

# Promoting Parenting: a UK response to improving outcomes for children

*Tackling Child Poverty: Lessons from the UK and New Frontiers in Japan*

Doshisha University, Kyoto

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# Overview

- Parenting versus poverty
  - Emphasis from current UK government on importance of parenting and downplaying of significance of poverty
- What is parenting?
  - Difficulties of definition and measurement
- Parenting *and* poverty
  - The importance of resources to parents and the limitations of an either/or approach



## ✦ *Parenting versus Poverty* UK governments' view of family

- Conservative Government (1980s & early 1990s)
  - 'Family Values' & 'Back to Basics'
  - "There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women and there are families." (Margaret Thatcher 1987)
- New Labour Government (1997-2010)
  - 'Hard-working Families'
  - "Every policy examined, every initiative tested, every avenue explored to see how we strengthen our families" (Tony Blair 1997)



🌟 *Parenting versus Poverty*  
British Prime Ministers doing parenting...



## 🌟 *Parenting versus Poverty*

### The current government's view

- “It is family background, parental education, good parenting and the opportunities for learning and development...that together matter more to children than money (*The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* 2010:p5)
- “the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their [children's] future than wealth, class, education or any other common social factor” (*Early Intervention: The Next Steps* 2011:p xiv)



## ✦ *Parenting versus Poverty*

### The current government's view

- “What matters most to a child’s life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting.” (David Cameron 2010)
- The current government therefore emphasises parenting as offering both the cause of childhood problems as well as the potential solution for countering negative outcomes for children



🌟 *Parenting versus  
Poverty*  
London Riots  
August 2011

Explanations offered by government focused on individual responsibility linked to absence of appropriate parental role models and inadequate parenting



## ✦ *What is Parenting?* From form to function

- Shift from interest in particular family forms e.g. single parent households
- Shift to activities of parents “what parents do not who they are that makes the difference”



# ✦ *What is Parenting?*

## Contemporary Change in UK families

- Separation of sex from marriage
  - Sex before marriage, higher age at marriage, higher levels of cohabitation, acceptance of gay sexual relationships
- Reconstruction of marriage as a terminable arrangement
  - Divorce and remarriage
- Separation of childbearing and childrearing from marriage
  - Extra-marital births, lone parenting, step/blended families



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

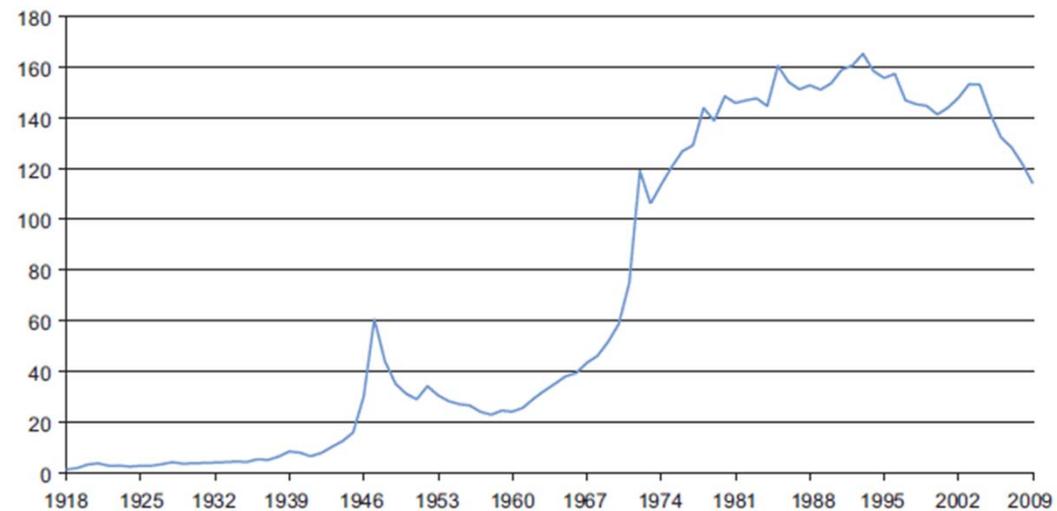
## Contemporary Change in UK families: reconstruction of marriage as a terminable arrangement



Prince Charles and Camilla  
the Duchess of Cornwall  
divorced and remarried

Figure 4 **Number of couples divorcing**

England and Wales  
Thousands



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2011f)

## *What is Parenting?*

### Contemporary Change in UK families:

separation of childbearing and childrearing from marriage

- Births Outside Marriage (England and Wales)
  - 1971 - 65,700 births outside marriage (8.4%)
  - 2009 - 326,200 births outside marriage (46.2%)
- In 2010 7% of households were lone parents with dependent children
- Of families, in 2010
  - 68% married couple family
  - 15.6% cohabiting couple family
  - 16.2 lone parent family



