would be captured by the 'step parent' category rather than the base category.

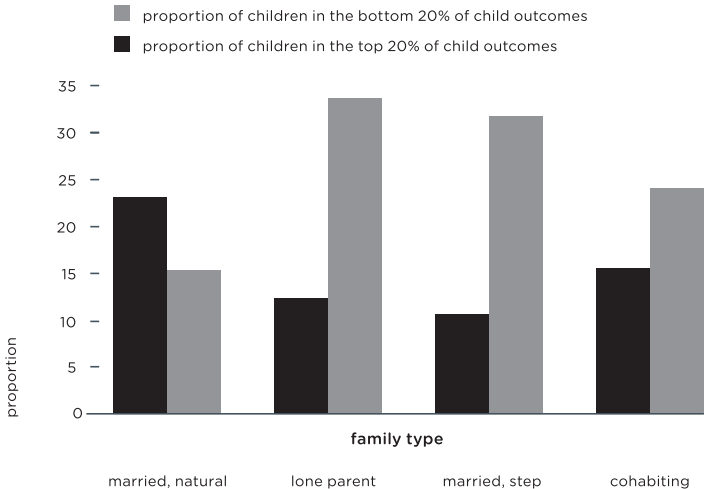
Figure 4 shows the probability of having outcome scores in the top 20 per cent and the bottom 20 per cent for children from lone parent households compared with different types of two-parent households – married with both natural parents, married with a step-parent, and non-married (cohabiting).

Figure 4 shows that children with married parents, both of whom are the child's biological parent, do best in terms of outcome scores. This group is around twice as likely to be in the top 20 per cent of child outcome scores as are children from lone parent families or step-parented families. Conversely, children with married parents are only half as likely to be in the bottom 20 per cent of child outcomes as are children with lone parents or step-parents. Children with cohabiting parents do worse than those with married parents but better than those with lone parents or step-parents.

However, when we control for other characteristics – namely parental style and parental confidence – the relationship between family structure and child outcomes disappears almost entirely. The only remaining correlation is a small difference between married parents and cohabiting parents (probably because marriage is serving as a proxy for more stable and happy partnerships). Crucially, the outcomes for children of lone parents and step-parents are explained by the differences in other family characteristics such as parental confidence and self-esteem; being a lone parent or a step-parent does not adversely affect child outcomes in itself.



Figure 4 **Outcome scores for children from lone parent households compared with different types of two-parent households**



These findings illustrate the need for policy to focus on supporting strong couple relationships before they break down, and when breakdown is inevitable, to minimise negative impacts on children. In addition, there should be a focus on ensuring that lone parents have the support they need to restore confidence in their parenting abilities.

Of the 9,436 families used in the data analysis, 9,425 had the natural mother as the primary carer at MCS wave 1 (when children were nine months old). Of the 11 remaining families, five had the grandmother as primary carer, three an adoptive mother, two the step-mother and one an 'other parent/carer'. None of these categories is large enough to analyse in any meaningful statistical sense.

There were 63 families where the natural father was the primary carer in the household at MCS wave 2 (when children were three years old). These have been left out of the main set of

results reported here to make the interpretation of ‘maternal attachment’ and other mothers’ and fathers’ variables in wave 1 clearer. However, running the regressions with the families where the father was the primary carer makes no perceptible difference to the results.<sup>50</sup> The sample is of course too small to make any serious claims, but it is worth noting that based on the data available having the father as the primary carer makes no difference to children’s behavioural outcomes.<sup>51</sup>

### Other background factors

While income and family structure are obvious variables to investigate for their influence on child outcomes, other factors were also found to have some effect. The other influencing factors, discussed here, were parental educational attainment and breastfeeding to six months. Both had a positive association with the development of character capabilities in five-year-olds. The strong association between the educational levels attained by both fathers and mothers echoes previous research in this area.<sup>52</sup> Once measures of parental ability are factored into the model, the *educational level* of the non-primary carer (usually the father) drops out, but the primary carer’s level of education continues to have a significant positive effect. Better-educated carers perform better in terms of developing character capabilities, even allowing for their other parenting abilities.

There is a strong association between children’s development of character capabilities and *breast-feeding* to six months. This effect remains even after controlling for all other variables in the model, including primary carer attachment. There is also a *gender* effect at work: girls are more likely than boys to develop these character capabilities by the age of five. This is to be expected: the different developmental patterns of boys and girls is well documented and understood. Boys take longer to develop non-cognitions in addition to being more likely to externalise negative behaviour – which is picked up easily by behavioural measures – as opposed to girls who tend to exhibit more internalising behaviour problems, which are harder to pick up.

In the MCS analysis undertaken for this study, the influence of paid work was also examined. The connection between parental employment and the development of behavioural skills, or character capabilities, is relatively under-explored in the research literature. But it has some relevance to current policy debates, not least around welfare to work. There is no connection between paid *employment* on the part of either the main carer, or the second parent, and the development of character capabilities in children. This is true whether employment status is captured when the child was aged nine months, or when they are five years old. Having unemployed parents appears to have no impact on the acquisition of these character capabilities.

There is of course a substantial body of research detailing the many advantages stemming from parents being in work, and there are no grounds for questioning these. But on the narrow question of developing these specific character capabilities in young children, the employment of parents in and of itself does not seem to be a factor. For more details about the impact of different variables see the technical appendix.

Parental *disability* and parental *ethnic background* are associated with significantly different outcomes for children at age five, but all differences are outweighed when parental ability was taken into account. Without these controls, having a mother with a long-standing limiting illness or disability at age five is associated with worse outcomes. Children of Pakistani or Bangladeshi mothers, or mothers with mixed ethnicity, also had significantly worse outcomes than children of white mothers. Once parental ability is accounted for, these background factors are no longer significant.

### Parental style: attachment, warmth and discipline

The previous section presented evidence for the relationship between circumstantial factors and the development of children's character capabilities. Income and family structure were found to have some effect, although parental ability significantly diminishes these effects.

This section investigates the impact of parental style on the way in which parents engage with their children. There is good evidence that certain parenting styles have a strong influence on the development of cognitive and behavioural attributes, as well as on key outcomes for children including in the labour market, their educational attainment, and general health and wellbeing.<sup>53</sup> The analysis conducted for this paper explores this link in more detail.

### Parental confidence

There is a rich literature pointing to the positive effects that strong self or collective efficacy has on the ability of parents – as individual and communities – to parent well.<sup>54</sup> Several measures in the MCS capture parents' general feelings of control and self-esteem, and measure how competent they feel as parents.<sup>55</sup> Of course, since these measures of ability are self-assessed, they must be treated with some caution, and say more about parents' confidence in their parenting ability rather than their genuine competence.

But for both the main carer and second parent, self-esteem, sense of control over their environment, and perceived competence as a parent were all significantly and positively associated with children's character capability development ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### Styles: warmth and control

One of the most robust approaches to measuring parental influences on child outcomes is to assess variations in parenting style. Diana Baumrind's influential framework views normal parenting as an attempt to socialise and control children. Baumrind's approach to parenting style is based on two important axes of good parenting:<sup>56</sup>

- *Warmth/responsiveness* describes the ability of parents to cultivate in their child a sense of individuality, an ability to assert themselves, and the capacity to regulate their emotions and

reactions. As Baumrind states: ‘The extent to which parents intentionally foster individuality, self-regulation, and self-assertion by being attuned, supportive, and acquiescent to children’s special needs and demands.’<sup>57</sup>

• *Control/demandingness* captures parents’ ability to supervise and confront their child when they are disobedient, and parents’ ability to successfully bring their children into family life or to help their children recognise their place in the world beyond their own wants and needs. Baumrind describes this attribute in terms of: ‘the claims parents make on children to become integrated into the family whole, by their maturity demands, supervision, disciplinary efforts and willingness to confront the child who disobeys’.<sup>58</sup>

We can view warmth and control as spectrums of parenting that many different parenting practices can be placed on (Figure 5). It is important to recognise that although individual practices – spanking a child or cuddling a child – may influence development, it is often misleading to look at specific approaches in isolation. Broad patterns of parenting are far more important in predicting child outcomes.

There is research evidence supporting the importance of both elements of parental style. Leon Feinstein has found that maternal and paternal hostility – the opposite of warmth – were the two most important factors in diminishing locus of control for the 1970 birth cohort.<sup>59</sup> (It is important to note, however, that the measure of hostility used by Feinstein was based on teacher assessment and therefore subject to potential bias.)

