

Parenting with disadvantage

Key insights

- Parenting practices, attitudes and help-seeking are highly correlated.
- Parents with socio-demographic disadvantages such as lower household income and lower education displayed less positive parenting behaviours and attitudes towards seeking help.
- Parents who felt more confident and effective displayed more positive parenting behaviours and this confidence was shown to be more important than socio-demographic factors.
- For parents experiencing psychological distress, the timing of support to build their parenting skills should also take into account the need for individual assistance addressing their concerns.

What are the parenting behaviours of parents experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability, and how do these parents seek help and information?

This Research Brief derives from the 2016 Parenting Today in Victoria Study conducted and analysed by the Parenting Research Centre, and funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

Context

Parental disadvantage, for example lower household income and lower education level, can affect child wellbeing and development. It has been linked to poorer child physical, emotional and cognitive development^{1, 2}.

However, what parents do, and how they are supported, can make a positive difference and act as a buffer against the effects of disadvantage. Characteristics of parenting behaviour such as responsive care, sensitivity, positive (not harsh) parenting methods and engaging in home learning can all improve child outcomes^{3, 4, 5}.

The Parenting Today in Victoria Study aims to inform the decisions the Victorian Government makes in its support of Victorian parents. This Research Brief focuses on parents experiencing socio-demographic disadvantage and psychological vulnerability. It explores their behaviours and practices, including help and information seeking.

Findings

Which parents are experiencing socio-demographic disadvantage?

Parents were characterised in terms of relative socio-demographic disadvantage. Table 1 shows the percentage of parents with various types of socio-demographic disadvantage. Just over one-third (36%) of parents had three or more types of disadvantage and they were more likely to be mothers, younger parents and living in regional (as opposed to city or metropolitan) areas.

1 Nicholson, J.M., Lucas, N., Berthelsen, D., et al. (2012). Socioeconomic inequality profiles in physical and developmental health from 0-7 years: Australian national study. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 66: 81-87.

2 Dunt, D., Hage, B., & Kelaher, M. (2011). The impact of social and cultural capital variables on parental rating of child health in Australia. *Health Promotion International*, 26: 290-301.

3 Davidov, M., & Grusec, J.E. (2006). Untangling the links of parental responsiveness to distress and warmth to child outcomes. *Child Development*, 77: 44-58;

4 Davis-Kean, P.E. (2005). The influence of parent education and family income on child achievement: the indirect role of parental expectations and the home environment. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19: 294.

5 Repetti, R.L., Taylor, S.E., & Seeman, T.E. (2002). Risky families: family social environments and the mental and physical health of offspring. *Psychological Bulletin*, 128: 330.

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Table 1. Proportions of parents with various types of socio-demographic disadvantage

Socio-demographic risk factor	% of sample
Lower formal education level (high school only)	39.0
Lower household income	34.2
Not in paid work	26.0
Not living with a partner	21.7
Poorer health	12.8
Neighbourhood disadvantage	10.7
Non-English language spoken at home	9.7
Four or more children living in the household	6.4

Note: Neighbourhood disadvantage was measured by the Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage⁶.

Which parents are psychologically vulnerable?

To look at psychological vulnerability, we measured parents' current psychological distress⁷, and we asked them about their history of depression and anxiety, and substance addiction. As a third measure of vulnerability, we used the Me as a Parent Scale (MaaPS)⁸ to understand how parents were feeling about themselves as parents. A high score indicated that parents felt more confident and effective in their role as parents. Components of the MaaPS are:

- parenting self-efficacy and self-sufficiency (e.g. 'I know I'm doing a good job as a parent'; 'I can find out what's needed to resolve any problems my child has'; 'My parenting skills are effective').
- personal agency and self-management (e.g. 'I meet my expectations for providing emotional support for my child'; 'I often feel helpless about my child's behaviour' (disagreement indicates greater personal agency); 'When changes are needed in my family I am good at setting goals to achieve those changes').

Of the parents surveyed, 4% were experiencing current psychological distress, but 40% had experienced depression

(including post-natal depression), anxiety or substance addiction at some time since becoming a parent. Most parents surveyed felt confident as parents, with mothers and younger parents scoring highest. We classified the 25% of parents who had the lowest parenting confidence scores as vulnerable.

How do socio-demographic disadvantage and psychological vulnerability relate to parenting behaviours?

WHAT PARENTING BEHAVIOURS WERE EXAMINED?

