



GROWING UP IN IRELAND – HOW FAMILIES MATTER FOR SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES OF 9-YEAR-OLD CHILDREN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is concerned with how families matter for the social and emotional outcomes of nine-year-olds in the *Growing Up in Ireland* study. The analysis considers how these outcomes relate to the characteristics of both the child and the child's family. Data were collected from teachers and mothers on children's social, emotional and behavioural problems using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Data on child characteristics, the quality of the parent-child relationship, parental depression, and marital satisfaction were gathered from mothers and fathers, while children reported on mothers' and fathers' parenting styles. Data on family structure and income levels were also included in the analysis. The findings presented are based on tests of associations among variables and interpretation requires caution about inferring causality to these relationships.

The findings indicate that the majority of nine-year-olds are developing well without any significant social, emotional or behavioural problems. However, based on mother and teacher reports, approximately 15% to 20% of children were classified as displaying significant levels of difficulty. Girls were more likely than boys to have problems of an emotional nature, while boys were more likely than girls to have problems of a behavioural nature, and to display more difficulties overall. Having a chronic illness or a learning and development difficulty (as reported by mothers) was associated with higher levels of social and emotional problems. Children with temperaments characterised by higher levels of emotionality and lower levels of sociability also displayed more negative outcomes. Together, these findings indicate that certain inherent characteristics render some children more vulnerable than others to poor social and emotional outcomes. Parenting styles and the quality of mother-child and father-child relationships were also associated with social and emotional outcomes. Children whose parents used an authoritarian parenting style (characterised by low levels of responsiveness and high levels of control) had more difficulty, as did children whose parents were neglectful (low responsiveness and low control). In addition, high levels of mother-child and father-child conflict were associated with elevated levels of difficulty, while low levels of closeness in the mother-child relationship were important for girls' but not boys' social and emotional outcomes. Father-child closeness was not associated with children's social and emotional outcomes.

Maternal depression was associated with increased conflict and lower levels of closeness in the mother-child relationship, and with poorer social and emotional outcomes. However, the strength of the association between maternal depression and SDQ scores reduced substantially once the quality of the mother-child relationship was accounted for, suggesting that maternal depression may be important for children's social and emotional outcomes via its association with mother-child relationship difficulties. Data on paternal depression was only



available for fathers who were co-resident with their children. Fathers' depression levels were associated with high levels of father-child conflict, but no association between fathers' depression and father-child closeness emerged. In addition, fathers' depression was not associated with children's social and emotional outcomes.

Similar findings emerged in relation to marital satisfaction. Mothers' marital dissatisfaction was related to children's problems – the more dissatisfied mothers felt, the more problems their children exhibited. As was the case with maternal depression, mothers' marital satisfaction was also associated with the quality of the mother-child relationship, while the association between mothers' marital satisfaction and children's outcomes reduced once the quality of the mother-child relationship was taken into account. For those fathers who were co-resident with their children, their marital satisfaction was not associated with children's outcomes.

Social class and family structure gradients emerged in relation to children's SDQ scores. Children in households headed by a single parent, regardless of the number of children, displayed higher levels of difficulty, although the magnitude of differences between children from one-parent and two-parent households was small and there was considerable variability in children's outcomes across all household types. Associations also emerged in relation to family income; children from families with the lowest income levels displayed more problems. However, the associations between family structure, income level and children's outcomes diminished once other factors such as child characteristics and parenting processes were simultaneously considered. The findings suggest that the quality of the parent-child relationship is more important for children's development than the structure or income level of the family. Notwithstanding this, mother-child conflict, a variable strongly associated with children's outcomes, was higher in all single-parent and low-income households. This suggests that the risk of mother-child conflict may be exacerbated by the stress inherent in households with relatively fewer relational or economic resources.

A number of policy implications arise from these findings. Across all of the models for predicting children's outcomes presented in the report, child characteristics such as gender, health status and temperament were the most important predictors of social and emotional wellbeing, even after accounting for parenting and family factors. This highlights the potential role that child-directed policies could play in identifying and intervening with groups of children who by their nature are at increased risk of poor outcomes. Child focused programmes which develop children's skills for building relationships, regulating their emotions, and coping with stress may help to improve children's outcomes.

The findings indicate that high levels of conflict in the parent-child relationship are associated with negative consequences for children's social and emotional wellbeing. Thus, policies that increase access to counselling or support for parents to build and maintain strong positive relationships, either with their partners or with their children, are likely to benefit children's wellbeing. The findings also indicate that children can be protected from the potentially damaging effects of parental depression and marital dissatisfaction if positive parent-child relationships can be maintained, despite parents' ongoing personal challenges.

Economic hardship and a lack of relational resources may impair some parents' abilities to be nurturing and responsive parents and to build positive relationships with their children. Therefore, policies aimed at alleviating stress and improving families' access to social and health support, across all types of households, could reduce the risk of poor social and emotional outcomes for children.



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