The empirical research base on the link between rules, control and discipline and the development of character capabilities is not extensive. However, the existing theoretical research suggests that the application and enforcement of rules is important in developing children’s sense of self-regulation. A US study was able to measure stronger internal locus of control among children who were raised by parents who combined consistent use of reward and punishment with encouraging autonomy in their child.<sup>60</sup> The consistent message of the existing theoretical and empirical research, however, is that a balance is

Figure 5 **Spectrums of parenting**

vital: the most successful parents combine clear, consistently enforced rules with warmth and responsiveness.

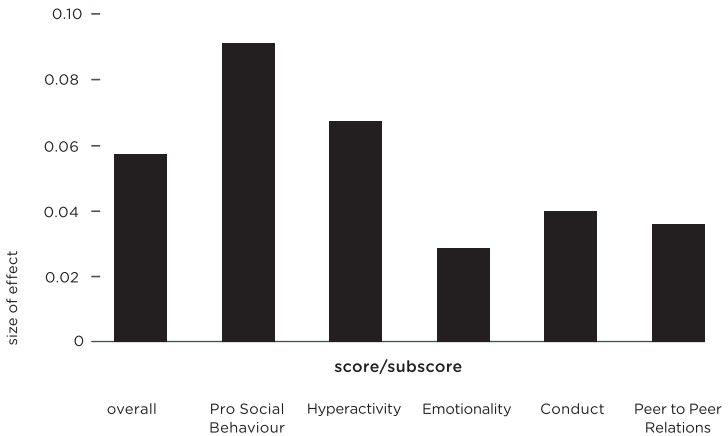
A well-tested proxy for warmth/hostility is the ‘attachment’ of the primary carer to the child. This is often labelled ‘maternal attachment’ since the overwhelming majority of primary carers in most surveys – including the MCS – are mothers. But the danger with the use of ‘maternal attachment’ is that it is interpreted prescriptively, rather than descriptively. There is no evidence that the gender of the primary carer is a factor, one way or the other.

In this study, attachment was measured using six questions from the MCS.<sup>61</sup> Primary carer attachment is strongly associated with better child outcomes (this finding is significant at the 5 per cent level). Figure 6 shows the estimated impact of primary carer attachment on children’s overall SDQ scores, as well as for five behavioural subscales measuring pro-social behaviour, hyperactivity, emotionality, conduct and peer-to-peer behaviour. Primary carer attachment is significant for each of the five subscores at the 5 per cent level.

Figure 6 tells us that a child whose main carer’s attachment score is 1 point higher than another child will (on average) have an outcome score that is 0.058 points higher than the other child. For pro-social behaviour, that outcome would be about 0.091 points higher than the other child, and so on for the other subscales.

Parental style on the control/discipline axis was measured by a series of questions from the MCS on the number of rules and enforcement of rules in the household.<sup>62</sup> Questions were asked of both the main carer and the partner.

Figure 6 **Effect of maternal attachment on child outcomes**

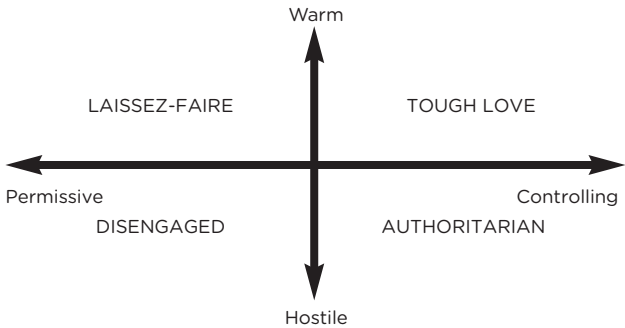


The analysis undertaken for this report found that the *number* of rules had no impact, but found a strong association between the *enforcement* of rules and the development of character capabilities (significant at the 5 per cent level). The association was reduced once controls were introduced for parental ability (see above), but remained statistically significant.

### Tough love: parenting types compared

Putting the two axes of parenting style together produces four overall 'types' of parental style, as shown in Figure 7: high warmth, low control parents are 'laissez-faire'; high warmth, high control parents are 'tough love'; low warmth, low control parents are 'disengaged'; and low warmth, high control parents are 'authoritarian'. Only parents scoring well below (or above) average on the two principal axes were classified in one of the four clear parental styles. The remaining parents (around half the sample) form the 'base' group against which the four can be compared; for more details on the construction of the typology

Figure 7 The two axes of parenting style



see the technical appendix. These are labels that have been generated for the purposes of this typology only and do not relate specifically to similar labels in the psychology literature. The four parenting styles are described in Box 1.

It is important to note that parents in all four quadrants of this parenting typology could be considered within the healthy or normal range, so long as they are not towards the extreme edges of the parenting style axes. In other words, all four parenting styles are generally acceptable ways to raise children. Only the extreme left-hand bottom area of the scale would indicate neglectful or abusive parenting.

#### Box 1 The four parenting styles

##### Tough love

*This group of parents combine a warm and responsive approach to child rearing with firm rules and clear boundaries. They are assertive without being aggressive or restrictive and the aim of their disciplinary methods is to reason with and support their child rather than to be punitive. Children from 'tough loving' families are characterised as cooperative, self-regulating and socially responsible.*



**Laissez-faire**

*Highly responsive parents who are undemanding in their approach to discipline and generally non-confrontational make up a second parenting style. They are nontraditional and engaged in their approach, opting for a lenient and democratic household that allows children considerable opportunity to develop at their own pace. Laissez-faire parents are permissive of behaviour and do not impose many rules.*

**Authoritarian**

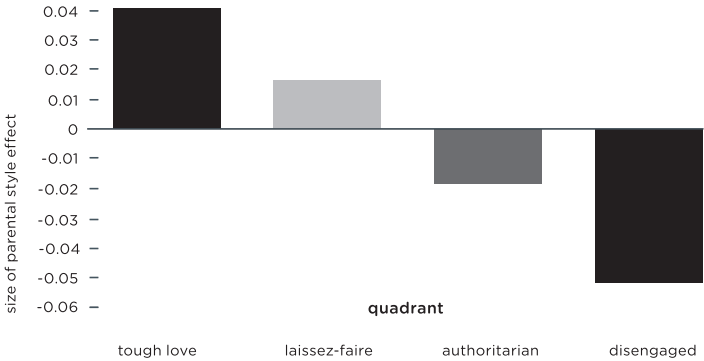
*This group's approach is characterised by firm discipline and rule-based parenting practices but without much regard for children's feelings or perspective. These parents typically value obedience and structured environments over freedom and exploration.*

**Disengaged (and, at the extreme, neglectful)**

*These parents are generally hands off in their approach to parenting. They are low in warmth and discipline. Extreme cases, at the lower end of both axes, make up a further group of poor parents whose children are 'at risk': a level of disengagement of a small minority of parents that would be considered neglectful. The lack of engagement that characterises this approach can result in the development of what some psychologists call 'callousness' in children. 'Callous' children grow up lacking a sense of empathy and guilt, and learn to see others in a purely instrumental way. The influence of parent and peer factors on callousness trajectories during adolescence plays a crucial role in the formation of these traits. Most crucial of all are parents' warmth, affection and responsiveness in caring for their baby in the early years.*

The results of the MCS analysis undertaken for this report show that the best parenting style, in terms of developing character capabilities, combines strong attachment and rule

Figure 8 Effect of parenting styles on child outcomes

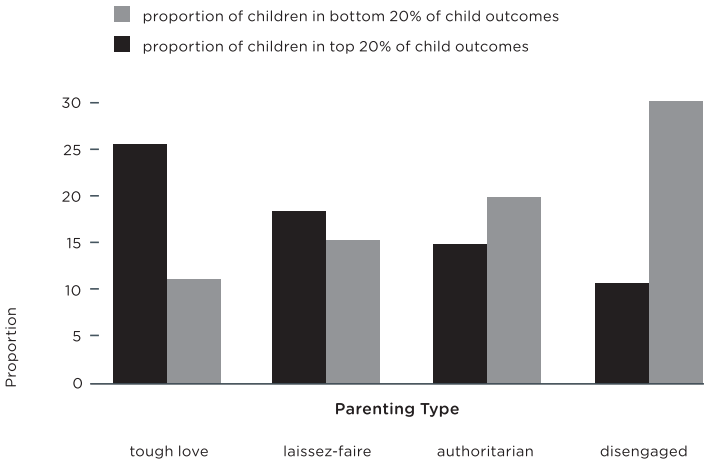


enforcement – ‘tough love’ (see Figure 8) – followed by ‘laissez-faire’ parenting, which combines high attachment with lower enforcement of rules. Authoritarian parenting, combining high enforcement of rules with low levels of attachment yields slightly negative outcomes, while disengaged parenting, which combines neither strong rule enforcement nor high levels of warmth, yields the most negative outcomes. Overall, warmth registers as more important than discipline in impacting on child behavioural outcomes.