The key parenting behaviours looked at in the survey were:

- parental approach: positive (being consistent, patient and feeling satisfied with the amount of time spent with the child) or negative (being impatient and criticising the child)
- parent-child activity: frequency of musical activities, and indoor and outdoor play with the child
- punitive discipline: smacking or yelling at the child.

HOW DOES SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DISADVANTAGE RELATE TO PARENTING BEHAVIOURS?

Greater socio-demographic disadvantage was not related to the activities shared by parent and child, or to parental approach. However, those with more types of socio-demographic disadvantage tended to be slightly more punitive in their parenting. Parents with poorer general health shared fewer activities with their children and had a less positive parental approach.

HOW DOES PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY RELATE TO PARENTING BEHAVIOURS?

The parents we describe as psychologically vulnerable were those experiencing psychological distress, or who had experienced depression, anxiety or substance addiction since having a child, and the parents who reported less confidence in their parenting. These parents shared fewer activities with their children and had a less positive parental approach. They were also a little more punitive – yelling or smacking more often.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS]. (2006). Analysis of the Regional Distribution of Relative Disadvantaged Areas using 2001 SEIFA. Retrieved from [http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/3F98BA340A2BDF76CA25718D0017ACB5/\\$File/1351055013_jun%202006.pdf](http://www.ausstats.abs.gov.au/ausstats/subscriber.nsf/0/3F98BA340A2BDF76CA25718D0017ACB5/$File/1351055013_jun%202006.pdf)

⁷ Kessler, R., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S.-L. T., ... Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959-976.

⁸ Hamilton, V.E., Matthews, J.M., & Crawford, S.B. (2014). Development and Preliminary Validation of a Parenting Self-Regulation Scale: "Me as a Parent". *Journal Child Family Studies*, 24, 2853-2864.

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INDEPENDENT EFFECTS - WHICH FACTORS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT?

We wanted to arrive at a more contextual explanation of how socio-demographic and psychological factors interact. Modelling analyses helped us identify which factors were the most important independent influences on parenting behaviour. Each factor was tested in turn, while at the same time taking into account the effect of all other relevant circumstances (Table 2).

We looked at how four types of socio-demographic disadvantage and three aspects of psychological vulnerability affected the three parenting behaviours independently of parent’s gender, age and residential location and some child characteristics.

The four socio-demographic factors we tested in this interactive analysis were being single, level of education, household income and living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood. Lower education level predicted more punitive parenting. However, any impacts of the four socio-demographic factors upon parenting approach scores or the frequency of parent-child activities were overpowered

by parenting confidence as measured by the MaaPS. This means that feeling confident and effective as a parent was much more important than socio-demographic factors for predicting positive parenting behaviours.

Of the three aspects of psychological vulnerability we looked at – psychological distress, a history of psychological distress or substance addiction, and feeling confident as a parent – feeling confident as a parent also had the strongest impact on parenting behaviours. This means that parents who felt less confident and effective did fewer activities with their children and were more likely to use punitive discipline. Importantly, these parents were also much more likely to have a negative approach to parenting.

Shared parent-child activities diminished when the child was older. Parental approach was a little less positive for fathers and those with many children. However, being single, level of household income, neighbourhood disadvantage and child’s medical problems had no independent impacts upon scores on the three parenting behaviours.

Table 2. Relative impact of factors upon three aspects of parenting behaviour.

Parenting behaviour	Factors with a strong impact	Factors with a moderate impact	Factors with a slight impact	Factors with no independent impact
Positive parental approach	More confidence as a parent	None	No past depression, anxiety, addictions Being a mother Fewer children in the home	Education level Psychological distress Parent age City/metro residence Child age
More parent-child activity	Younger child	More confidence as a parent	Rural/regional residence	Education level Psychological distress No past depression, anxiety, addictions Father vs mother Parent age Number of children
More punitive discipline	None	Less confidence as a parent	Lower education Psychological distress Past depression, anxiety, addictions Younger parents	Father vs mother City/metro residence Child age Number of children

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How do socio-demographic disadvantage and psychological vulnerability relate to information seeking and support resources used?

We asked parents about the sources of information they used and any parenting groups they attended. We also asked them how they felt about their interactions with educators, GPs and mental health professionals.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

Parents with greater socio-demographic disadvantage used fewer informal sources of parenting information and relied less on their own research (e.g. online information seeking). The group experiencing more disadvantage also attended Maternal and Child Health first-time parents groups less.