# 🌿 *What is Parenting?*

## Shift from 'being' to 'doing'

- Variation in living arrangements and range of personal relationships thought of as 'family' mean there is less focus on ensuring a single 'best' family form



## ✦ *What is Parenting?*

# Good Parenting = Intensive Parenting

- Intensive
  - highly demanding, child-centred approach
  - time and emotionally intensive enterprise
  - requires knowledge (from experts)
  - term 'intensive mothering' Hays (1996)



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

## Intensive Parenting - Supernanny



- Routine and Teamwork
  - “Sometimes, all a family needs is some structure and some practice at working together to get them back on track.”
- Discipline and Reward
  - “Positive attention and praise are the most effective rewards for good behaviour, but sometimes it's important to give your child boundaries and let them know that certain behaviour is unacceptable” ‘Naughty Step’

<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/supernanny>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aj0u8aZ-5O8>



## 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

(also) Good Parenting = Intimate Parenting

- Intimacy

- dyadic approach, focused on development of close parent-child relationship
- emotionally intensive (though not necessarily time intensive)
- requires communication, emotional engagement
- term 'intimate fatherhood' Dermott (2003:2008)



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

## Measuring Parenting

- “We all know what good parenting looks like” (David Cameron 2010)
- But not straightforward to translate these cultural expectations into quantifiable measures; most sociological research has relied on qualitative research
- Parenting behaviours
- Parent-child relationship
- Parenting activities



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

## Measuring Parenting

- Parenting measurement tends to include:
- (1) Parenting behaviours e.g. discipline, routine, setting boundaries:
  - ‘positive parenting’; “parents setting clear boundaries and routines for children as well as being responsive and warm towards the child” (*The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* 2010: 43)
  - Difficulty in how to assess these, either lot of questions e.g. to establish what a routine is or parents’ interpretation of what a ‘routine’ is.



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

## Measuring Parenting

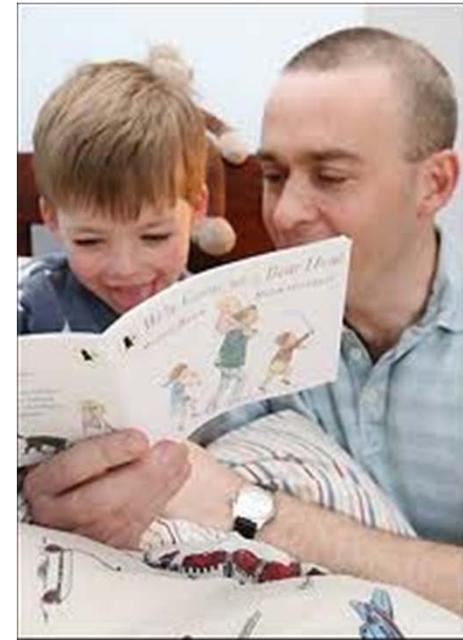
- Parenting measurement tends to include:
- (2) Parent-child relationship, e.g. perception of relationship quality *'how close a relationship do you have with your child?'*
  - Relationship quality is inherently subjective.
  - Not meaningful unless both parties express an opinion
  - Measure requires a battery of questions, preferably supported by observations and interviews as well



# 🌟 *What is Parenting?*

## Measuring Parenting

- Parenting measurement tends to include:
- (3) Parenting activities e.g. reading with child, helping with homework, watching television together, playing games
  - One-to-one interaction in joint activity
  - ‘Home learning environment’: talk to your child (with the television off) for 20 mins; play with you child on the floor for 10 mins; read to your child for 15 minutes (Centreforum 2011: 6)



# ✦ *What is Parenting?*

## What is Left Out?

- Family characteristics      E.g. presence of step-parents/children, parents marital status, number of siblings, generations in household
- Parental characteristics      E.g. age of mother at birth, occupation, education/qualifications
- Caring activities      E.g. cooking, cleaning



## *Parenting and Poverty*

- Link between poverty and child outcomes
- Link between parenting and child outcomes
- But relationship between poverty and parenting is NOT clear