This graph tells us that children with parents taking a ‘tough love’ approach will (on average) have an outcome score that is 0.04 points higher than the base group, ~0.02 points higher than children with parents taking a ‘laissez-faire’ approach, ~0.06 points higher than children with parents taking an ‘authoritarian’ approach, and ~0.1 points higher than children with parents taking a ‘disengaged’ approach.

Another way of showing the effect of different parenting styles on child outcomes is to look at how each style is associated with the probability of scoring particularly high or low on the child outcome score. Taking the four different parenting styles, Figure 9 shows the percentage of children with parents of each

Figure 9 **Percentage of children with parents of each style who have ‘good’ outcome scores and ‘bad’ outcome scores**



style who have ‘good’ outcome scores (in the top 20 per cent of outcomes) and the percentage with ‘bad’ outcome scores (in the bottom 20 per cent).

Figure 9 shows a clear relationship between the probability of especially good or bad child outcomes and parenting style, which backs up the evidence from regressions shown earlier. If parental style bore no relationship whatsoever to child outcomes we would expect that all the lines in the graph would be at or around the 20 per cent mark. However, instead we find that children with ‘tough love’ parents are around two and a half times more likely to have outcomes in the top 20 per cent than children with ‘disengaged’ parents (29.3 per cent versus 12.2 per cent). Conversely, children with disengaged parents are around three times more likely to be in the bottom 20 per cent of outcome scores as children with tough love parents. The two other parenting styles occupy an intermediate position. Children

with laissez-faire parents do slightly better than those with authoritarian parents; both parenting styles are associated with much better results than the disengaged parenting style.

The results in Figure 9 do not control for any other differences between parents that might affect child outcomes. It is important to do this because many of the other parental and child attributes which help determine child outcomes are correlated with parenting style – poorer households are more likely to have disengaged parents, for instance. When we control for other factors using regression techniques (explained in the technical appendix), the differences between the parenting styles narrow somewhat but they do not disappear.

Controlling for other factors, children with tough love parents are still around twice as likely to have top-quintile outcomes as children with disengaged parents, while children with disengaged parents are just over twice as likely to have bottom-quintile outcomes as children with tough love parents. This shows that parental style is not just a proxy for other factors but is significantly related to child outcomes in its own right, even when other factors are controlled for.

### Psychological vulnerability

Infants between birth and three years old are more malleable than they will be at any subsequent stage in their lives. A growing body of research suggests that due to genetic and/or environmental circumstances difficult or emotionally troubled infants are even more malleable than stable, healthy infants of the same age. In other words, certain children are more strongly influenced by good *and* bad care. What this could mean is that a poor start in very early life puts many infants in a particularly vulnerable, but also particularly receptive, position. A range of studies have shown how good care has resulted in extra-positive outcomes for infants with a ‘negative’ temperament:

- A study in 2000 showed that proactive parenting – based on an observed supportive presence and clear limit-setting – yielded the most pronounced beneficial effects at age seven and/or age

nine in the case of children who scored high on externalising problems – disobedience, aggression, anger) at an earlier time of measurement (at age four) even after controlling for problem behaviours at the initial measurement.<sup>64</sup>

- Studies from the USA in 1997 and 2005 show that infants with highly negative emotionality in the early years benefited disproportionately from strongly supportive rearing environments.<sup>65</sup>
- A study of an infant-toddler intervention programme found that infants with highly negative temperaments benefited more both in terms of lower levels of externalising behaviour problems and better cognitive functioning as well.<sup>66</sup>
- In 2006, an experiment showed that interventions into parenting style aiming to improve maternal sensitivity prompted better attachment for infants with negative temperament than others.<sup>67</sup>

Although it seems clear that some children are more responsive to both good and bad environments – in other words are ‘differentially susceptible’ – it is more difficult to determine the factors or causes of variation in susceptibility and its connection to negative temperament. It is also not clear whether there is any underlying reason why some children should become more susceptible than others. There are two main theoretical explanations:

- *Evolutionary*: Because it is not possible to predict what kind of world our children will be living in after we are gone, natural selection ensures that children will differ in their receptiveness to our parenting strategies. If it is the case that a family’s parenting style did not prepare their children well for the world, the less susceptible child is a form of family insurance. In other words, differential susceptibility represents a form of natural ‘parental bet-hedging’.<sup>68</sup> What we consider to be a successful parenting style today in the UK, given the challenges and expectations that our children will face at school, in the job market and so on, may be very different from a successful parenting style for a child growing up in a post-climate-change world, for example, characterised by flash flooding, hostile environment and

temperature, and food scarcity. Whereas the former style would emphasise love, trust and consistency, the latter would try to instill caution, quick fight-or-flight response and aggression.

- *Foetal programming/environment*: Different pre-birth factors, including the ill-health or stress of the mother, may be hard-wiring heightened susceptibility into the developing baby even before the child is born. Maternal anxiety late in the pregnancy term but before birth has predicted behavioural problems in children, for example, even when controlling for post-birth maternal depression and anxiety.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, elevated levels of the stressor chemical cortisol in the womb during late pregnancy have also been shown to predict negative temperament in infants at age two and cortisol levels at age ten.<sup>70</sup>

There are further environmental explanations for why negative emotionality results in heightened susceptibility:

- Infants born prematurely or who experienced pre-birth trauma tend to be less active and participative than other infants. This passivity results in a heightened awareness of their surroundings and a greater opportunity to learn by mimicking or watching others (particularly interesting in the case on differential susceptibility and childcare).<sup>71</sup>
- By the same token, these infants develop highly sensitive nervous systems that experience and react more severely to both positive and negative environments.<sup>72</sup>

Most of the research on the effects of parenting style on more susceptible children comes from the USA, but further analysis from the Birkbeck Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues will shortly be using the Millennium Cohort Study to generate UK data. Research in the USA measuring the effects of childcare on children with a negative temperament – as opposed to parenting – has produced similar results. Importantly, the quality of childcare was a much stronger determinant of positive and negative outcomes than quantity, although early, continuous and extensive childcare was correlated with some negative behaviours.<sup>73</sup>

The policy implications for these findings are potentially significant. Decades of policy prescriptions to identify and support ‘at risk’ children have only been telling one side of the story. What this new analysis suggests is that the situation of at risk children may be both graver and more hopeful than previously assumed. In the case that differentially susceptible children are subjected to poor-quality childcare, poor parenting, or the detrimental effects of poverty itself, their risk is increased substantially – it is risk squared. On the other hand, if interventions occur in the right way and at the right time, children with a poor start in life have every opportunity to make up for lost ground and even exceed their more advantaged peers: differential susceptibility may be one of the factors in what helps certain kids to ‘buck the trend’.

### What matters most

The evidence clearly shows that there are some children who are less likely to develop key character capabilities than others – and have narrower life chances as a result. To recap the arguments and evidence in Chapter 3: three kinds of disadvantage inhibit the development of character capabilities in the early years, relating broadly to *poverty*, *psychology* and *parenting*:

- 1 *Poverty or educational disadvantage*. The children of parents with a low income and/or low educational qualifications are less likely to develop these vital character capabilities. This ‘visible’ disadvantage has been the focus of most policy, as it delineates clear and well-understood fault lines between advantage and disadvantage and is easy to target through government programmes and initiatives.
- 2 *Psychological vulnerability*. Some children have an in-built temperament which makes them more susceptible to weaker parenting or a less nurturing environment, leading to poorer outcomes. These children are found across the socio-economic spectrum, but suffer more in low-income households; in this sense they are doubly disadvantaged.

3 *Parenting style and confidence*: The children of parents with a ‘tough love’ approach do best in terms of character development; those with ‘disengaged’ parents do worst. Children of parents who rank themselves poorly in terms of their own parenting ability are also less likely to develop key character capabilities.

The overall story that emerges from this chapter is that character capabilities – application, self-regulation and empathy – make a vital contribution to life chances, mobility and opportunity. The development of these character capabilities appears to be profoundly shaped by the experience of a child in the pre-school years. There is some evidence that lower-income households face more difficulty in incubating these character capabilities. But the most important influence is the quality of parenting. Confident, skilful parents adopting a ‘tough love’ approach to parenting, balancing warmth with discipline, seem to be most effective in terms of generating these key character capabilities. An ambitious agenda for equality of opportunity will need to take the development of these capabilities seriously.







