

# Research Briefing 1

## Not All Mothers With High Parenting Stress Have the Same Support Needs

### Findings from the Growing Up in Scotland Study

#### The study examined:

- (1) How parenting stress varies according to maternal education level; and
- (2) How this variation is related to mothers' support needs, among families with a 10 month old infant.

It used information from over 5,800 families in the Growing Up in Scotland second birth cohort, with children born in 2010 or 2011.



#### What is parenting stress?

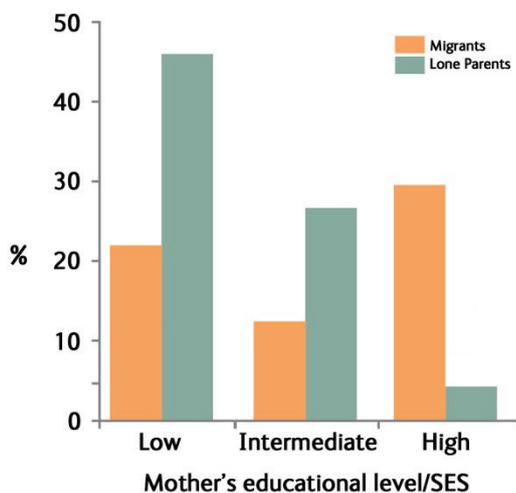
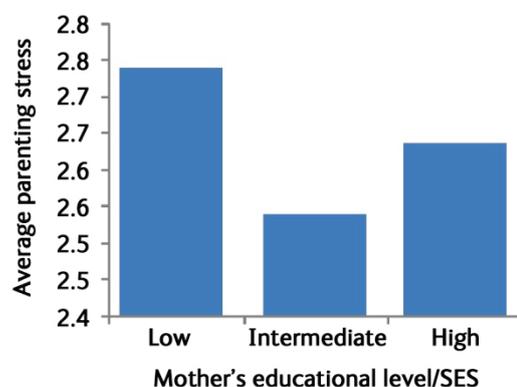
Parenting stress is the term given to stress involved in caring for a child.

High stress levels may be associated with poorer parenting.

### Main findings

**Parenting stress<sup>1</sup> is higher among mothers with high and mothers with low educational qualifications,** than among mothers with intermediate qualifications<sup>2</sup> (see Figure on right). Education is a measure of socio-economic status (SES); higher qualifications = higher SES.

Social patterning of parenting stress



**Similar stress levels among low and high SES mothers are produced in different ways.** Low SES mothers are most likely to be stressed by economic hardship, while high SES mothers are most likely to be stressed by the demands of combining parenthood with a career.

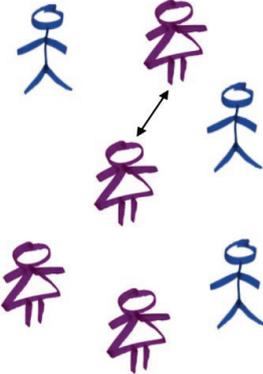
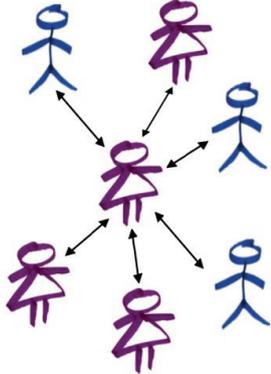
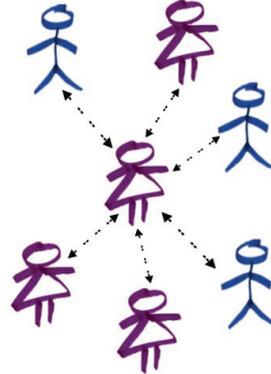
**High parenting stress is linked to lower support.** Low and high SES groups contain many mothers likely to lack support (migrants to Scotland from overseas or the rest of the UK; and lone parents, see Figure left).

Low and high SES mothers lack different aspects of (continued over)

<sup>1</sup> Parenting stress was measured using mothers' agreement with 3 statements from the Parental Stress Scale (Berry and Jones, 1995): "Having a child leaves little time and flexibility in my life"; "It is difficult to balance different responsibilities because of my child"; "Having a child has meant having too few choices and too little control over my life". Responses on a 5-point scale from (1) "strongly agree" to (5) "strongly disagree".

<sup>2</sup> Mothers' education was divided into: high (degree-level), intermediate (university-entry level, or upper-level school leaving age qualifications) and low (lower level qualifications, or none).

support (see red text in box below)

Mothers education/SES			
Support	Low	Intermediate	High
<b>Social Networks</b>	 <p><b>Smaller networks</b> - few friends/grandparents to rely on (for lone mothers, the maternal grandmother often the only grandparent in contact).</p>	 <p>Large networks of grandparents, other relatives and friends for regular support.</p>	 <p><b>Less regular contact</b> - grandparents further away, and mothers have less time to see friends and extended family outside working hours.</p>
<b>Childcare</b>	 <p>Mothers likely to work part time, with childcare by grandparents.</p>		<p>More work full time – and <b>depend on availability of childminder or nursery</b>, as grandparents often too far away.</p>
<b>Health and Welfare Services</b>	<p>Barriers to access - low awareness and trust, fears of interference or stigma.</p>	 <p>Positive attitudes to professional support for parents.</p>	

### Implications for practice

- Careful assessment of support needs by health and social care practitioners is required for high SES/advantaged, as well as low SES/disadvantaged mothers.
- Low SES/disadvantaged groups may be helped via measures improving access to health and welfare services, and restoring relations with grandparents.
- High SES/advantaged groups may be helped via improved access to childcare, as well as internet and telephone resources.

Full details of this research are in Parkes, Alison; Sweeting, Helen; Wight, Daniel. 2015 [Parenting stress and parent support among mothers with high and low education](#). Journal of Family Psychology, Vol 29(6), Dec 2015, 907-918. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/fam0000129>

For more information on the Growing Up in Scotland study, please visit <http://growingupinscotland.org.uk/>

**MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow**  
*Improving health and reducing inequalities through the study of social influences on health and wellbeing.*