

Parenting Behaviours and Early Child Development in Europe

It is an alarming fact that – on average – children whose parents have a lower level of education do less well in areas of development and schooling than children of parents with a higher level of education¹. These and other social inequalities start early and accumulate throughout a person’s life course^{2,3}. In order to reduce the impact of social inequality on child development, it is important to identify factors that both influence the development of parenting skills and can be addressed with effective programmes and policies.

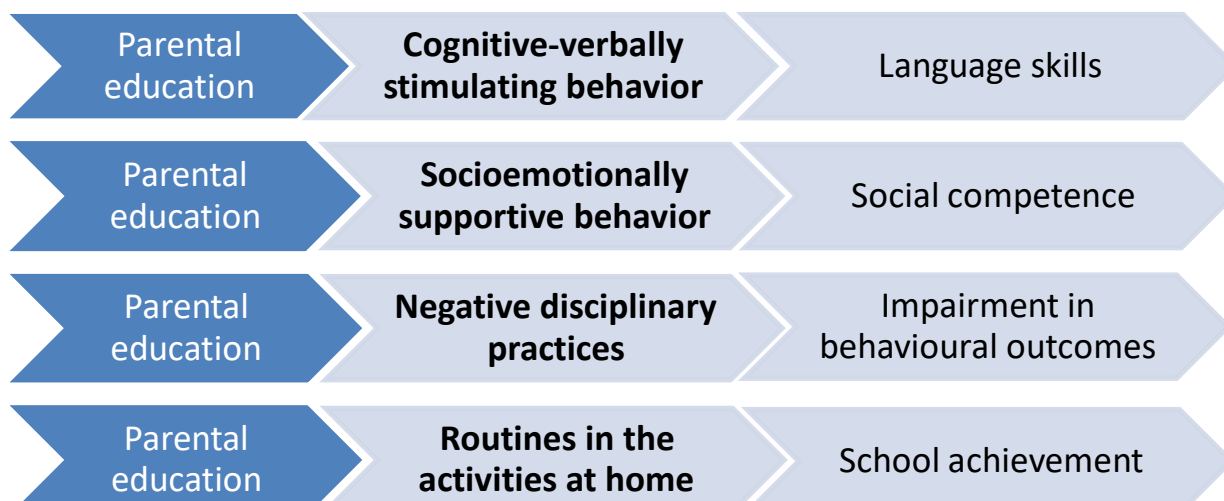
About the research:

Drawing on large population studies in the Netherlands (Generation R), Germany (National Educational Panel Study: NEPS), and the United

Kingdom (Millennium Cohort Study: MCS), we investigated the impact of social inequality on children’s early behavioural and developmental outcomes. A key part of this was the explanatory role of different aspects of parenting behaviours (emotional support, disciplinary practices, parent–child interactions, and activities) and routines in the children’s homes.

Key findings:

- Our studies included more than 15,000 children from the UK and Germany. Findings showed that toddlers who experienced more cognitive-verbally stimulating and socioemotionally supportive parenting behaviours had more advanced language skills and higher social competence. Furthermore, children who were disciplined by their parents



¹ Halle, T., Forry, N., Hair, E., Perper, K., Wandner, L., Wessel, J., & Vick, J. (2009). Disparities in early learning and development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B). *Child Trends*.

² Weinert, S., Attig, M., & Roßbach, H.-G. (2017). The emergence of social disparities: Evidence on early mother–child interaction and infant development from the German National Educational Panel

Study (NEPS). In H.-P. Blossfeld, N. Kubic, J. Skopek, & M. Triventi (Eds.), *Childcare, early education, and social inequality: An international perspective* (pp. 89–108). Edward Elgar Publishing.

³ Attig, M. & Weinert, S. (2020). What impacts early language skills? Effects of social disparities and different process characteristics of the home learning environment in the first two years. *Frontiers in Psychology, 11*, 557751. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2020.557751.

in a negative way were more likely to show behavioural difficulties at the age of 5 years. Low socio-economic families were more likely to show less favourable parenting behaviours from early on, although it is important to note that parents differed widely in their interactive behaviours within and across social groups. Results were rather similar across the UK and Germany.

- In the Netherlands, findings with 3,450 children showed that there was a significant relationship between parental education and school achievement at the end of primary school. 8% of this relationship was due to the fact that parents with a higher level of education provided more structured activities for children, e.g. routines at mealtimes and bedtime or routines related to homework, household responsibilities, and cultural activities.

Overall, we found that up to 22% of the association between parental education level and children's outcomes were explained by differences in the aforementioned parenting behaviours.

Data reference:

- Generation R: <https://generationr.nl/>

Policy implication and recommendation:

Our results show that parents' level of education has a significant influence on early child development via parental behaviours. However, parental behaviours are not only determined by the levels of parental education. We find big differences in parental behaviours within and across social groups and across developmental domains. To a certain degree this is a promising message indicating educational options to influence and enhance parental behaviours (beyond increasing parental education). In all three countries, various successful programmes for improving parental behaviours could be further optimized. Without any claim to be complete such programmes can be, for example, home visiting programmes like Opstapje or HIPPIY, "information letters" to parents on a regular basis that come along with the increasing age of the children, verified educational guidebooks or consulting hours for parents. Against this background we recommend:

What this research adds?

Social inequality related to children's development starts early in life. Parenting behaviour as an explanatory factor has important effects on very young children's verbal and behavior social skills, and on later school achievements.

Parenting behaviour is a broad construct covering different behaviours. Proposing early prevention or intervention could maximize the effectiveness of these programmes.

- Millennium Cohort Study: <https://cls.ucl.ac.uk/cls-studies/>
- National Educational Panel Study: <https://www.neps-data.de/>

Further reading:

Journal papers of this work are under review. Further information and copies of papers can be requested from: Wei Huang (wei.huang@lifbi.de) and Pauline Jansen (p.w.jansen@erasmusmc.nl)

- Early education and early specific parenting programmes are important as social disparities emerge early in life.
- These programmes should focus on helping parents to deliver more adequate parenting behaviours (e.g., warmth, responsively, and verbally stimulating interactions) to their children to foster the development of social skills, language, and mathematics. Besides programmes for all parents, it should be considered to apply tailored programmes for specific groups of parents (such as those that are less well educated parents or are vulnerable for example for reasons of mental health); this may reduce the impact of social inequality on children's language and social development.
- Promoting routine activities at home from early on such as meal and bedtime routines as well as extending to age appropriate household responsibilities, e.g., school activities, homework and cultural activities could facilitate children to reach higher school achievement.
- To improve and further enhance such programmes we recommend conducting additional research and strict evaluations of these programmes because not all available programmes fulfil their promises.



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