## 4 Policy directions

There is very strong evidence that character capabilities have a significant impact on life chances; that parents play the principal role in developing these character capabilities in children, especially in the early years; and that improving the quality of parenting, especially for disadvantaged children, is a key priority for policy aimed at generating a fairer society. This chapter:

- sets out goals for public policy
- evaluates existing policy interventions
- makes policy recommendations

At this stage in the programme of work, the policy suggestions are offered as potential directions of travel. In phase two we propose to flesh out and test fully fledged policies, based on in-depth interviews with practitioners, policy makers and parents themselves. The focus here is also entirely on the early years; this is not to say that there are not important policy implications for education, children in care, citizens' services and voluntary activities, and a range of other areas. But in line with the analysis presented here of the MCS, we have attempted to retain a focus on the precious, vital, early years.

The animating purpose of policy in this area ought to be to provide all children with an opportunity to develop the character capabilities necessary for an autonomous, flourishing life. Of course, there are serious limits to what public policy – spending and provision by government – can achieve in this area. By definition, the nature of the home environment and the quality of parenting lie beyond the easy reach of official agencies. There is no set of policy solutions that can solve such an intractable, private and complex cluster of problems. But there are some which can have a positive impact.

There are some who would argue that the performance of parents in building the character of their children is no business of the state in any case – that this is a private, civic issue rather than a concern of government. But the implications for life chances are such that character development must be seen as a collective concern. The term ‘nanny state’ is used pejoratively to describe government meddling in the private concerns of citizens. But if there is one area where government intervention is justified, it is in precisely the area of life signalled by the term ‘nannying’ – the development of children’s capabilities.

Based on the research conducted for this report, the goals for policy should be to:

- strengthen provision of *support and information* to parents to help them incubate character capabilities in their children
- focus support on *disadvantaged* children – those from low incomes – with greater susceptibility to the quality of their care and with poorly performing parents
- ensure *quality control* and *value for money* in early years intervention

One of the challenges is to build on networks, knowledge policies and institutions with some track record in this area of policy. It is tempting for policy makers to alight on a new initiative or new institution as the solution. This is sometimes necessary, of course. But in general it is more effective – if less exciting – to build on what works, rather than starting from scratch.

There are five specific policy conclusions, which we discuss below.

### **Sure Start back to its roots: an early intervention initiative**

There are competing visions for the role of Sure Start. It can be seen as a strongly focused early years intervention scheme, aimed at getting more support to parents most in need of help and supporting child development. Or it can be seen as a delivery

system for a wide range of child-related services, ranging from health care to childcare.

In its first iteration, Sure Start was based on child development and support for disadvantaged families. In 1999 the programme aspired to:

*Work with parents-to-be, parents and children to promote the physical, intellectual and social development of babies and young children – particularly those who are disadvantaged – so that they can flourish at home and when they get to school, and thereby break the cycle of disadvantage for the current generation of young children.<sup>74</sup>*

Latterly, Sure Start has been retasked along a ‘Children’s Centre’ model, with less social targeting and greater emphasis on childcare and getting mothers into work. It has been passed into local authority control. The stated ambition by 2003 was to:

*Achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities... through increasing the availability of childcare for all children; improving health and emotional development for young children; supporting parents as parents and in their aspirations towards employment.<sup>75</sup>*

At the same time there has been a move away from the focus on early years: Sure Start ‘Mark 1’ was explicitly aimed at children from birth to age four – ‘Mark 2’ is for children up to teenage years. Sure Start is a hugely valuable programme, but is in danger of losing its focus. It should not be a new arm of the welfare state, but a clearly specified programme to provide a range of early years interventions. Childcare is an important public policy issue, but one which should not be confused with support for parents in their *role* as parents. Sure Start should be retained, but refocused to be closer to its original mission. At the same time, greater emphasis in the early years initiatives delivered via Sure Start – including the broadened Family Nurse Partnership – should be placed on parental style and skills, and on the development of character capabilities that underpin so many other, later outcomes. There is also no evidence from the analysis undertaken here of any link between

the paid employment of parents and the development of character capabilities.

Sure Start could also act as a more effective hub for creating peer relationships which can be central to parental support; for example, older local residents – perhaps grandparents themselves – have been shown to be effective advisers and mentors to young parents. This should be seen as part of the focus on early years, with peer support schemes specifically for parents with pre-school age children.

### Improved pilots for the Family Nurse Partnership

The Family Nurse Partnership (FNP) is a British version of a highly successful US programme, the Nurse Family Partnership. It provides intensive home visiting for ‘vulnerable’ first-time young mothers by specially trained health visitors or midwives. The visits begin in early pregnancy and continue for two years. Following pilots in ten areas in 2006, the scheme is now being run in a further 20 local authority areas. A total of £30 million has been allocated to support the Nurse Family Partnership over the Spending Review period, from 2008–09 to 2010–11, rising year on year. The UK scheme was launched as part of a government drive against social exclusion and – like its US forerunner – explicitly targets parents most likely to need support in their parenting: teenage mothers.

Policy must be based on evidence of what works – indeed the need for greater quality control for early years interventions is discussed below. The first series of pilots received encouraging evaluation, with high take-up rates (87 per cent) and engagement. Pre-natal measures showed a marked success: for example, smoking rates in pregnancy showed a 17 per cent relative reduction from 41 per cent to 34 per cent. Two-thirds of the recruited FNP mothers started to breastfeed, compared with one in two in comparable national sample.<sup>76</sup> The next stage of assessment will be able to examine the impact on children, but the early findings suggest that one of the strongest outcomes has been a sharp rise in the confidence of parents in their own parenting ability – which links strongly to the

development of character capabilities, as the research presented in early chapters showed.

But there is sufficient evidence from the USA to suggest that the FNP has positive long-term outcomes. The UK is some way behind the USA and some other countries in terms of evaluating early years interventions, but this at least means that UK policy makers do not need to re-invent the wheel. The US programme is mature enough to allow for a 15-year follow-up, and there has been a series of robust randomised control trials of the scheme's effectiveness. The UK evaluators summarise the US findings: 'In all three trials of the programme there was wider spacing between the first and subsequent births, less reliance on welfare, more take-up of education and more paid employment.' The children of FNP parents show improved outcomes on a range of measures; cost-benefit analyses of the US programmes show a very high rate of return on the public investment made.

However, the US programme has been more tightly targeted than the UK version. In the USA the programme is offered to young, low income mothers; in the UK the only selection criteria is age (under 20 at first birth in most cases). The evaluations of the US programme show that the strongest effects are seen for poor, young mothers who are additionally lone mothers, and who lack 'psychological resources' themselves. This suggests that tighter targeting of even the US programmes would produce better results.

However, there are important contextual differences between the USA and the UK. In the USA, where the primary evaluations have been conducted, there is a much poorer safety net than in the UK (no national health service, no child allowance, and no home visiting service). Although the Nurse Family Partnership has proven effective in the USA against a very low level of services, it does not follow that the same application of it in the UK would lift clients above the level of functioning supported by a much better safety net here. Even beyond these reasons, other attitudinal differences between the UK and USA around aspiration and class consciousness are cause for further scepticism. The culture of aspiration in the USA where 'any body can grow up to be president' is not necessarily

mirrored in the UK. The Nurse Family Partnership is predicated on a belief that individual people aspire to move beyond their current position and that wider society buys into this view as well – the class legacy in the UK means that this may well not be the case here.

Because young mothers in the UK are more likely to be from low income backgrounds, there is some emphasis towards poorer households in the UK programmes – three-quarters of mothers recruited in the initial wave (of the half for whom income data was available) were in households with an income less than £10,000 per annum. The UK evaluators suggest a pure age criteria may offer a compromise between the risk of stigma attached to services for the poor, and the need to target public money as effectively as possible:

*Although recruited for the most part with a simple age criterion, the English client group reflects the earlier UK findings in that they are disproportionately from households with low income, they have few educational qualifications, and many vulnerabilities including mental health problems. Thus it is possible to offer a service that is not presented as stigmatizing with a simple age criterion, but that reached some of the most disadvantaged first-time mothers, likely to become even more disadvantaged in later life.<sup>77</sup>*

There is of course a balance to be struck. In an era of tough fiscal constraints, the need to ensure the best possible results from public spending is great. It is important that we determine whether the US model works for the UK or if the infrastructural and cultural differences render it redundant. Pilots should be undertaken in the UK which match the US model.