Parents with current psychological distress sought individual professional advice a little more. Parents who felt less confident as parents were less likely to rely on their own research or to seek advice from their family or partner.

Parents with current psychological distress, and parents who had experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety or substance addiction since becoming a parent, were a little more likely to have attended a Maternal and Child Health first-time parents group or a playgroup.

ATTITUDES ABOUT INTERACTIONS WITH EDUCATORS AND HELPING PROFESSIONALS

We also sought attitudes about interactions with educational, medical and mental health professionals – did parents feel satisfied with interactions, and did they feel valued, or judged, blamed or criticised. Parents with greater socio-demographic disadvantage had less positive attitudes toward interactions with educators.

Parents experiencing psychological distress, and parents who felt less confident and effective in their parenting, had a less-positive overall attitude toward how educators, general medical practitioners and mental health professionals treated them when they sought help for their child.

INTERACTIONS BETWEEN PRACTICES, ATTITUDES AND HELP-SEEKING

Parenting practices, attitudes and help-seeking are highly correlated. If parents had more interaction with their children they also felt more positive and empowered when seeking help from educators. Parents who felt more confident and effective as parents also had more positive communications with educational or medical professionals, and those who had attended parenting programs were also more likely to have accessed various forms of information resources, from formal centres, groups or seminars.

Implications for policy

Parenting behaviour can be changeable. Individual and group parenting programs and supports can help parents develop skills and behaviours that reduce the effects of disadvantage. This has been demonstrated in other studies for teen parents and their children, for preschoolers in socially disadvantaged families, and for children who have experienced abuse or neglect^{9, 10, 11, 12, 13}.

Based on our analyses, we can suggest the groups who would potentially benefit from greater support to achieve more positive, capable parenting, effective help-seeking and good interactions with parenting advisors and services. The first two groups of parents may benefit the most:

1. Parents with less confidence in their parenting. Parents who felt less confident and effective in their role were more likely to have less positive parenting practices and less positive interactions with sources of parenting advice and support. This association between a parent's confidence and the parent's behaviours suggests that, in a universal approach to parenting support, it is important that messages about parenting are based on strategies that show evidence of building parent confidence, rather than depleting it. For parents who could benefit from a more targeted approach, services could measure a parent's own sense of confidence and specifically recommend confidence-building positive parenting programs to parents who would most benefit.

9 Barlow, J., Bergman, H., Kornor, H., et al. (2016). Group-based parent training programmes for improving emotional and behavioural adjustment in young children. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*: CD003680.

10 Barlow, J., Johnston, I., Kendrick, D., et al. (2006). Individual and group-based parenting programmes for the treatment of physical child abuse and neglect. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*: CD005463.

11 Barlow, J., Smailagic, N., Bennett, C., et al. (2011). Individual and group based parenting programmes for improving psychosocial outcomes for teenage parents and their children. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*: CD002964.

12 Bradley, R.H., & Corwyn, R.F. (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology* 53: 371-399.

13 Miller, S., Maguire, L.K., & Macdonald G. (2011). Home-based child development interventions for preschool children from socially disadvantaged families. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev*: CD008131.

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- 2. Those who are experiencing psychological distress, or who have suffered depression, anxiety or substance addiction.** These psychologically vulnerable parents tended to be less positive, self-assured and motivated to seek help. These parents were also less likely to reach out to a varied range of sources of parenting advice, rather looking inward to their own partners and families. For these parents the timing of support to build their parenting skills should also take into account the need for individual assistance addressing their concerns.
- 3. Those with greater socio-demographic disadvantage.** There were smaller effects for this group. Even so, a less positive attitude toward interactions with educators was specifically related to lower education, lower household income and neighbourhood disadvantage. Experiencing more types of socio-demographic disadvantage also decreased the use of some parenting information resources and parenting groups. These findings suggest that targeting positive parenting programs toward parents experiencing greater socio-demographic disadvantage might also be a useful strategy.

STUDY DETAILS

The 2016 Parenting Today in Victoria study used computer assisted telephone interviewing, in English, to randomly survey 2600 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0-18 years. In each family, one parent was interviewed and asked questions about one child (the focus child). The sample was weighted to match Victorian parents in the 2011 Census for the key characteristics of age (sample age was adjusted upwards), education level (sample education lowered) and residential location (sample adjusted towards more metro/city dwellers).

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