There is also a case for adapting the NFP to suit UK families better through placing greater emphasis on tackling low aspirations among poor parents as well as helping parents in their parenting style and approach. Currently the specified time to be spent by nurses breaks down as follows: personal health, 35–40 per cent; maternal role, 23–25 per cent; life course development, 10–15 per cent; and environmental health, 5–7 per cent. Although personal health is clearly a vital issue, the analysis



presented in this paper suggests that a greater investment in maternal role (and paternal role?) may pay higher dividends in terms of child outcomes and life chances. In addition this report found a strong link between low income parents and lower confidence when it comes to parenting. A second set of pilots, distinct from the US version, should aim to tackle these class-based issues.

### Early years role for health visitors

Health visitors are a huge early years resource, which is insufficiently used. They are trusted and liked by parents, who see them as important advisers on health matters. Three out of four parents in a 2007 survey said they wanted advice from a ‘trained health visitor with up to date knowledge’, and the overwhelming majority wanted this advice in their own home. This contrasts with attitudes towards nurses, who are seen as more medically focused.

Health visitors have a crucial role to play in monitoring the health and development of very young children – but they could be offering more support and guidance to parents too. Indeed the profession is advocating a wider role for health visitors.

Health visitors should receive more training on parenting style, ‘motivational interview’ techniques, drawing on the tailored training for FNP nurses. A specific role supporting parents in their parenting style could be introduced for health visitors. This has knock-on effects on investment in the health visiting service more generally, of course, which are beyond the scope of this paper. But as the key ongoing contact point for most parents, health visitors should be seen additionally as parent advisers. Again, the fiscal environment has to be acknowledged as a difficult one for spending claims. But primary care trusts spend in a range of just £117–350 for preventative health care of children up until their second birthday.<sup>78</sup> Given the evidence for the payback from early years intervention, not least in terms of education and employment, there is a case for a renewed focus here.

## Temperament check

The evidence that some children are ‘differentially susceptible’ to parenting quality – that they are at both higher ‘downside’ and ‘upside’ risk – suggests there would be significant benefits from targeting support towards the parents of these children. This would reduce the risk of poorer long-term outcomes, but also enhance their chances of overcoming potentially difficult backgrounds. These are children, in other words, who could ‘buck the trend’ suggested by their family circumstances and whose life chances could be improved.

There are relatively simple tests of temperament, ideally administered between four and nine months of age. The schedule for health visitor contact could be revised to include a check at this age – along with traditional health visitor checks on a baby’s weight, size and so on, and the enhanced support for parenting discussed above. In addition and at the same time, health visitors could undertake a simple ‘parent–child interaction’ test to measure warmth, responsiveness and attunement between the parent and child. This new ‘Half-Birthday Check’ would act as the trigger for greater support being provided to the parents of children with differential susceptibility or those who are struggling to bond with their baby, via either enhanced health visitor contact or the FNP.

## A ‘NICE’ for evidence-based parenting interventions

The case for investing in helping parents to improve their parenting skills is strong. But it is critical that only interventions with proven impact are funded. US policy makers are applying tough ‘return on investment’ tests to programmes to ensure the best use is made of scarce resources. In the UK there is an urgent need for a body with the knowledge and capacity to evaluate programmes aimed at supporting parents. The National Academy of Parenting Practitioners (NAPP) has been charged thus far with developing expertise and a body of knowledge on what works in this field. At present it is scheduled to complete this work and wind up in 2010.

Policy makers should always be wary of allowing organisations to continue in existence when they are past their

use by date. But NAPP has the potential to use its institutional knowledge to act as a qualifying authority for parenting interventions – a statutorily empowered National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) for parenting policy. Local authorities and other funding bodies would only be permitted to spend on programmes with the NAPP stamp of approval – which signals proven efficacy and cost-effectiveness – and would be obliged to run them along strictly determined parameters. There would of course be considerable scope for local funders to choose interventions suitable for their locality and population, but not to use monies raised from general taxation on unproven interventions.



# Technical appendix

## Data

The data for this study come from information collected in the first three waves of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). The MCS is a large scale, longitudinal survey of children born during the same week in April across the constituent countries of the UK (Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England). Sweep 1 (MCS1) was executed during 2001–02 and included information on 18,819 babies in 18,533 families, which was collected from parents when the babies were between nine and 11 months of age. The design of the sample allowed for over-representation of those families living across England in areas with high deprivation, child poverty or ethnic minorities, as well as the three smaller countries in the UK. The first follow-up study (MCS2) took place when those same children were three years old (between 35 and 39 months of age at interview). The achieved response rate at this wave was 79 per cent of the target sample. The second follow-up study (MCS3) took place when the children were five years old and achieved a response rate of 79.2 per cent of the cohort (15,246 families). Comprehensive information on the individual cohort sweeps – objectives, origins, sampling and content of surveys – as well as documentation attached to the data can be found at the Centre for Longitudinal Studies website.<sup>79</sup>

## Variables

For the purposes of our analysis we separated the variables into three categories: our outcome variable, which is a measure of behaviour; our focal variables, which include income, parental style and parental ability; and a set of control variables.

Our regressions include all children in the MCS for whom the child's mother was interviewed in waves 1, 2 and 3 and for

whom there was no missing information on any of the outcome, focal or control variables. After dropping any sample members who did not meet these criteria we were left with a sample of 9,346 families (61.3 per cent of the MCS wave 3 sample).

### Outcome variables

Behavioural outcomes were assessed at age five and were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire,<sup>80</sup> a 25-point behavioural screening survey composed of five behavioural subscales or dimensions of children's behaviour: pro-social behaviour, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, hyperactivity and peer-to-peer relations. The main respondent (usually the mother) rated their child's behaviour according to each attribute using a scale from 0 to 2 (certainly true, somewhat true, not true). Scores for all five scales were combined and averaged to provide an overall score.

Ideally, there would have been a survey administered directly to the child or observational data to provide a more objective measure of children's behaviour. There are numerous problems with using parents as proxies. Studies have suggested that mothers who are depressed or who have low self-esteem or perceived competence are more likely to report negatively on their children's behaviour. It is possible that the association between parental perceived competence and child behaviour outcomes is spurious. Unfortunately, without information from surveys administered directly to the children, it is impossible to test this hypothesis. We have therefore proceeded on the basis that the data from the parental surveys constitute an accurate assessment of each child's behaviour.

### Focal variables

#### *Income*

We used information from waves 1 and 2 (MCS1 and 2) by averaging income across both waves. We then divided income

into five equally sized quintiles, so each income bracket captured 20 per cent of the sample. The dummy variable used in the regressions is for families in the lowest quintile of average income (the poorest 20 per cent of families).

### *Parental style*

We based our choice on theoretical literature and empirical research around parenting style and important influences on children's development. This research was based around the idea that two axes – one measuring attachment or responsiveness, the other measuring regulation or demandingness – make up parenting style.

We chose a six-point measure of postnatal maternal attachment from wave 1 (MCS1) (Table 2).

We chose two questions to measure demandingness/control based around rules and enforcement from wave 2 (MCS2). Parents were asked about the amount of rules that they had: lots of rules, not many rules, or varies; and about how they enforced those rules: strictly enforced, not strictly enforced, or varies.

We created four categories or 'quadrants' for parenting style based on separating attachment scores and rules/enforcement scores into 'above average' and 'below average' yielding four categories:

- high rule enforcement, high attachment
- high rule enforcement, low attachment
- low rule enforcement, high attachment
- low rule enforcement, low attachment

Ideally, we would have had a measure of secondary carer or partner attachment as well as maternal attachment, and a composite measure of attachment from both wave 1 and wave 2. Unfortunately, these data were not harvested in the Millennium Cohort Study. We also would have benefited from more in-depth questioning about rule enforcement and regulatory approach from parents, but again, the data was limited.

Table 2 **Assessments of postnatal attachment in mothers (per cent, weighted N)**

	<b>Mothers</b>
When I am not with the baby, I find myself thinking about them (almost all the time, very frequently)	72.1 (12,945)
When I have to leave the baby I often/always feel rather sad	44.9 (8,061)
Usually when I am with the baby I am very/a bit impatient	7.4 (1,336)
When I am caring for the baby I am very/fairly incompetent and lacking in confidence	2.7 (492)
Regarding the things that I/we have had to give up because of the baby I find that I resent it quite a lot/resent it a fair amount	2.0 (354)
When I am caring for the baby, I get feelings of annoyance or irritation (almost all the time, very frequently)	1.3 (236)
<b>Maximum unweighted sample size</b>	<b>17,882</b>

Sample: All MCS natural mothers

### *Parental ability*

We identified several questions to measure parents' sense of control and competence as parents.

We used a question on parents' perceived competence in their role as parent which could be responded to in six ways: not very good at being a parent, a person who has some trouble being a parent, an average parent, a better than average parent, a very good parent, can't say.

We used a measure of both the main respondents' and partner respondents' self-esteem, which was an MCS six-point



Table 3 **Self-esteem measures among parents (per cent, weighted N: strongly agree/agree)**

	<b>Fathers</b>	<b>Mothers</b>
I am able to do things as well as most other people	94.3 (12,873)	92.7 (16,631)
I take a positive attitude toward myself	90.7 (12,385)	82.6 (14,825)
On the whole, I am satisfied with myself	89.0 (12,148)	84.7 (15,199)
I certainly feel useless at times	20.0 (2,734)	24.7 (4,426)
At times I think I am no good at all	19.8 (2,702)	22.8 (4,098)
All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure	3.8 (520)	4.9 (885)
<b>Maximum unweighted sample size</b>	<b>12,751</b>	<b>17,889</b>

Sample: All MCS respondent mothers and fathers

survey taken from the longer Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Table 3).

Finally, we chose a measure of parents' perceived control over their life (Table 4).

Support for these choices comes from strong empirical and theoretical research, which suggests that a parent's general wellbeing, sense of control and self-esteem has an influential effect on parenting style.

Table 4 **Feelings of being in control among parents (per cent, weighted N)**

	Fathers	Mothers
Usually I can run my life more or less as I want to ( <i>vs I usually find life's problems just too much for me</i> )	85.9 (11,723)	86.5 (15,517)
I usually have a free choice and control over my life ( <i>vs Whatever I do has no real effect on what happens to me</i> )	79.5 (10,859)	79.3 (14,238)
I usually get what I want out of life ( <i>vs I never really seem to get what I want out of life</i> )	74.7 (10,220)	76.0 (136,547)
<b>Maximum unweighted sample size</b>	<b>12,748</b>	<b>17,893</b>

Sample: All MCS respondent mothers and fathers

### Control variables

A series of background factors were included in our model. These variables are based on a model measuring similar outcomes which we used as a template, and comprise family background attributes and child attributes.<sup>81</sup>

#### Family background attributes

These are:

- age of mother at birth of first child (in bands: less than 20, 20–24, 25–29 (base category), 30–34, 35 and over)
- ethnicity of mother (white (base category), Indian, Pakistani/Bangladeshi, black, mixed, other)
- ethnicity of father (if applicable)
- if mother's parents (child's maternal grandparents) are separated
- employment status of mother and father at MCS wave 1 and 2
- highest educational qualification of mother (level 4 or 5 (degree or vocational equivalent), level 3 (A level or equivalent), level 2

- (GCSE grade C or equivalent), level 1 (GCSE below grade C), other (mainly foreign qualifications), none (base category)
- highest educational qualification of father
  - family structure (two married natural parents (base category), two parents with at least one step-parent, two cohabiting parents, lone mother)
  - main language spoken in household (English (base category), other language(s) exclusively, mix of English and other language(s))

### *Child attributes*

These are:

- boy or girl
- low birth weight (equal to or less than 5lb 4oz at birth)
- if breastfed for six months or more
- if never breastfed
- number of siblings (at wave 2): one, two, three, four or more

## Results

### *Impact of parental style on child outcomes*

#### *Factors influencing child's strength/difference score at MCS wave 3*

Table 5 shows the main results from our model of the determinants of child outcomes (measured using the 25-question strength/difference (SD) score as explained above).<sup>82</sup> Four different specifications were used:

- a including the parental style variables (maternal attachment score, the presence or absence of rules in the household and their enforcement) as separate variables
- b interacting the parental style variables as interactions between maternal attachment score and rules/enforcement to produce four different variables corresponding to different 'quadrants' of parental style: strong maternal attachment, lots of rules/well enforced; strong maternal attachment, few or no rules/loosely enforced; weak maternal attachment, lots of rules/well enforced;

and weak maternal attachment, few or no rules/loosely enforced<sup>83</sup>

- c including ability controls (competence, self-esteem and self-control) instead of style controls
- d including ability *and* style controls to establish which seem to be more important

Table 5 includes the coefficients from all the relevant style and ability variables for each regression, plus the ‘lowest income quintile’ dummy variable. Additionally, the control variables which proved to be statistically significant in at least one regression specification have been included. (Mother’s age at birth of first child, mother and father’s ethnicity, separation of mother’s parents, mother and father’s employment status, and language spoken in the household were not significant in any of the regressions and so have been omitted from the table for simplicity.)

The results from specification (a) show that maternal attachment has a significant positive relation to the SD score. A one-point increase in the maternal attachment score is associated with an increase of about 0.06 in the child’s outcome score. In specification (d), maternal attachment is still positively related to child outcomes when additional controls are included for parental ability, although the coefficient falls to 0.01 and is only significant at the 10 per cent level.

In specification (a), the enforcement of rules seems to be more important than just having or not having rules. Strong enforcement of rules is associated with a 0.02 increase in the SD score conditional on other factors. This falls to 0.01 when ability controls are included, but is still significant at the 5 per cent level.

When the maternal attachment and rules scores are combined into ‘quadrants’, the ‘strong/strong’ quadrant – where there is strong maternal attachment and strong rules – has the strongest positive association with child outcomes. When there is strong maternal attachment but rules are weak or poorly enforced, there is a positive association but it is smaller and not significant at the 5 per cent level. Both ‘weak attachment’ quad-

rants are negatively associated with the SD score – but the negative effects are amplified when rules are weak or poorly enforced (a coefficient of  $-0.05$  compared with  $-0.02$  where attachment is weak but rules are strong or well enforced).

Specifications (c) and (d) contain parental ability variables, and the estimated effects of these are very similar whether or not parental style controls are also included. None of the father's ability variables are significant, whereas all of the mother's are – and all the identified relationships are positive. That is, higher parental ability is associated with better child outcomes. The effect for the mother's self-control score is particularly strong – a unit increase in the self-control score is associated with an increase of  $0.05$  in the child's SD score.

The low income dummy is never significant at the 5 per cent level in these specifications, although when ability controls are omitted, it is significant at the 10 per cent level – and negative. Being in the poorest 20 per cent of families (averaged across MCS waves 1 and 2) is associated with an SD score that is approximately  $0.02$  points lower.

When parental ability is not controlled for, both mother's and father's qualifications are strongly significant. In general, the higher the mother and father's qualifications, the better the child's performance on SD. The mother coefficients are approximately twice the size of the father coefficients at levels 2 to 4. When parental ability controls are included, the mother's qualification variables are still significant but the father qualifications lose their significance.

There is some relationship between family structure and child performance when ability is not controlled for. While there is no relationship between having a lone parent and child outcomes vis-à-vis having two married, natural parents, both step-parents and cohabiting parents are associated with worse child outcomes than married natural parents, controlling for other factors. The estimated negative effects of a child having step-parents are larger than those of a child having cohabiting parents. The effects become smaller and are no longer significant at the 5 per cent level once parental ability is controlled for.

Table 5 Results from regressions: impact of parental style on child outcomes

Regressor	Specification							
	(a) Separate parental style controls		(b) 'Quadrant' style controls		(c) Ability controls only		(d) Style and ability controls	
	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat
<b>Style</b>								
Maternal attachment score	.0572	8.79					.0103	1.67
Rules: lots	.0052	0.81					.0040	0.68
Rules: not many	-.0065	1.08					-.0041	0.78
Enforced: yes	.0216	3.86					.0099	1.98
Enforced: no	.0008	0.11					-.0030	0.44
<b>Quadrant</b>								
High attachment, lots of rules	.0406			5.64				
High attachment, not many rules	.0162			1.60				
Low attachment, lots of rules	-.0183			2.14				
Low attachment, not many rules	-.0517			4.30				

<b>Ability</b>								
Mother's self-esteem			.0101	2.20	.0088	1.91		
Father's self-esteem		.0031	0.63	.0032	0.66			
Mother's self-control		.0473	6.81	.0462	6.46			
Father's self-control		.0017	0.25	.0015	0.23			
Mother's competence		.0154	4.94	.0146	4.72			
Father's competence		.0001	0.03	-.0001	0.03			

**Family income**

Lowest income quintile	-.0190	1.86	-.0194	1.87	-.0131	1.40	-.0124	1.32
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**Other controls (where significant)**

*Qualifications*

Mother: Level 4/5	.0635	5.24	.0653	5.28	.0533	4.87	.0519	4.75
Level 3	.0451	3.31	.0472	3.48	.0377	3.16	.0366	3.07
Level 2	.0257	2.76	.0353	2.91	.0273	2.51	.0263	2.42
Level 1	.0082	0.54	.0102	0.66	.0125	0.96	.0123	0.93
Other	.0218	0.93	.0232	1.03	.0292	1.33	.0297	1.34
Father: Level 4/5	.0325	3.31	.0318	3.24	.0154	1.57	.0152	1.53
Level 3	.0258	2.40	.0265	2.45	.0103	0.97	.0097	0.92
Level 2	.0128	1.41	.0138	1.52	-.0036	0.41	-.0041	0.47
Level 1	.0072	0.57	.0069	0.55	-.0032	0.29	-.0033	0.29
other	-.0007	0.04	-.0030	0.14	-.0174	0.82	-.0160	0.75

*Family type*

Lone mother	-.0088	0.04	.0094	0.61	.0042	0.30	.0036	0.26
Couple, step-parent(s)	-.0516	2.81	-.0518	2.80	-.0273	1.78	-.0284	1.86
Couple, cohabiting	-.0179	2.31	-.0183	2.38	-.0097	1.36	-.0094	1.30

Table 5 Results from regressions: impact of parental style on child outcomes *continued*

Regressor	Specification							
	(a) Separate parental style controls		(b) 'Quadrant' style controls		(c) Ability controls only		(d) Style and ability controls	
	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat	Coeff.	t stat
<i>Maternal depression</i>								
Wave 1	-.0239	3.70	-.0255	3.98	-.0057	0.99	-.0059	1.02
Wave 2	-.0812	15.57	-.0849	16.14	-.0229	4.28	-.0228	4.27
<i>Child controls</i>								
Is female	.0587	12.22	.0597	12.53	.0521	10.46	.0519	10.45
Low birth weight	-.0274	2.25	-.0280	2.29	-.0291	2.61	-.0294	2.64
Breastfed >6 months	.0206	3.08	.0207	3.04	.0125	2.17	.0124	2.15
Never breastfed	-.0075	113	-.0081	1.22	-.0062	1.12	-.0053	0.98
1 sibling (wave 2)	.0071	1.07	.0066	1.02	.0192	2.90	.0179	2.71
2 siblings	.0049	0.51	.0063	0.66	.0138	1.51	.0121	1.32
3 siblings	.0227	1.56	.0227	1.61	.0263	2.07	.0242	1.88
4 or more siblings	.0079	0.32	.0099	0.40	.0037	0.17	.0011	0.05
Number of observations		9,346		9,346		9,346		9,346
R-squared		0.1707		0.1648		0.3054		0.3065

Notes:

Dependent variable=child's outcome on 'strengths and differences' questionnaire at MCS wave 3 (averaged over 25 questions). Standard errors are corrected to take account of sample clustering and stratification in the MCS.



Maternal depression at wave 2 has a significant negative relationship with child outcomes in all specifications. Depression at wave 1 is only significant (and negative) when ability controls are omitted.

Girls perform better on the SD scale than boys (by about 0.05 points) in all specifications, controlling for other factors. Low birth weight has a negative correlation with child outcomes, while being breastfed for more than six months has a (slightly smaller) positive correlation. The pattern of sibling effects is not very strong – when ability is controlled for, children with just one sibling (at wave 2) seem to have slightly better outcomes at wave 3 than either only children or those with more than one sibling.

#### *Modelling the probability of being in the top or the bottom of the outcome score distribution*

To supplement our interpretation of the results in Table 5, where the dependent variable was the outcome score, we also did some regression analysis of the determinants of having a particularly good or particularly bad outcome score. We defined a ‘good’ outcome score as being in the top 20 per cent of the score distribution, and a ‘bad’ outcome score as being in the lowest 20 per cent of the distribution. We conducted two logistic regressions, one for ‘good’ outcomes and one for ‘bad’ outcomes, with the dependent variable being whether each child was in the top 20 per cent, and the bottom 20 per cent, respectively. The other control variables were as in specification (b) in Table 5.

The coefficients from the logistic regression represent the relative probabilities of a good or bad score (‘odds ratios’), controlling for other factors. So for example, in the regression where the dependent variable was being in the top 20 per cent of the outcome score distribution, the results give an odds ratio of 1.47 for children with ‘tough love’ parents, and 0.75 for children with disengaged parents. This means that children with tough love parents are  $(1.47/0.75) \approx 2$  times (twice) as likely to be in the top 20 per cent of outcome scores as are children with disengaged parents. Full results from these regressions are available from the authors on request.

### Impact of parental ability on parental style

In the course of research for this report we also carried out regression analysis of the effects of parental ability (measured using the parental competence, self-control and self-esteem variables defined earlier) on parental style (the maternal attachment and rules variables). The regressions included the same sets of controls for family income and family circumstances shown in the previous section (but not the child controls). For space reasons we do not present the results of these regressions in as much detail as Table 5 in the previous section.<sup>84</sup> However, the main findings from these parental style regressions are summarised below.

#### *Determinants of maternal attachment*

Mother's self-esteem, mother's self-control and mother's competence are all positively associated with maternal attachment, controlling for family circumstances. The corresponding father variables are not significantly correlated with maternal attachment.

Younger first-time mothers have stronger maternal attachments than older mothers, conditional on other factors. Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers and mothers from 'other ethnic groups' have weaker maternal attachments than the base group (white mothers). Neither mother's nor father's qualifications have a significant correlation with maternal attachment. The family structure variables – lone mothers, step-parents and cohabitees – are not significant.

#### *Determinants of strong rules in the household*

Interestingly, having a lot of rules in the household is not strongly associated with parental ability variables conditional on other factors. Mothers who had their first child very young (aged less than 20) are less likely to have a lot of rules in the household than the base group (mothers aged 25–29), as are older mothers (aged 35 or over).

Pakistani and Bangladeshi mothers are less likely to have strong household rules than white mothers. Fathers from other (not white, black, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or mixed)

ethnic groups are less likely to have lots of rules than white fathers.

There are less likely to be lots of rules in the household if the mother was in work at MCS wave 1 or 2. Mothers' and fathers' qualifications are not significantly associated with rules in the household.

Cohabiting two-parent families are less likely to have lots of rules in the household than married natural two-parent families (the base group).

Maternal depression at wave 1 is positively associated with having lots of rules in the household, but not at wave 2. Families whose first language is not English, or who use a mix of English and other languages, are more likely to have lots of rules than families whose first language is English.

#### *Determinants of having strictly enforced rules*

Mother's self-esteem score is positively associated with the enforcement of rules, as is *father's* competency score (but not mother's competency score).

Mothers who had their first child aged 20–24 are less likely to enforce rules than other age groups. Highly qualified mothers are more likely to enforce rules. Lone mothers and two-parent families with at least one step-parent are more likely to enforce rules than married two-parent families with two natural parents.

#### *Determinants of being in particular attachment/rules 'quadrants'*

We also ran regressions for the determinants of being in each of the 'quadrant' variables for maternal attachment (on one axis) and strong or weak rules (on the other axis) as used in specification (b) of Table 5. The main insights this produced were as follows:

Being in the 'strong'/'strong' quadrant – having high maternal attachment and strong rules – was positively associated with high levels of self-esteem, competence and control on the part of the mother. Black mothers were more likely to be in this quadrant than white mothers.

Mothers with high self-esteem and high competence were less likely to be in the quadrant of strong rules but weak

maternal attachment. Very highly qualified mothers (level 4 or above) were more likely to be in this group, as were mothers who were depressed at wave 1.

Highly qualified mothers (and fathers) were less likely to be in the quadrant of weak rules but strong maternal attachment. Mothers' ability measures were all positively associated with being in this category.

Being in the 'weak'/'weak' quadrant was, unsurprisingly, associated with having low maternal self-esteem, competence and control. Families where the mother was working at MCS wave 1, and cohabiting families, are more likely to be in this category than other groups.

#### Impact of family income on parental ability

We also conducted regression analysis of the relationship between low family income (being in the poorest 20 per cent of families, averaged across waves 1 and 2) and the parental ability measures which we use. Our main findings were that low income has no significant association with mother's self-esteem or competence, controlling for other factors. However, there is a negative association between low income and the mother feeling in control. In families with low income, the mother feels less 'in control', taking other control variables into consideration, than in families with higher incomes.

# Notes

- 1 Barnes, 'Introduction' to Aristotle, *The Ethics*.
- 2 Layard, *Happiness*; Nettle, *Happiness*; Oswald, 'Happiness and economic performance'.
- 3 'Mid-continent research for education and learning'.
- 4 Feinstein, *The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood*; Kiernan and Huerta, 'Economic deprivation, maternal depression, parenting and children's cognitive and emotional development in early childhood'; Margo, *Freedom's Orphans*.
- 5 See 'Bad parents "widen ability gap"'.  
6 Shore, *Rethinking the Brain*.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Smith, and Allen, *Early Intervention*.
- 9 Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Haynes, 'Delaying gratification'.
- 13 Offer, *The Challenge of Affluence*.

- 14 Basic Skills Agency, *Young Children's Skills on Entry to Education*; Dammler and Middlemann-Motz, 'I want one with Harry Potter on it'.
- 15 Mayo, *Shopping Generation*.
- 16 Schor and Holt, *The Consumer Society Reader*.
- 17 Lehrer, 'Science of spending'.
- 18 Atkinson, *Levels of Financial Capability in the UK*.
- 19 Wilson, *Working Futures 2004–2014 National Report*.
- 20 Margo, *Freedom's Orphans*.
- 21 Dixon and Pearce, *Social Justice*.
- 22 Hills, *Towards a More Equal Society?*
- 23 Feinstein, *The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood*.
- 24 Margo, *Freedom's Orphans*.
- 25 Margo, *Freedom's Orphans*; Feinstein and Bynner, 'The importance of cognitive development in middle childhood for adulthood socioeconomic status, mental health, and problem behavior'.
- 26 Heath and Payne, *Twentieth Century Trends in Social Mobility*.
- 27 Goldthorpe and Mills, 'Trends in intergenerational class mobility in modern Britain'.
- 28 Blanden and Machin, 'Up and down the generational income ladder in Britain'.
- 29 Narey, *Report from the Independent Commission on Social Mobility*.

- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Smith and Allen, *Early Intervention*; Layard and Dunn, *A Good Childhood*.
- 32 DfES, *Primary National Strategy Excellence and Enjoyment*.
- 33 Gillham et al, 'School-based prevention of depression and anxiety symptoms in early adolescence'.
- 34 Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development*; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 'The evolution of environment models in developmental research'.
- 35 Bor, 'The relationship between low family income and psychological disturbance in young children'.
- 36 Atkinson, *Parents and Children*; Duncan, and Brooks-Gunn, *Consequences of Growing up Poor*; Shonkoff and Phillips, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 'Duration and developmental timing of poverty and children's cognitive and social development from birth through third grade'.
- 37 Becker, *A Treatise on the Family*; Becker and Tomes, 'Human capital and the rise and fall of families'; Blau, 'The effect of income on child development'.
- 38 Elder and Caspi, 'Economic stress in lives'; Conger, 'The role of economic pressure in the lives of parents and their adolescents'.
- 39 Kiernan and Huerta, 'Economic deprivation, maternal depression, parenting and children's cognitive and emotional development in early childhood'.
- 40 Kiernan and Mensah, *Poverty, Maternal Depression, Family Status and Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development in Early Childhood*.

- 41 Levine, *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes*.
- 42 A regression of log family income (averaged across MCS waves 1 and 2) against the maternal attachment 'score' measure used in our empirical work (defined in the technical appendix to this report) showed no significant correlation between income and maternal attachment. The t-statistic on the regression is only 1.26 – falling well short of statistical significance.
- 43 The relationship is only statistically significant at the 10 per cent level.
- 44 Quoted on 'Character factories', BBC Radio 4, 2008.
- 45 Kiernan and Huerta, 'Economic deprivation, maternal depression, parenting and children's cognitive and emotional development in early childhood'.
- 46 Cowan and Cowan, 'Strengthening couples to improve children's wellbeing'; Neale, *Young Children's Citizenship*.
- 47 MORI, *Teenagers Attitudes to Parenting*.
- 48 Joshi, 'Diverse family living situations and child development'.
- 49 In phase 2 of this project we propose to investigate the implied relationship between parental ability and income.
- 50 In the expanded sample, the dummy for 'father as primary carer' is not significantly related to any key outcome measures.
- 51 In the case of same-sex partnerships, the MCS only contains eight same-sex partnerships at wave 2. This is not enough to estimate any reliable statistical information on the effects of being brought-up by two parents of the same sex on child behaviour (if any).
- 52 Feinstein and Kiernan find this relationship in both the British Cohort Study in 1970 and the Millennium Cohort Study in 2000.



- 53 Feinstein, *The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood*; Blanden, “Bucking the trend”.
- 54 Sampson, ‘What community supplies’; Simons, ‘Collective efficacy, authoritative parenting and delinquency’.
- 55 See technical appendix.
- 56 Maccoby, and Martin, ‘Socialization in the context of the family’.
- 57 Baumrind, ‘The influence of parenting style on adolescent competence and substance use’.
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Feinstein, *The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood*.
- 60 Carton and Nowicki, ‘Antecedents of individual differences in locus of control of reinforcement’.
- 61 See technical appendix for individual questions and justification.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Gutman et al, *Nurturing Parenting Capability*.
- 64 Denham, ‘Prediction of externalizing behavior problems from early to middle childhood’.
- 65 Belsky, ‘Variation in susceptibility to rearing influence’; Belsky, ‘Differential susceptibility to rearing influence’.
- 66 Blair, ‘Early intervention for low birth weight preterm infants’.
- 67 Velderman et al, ‘Effects of attachment-based interventions on maternal sensitivity and infant attachment’.

- 68 Belsky, 'Variation in susceptibility to rearing influence', and Belsky, 'Differential susceptibility to rearing influence'.
- 69 Huizink et al, 'Psychological measures of prenatal stress as predictors of infant temperament'; O'Connor et al, 'Maternal antenatal anxiety and children's behavioural/emotional problems at 4 years'; O'Connor et al, 'Maternal antenatal anxiety and behavioural/emotional problems in children'.
- 70 Davis et al, 'Prenatal exposure to maternal depression and cortisol influences infant temperament'; O'Connor et al, 'Prenatal anxiety predicts individual differences in cortisol in pre-adolescent children'.
- 71 Suomi, 'Early determinants of behaviour'.
- 72 Boyce and Ellis, 'Biological sensitivity to context'.
- 73 Pluess and Belsky, 'Differential susceptibility to rearing experience'.
- 74 See [www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/cnrpapersowrd/children/glass.ppt](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/sps/cnrpapersowrd/children/glass.ppt) (accessed 15 Apr 2009).
- 75 'Sure Start'.
- 76 Barnes et al, *Nurse-Family Partnership Programme*.
- 77 Ibid.
- 78 Family and Parenting Institute, *Health Visitors*.
- 79 Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Millennium Cohort Study.
- 80 Goodman, 'The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire'.
- 81 Kiernan and Mensah, *Poverty, Maternal Depression, Family Status and Children's Cognitive and Emotional Development in Early Childhood*.

- 82 We also conducted regression analysis of the determinants of each *subscore* of the SD score (psycho-social, hyperactivity, emotional, conduct and peer problems). Figure 6 in the main report shows the estimated impact of the maternal attachment score measure on the overall SD score and each subscore for the equivalent of specification (a) in Table 5. More detailed results for each subscore are available from the authors on request.
- 83 The precise definition of the quadrants is as follows: (1) Aggregate maternal attachment score more than 1.5 *and* either lots of rules, or rules well enforced, or both. (2) Aggregate maternal attachment score more than 1.5 and either few or no rules, or rules badly enforced, or both. (3) Aggregate maternal attachment score less than 1, rules/enforcement conditions as for (1). (4) Aggregate maternal attachment score less than 1, rules/enforcement conditions as for (2). Families for whom rules were strong but enforcement was weak, or who had few or no rules but where rules were strongly enforced, were not included in any of categories (1) to (4) but were instead included in the base category along with people who answered ‘don’t know’ on maternal attachment or on rules and enforcement.
- 84 Full results are available from the authors on request.

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Character counts. The endeavors that make up a good life – developing caring, positive relationships; learning and educating ourselves; planning for the future – are underpinned by character capabilities such as empathy, application and emotional control. Far from being ‘soft’ skills, the capabilities that make up our character are vital for social mobility.

We shape and strengthen our character throughout life, but the critical years are the early ones. Parents, then, are the primary character builders in society.

Parents who combine warmth and consistency – a style described in this report as ‘tough love’ – are the most successful in developing character capabilities in their children. But this kind of parenting is unevenly distributed across society and parents with low levels of confidence, support or income are less likely to use this approach. Moreover, recent social and economic change has put a premium on character capabilities; they are more important than ever before to success.

There are limits to state intervention in this area. But to the extent that character impacts on equality, opportunity and fairness, it ought to be a concern for policy-makers. A range of policy interventions is proposed: a reformed Sure Start scheme; a ‘NICE’ agency to assess the effectiveness of parenting interventions; and new roles for health visitors to make sure that young children get a fair start, right from the beginning.

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