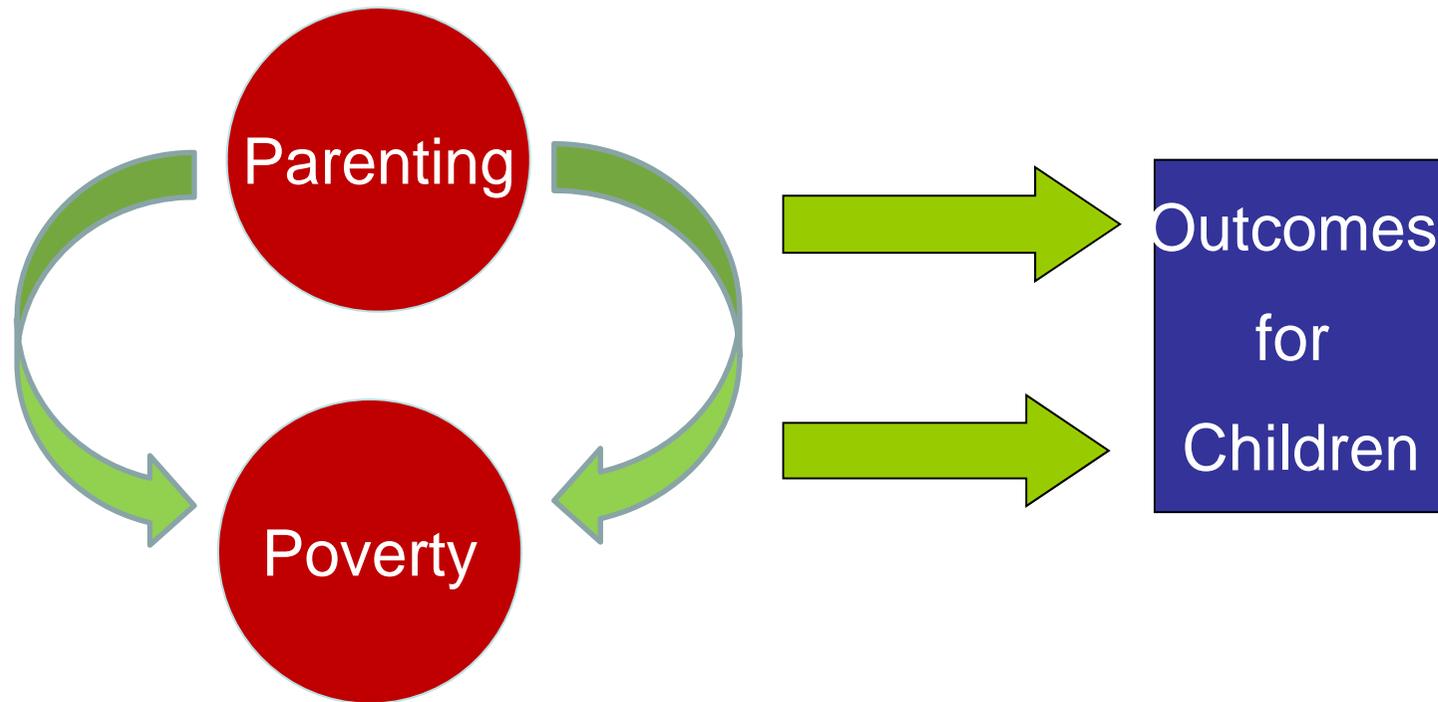
## *Parenting and Poverty*

		Parenting	Index	Score
		Low	Mid	High
<b>Total sample (%)</b>		<b>33.3</b>	<b>33.3</b>	<b>33.3</b>
<b>Poverty history</b>				
<b>None</b>	<b>61.4</b>	<b>20.5</b>	<b>36.0</b>	<b>43.5</b>
<b>Episodic (not poor at 5)</b>	<b>12.9</b>	<b>45.6</b>	<b>33.1</b>	<b>21.4</b>
<b>Episodic (poor at 5)</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>48.7</b>	<b>31.4</b>	<b>19.9</b>
<b>Persistent poverty</b>	<b>13.6</b>	<b>66.3</b>	<b>23.1</b>	<b>10.6</b>

Adapted from Kiernan and Mensah 2010



# 🔥 *Poverty and Parenting* Causality?



## 🌟 *Poverty and Parenting*

- Current political discourse is problematic and unhelpful
- *Problematic* – because of difficulties of conceptualising and measuring parenting
- *Unhelpful* – works against development of nuanced understanding of relationship between parenting and resources



## *Conclusion - Parenting and Poverty*

### Parenting in the Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (PSE)

- Test existing measures and examine the extent and nature of poverty and social exclusion in the UK
- Parenting measures:
- Family characteristics (including information on children in other households)
- Parental characteristics
- Parenting activities
- *Parenting will be examine alongside variables measuring poverty and social exclusion*
- *Qualitative interviews will be able to tease out the relationship between parenting practice, parental attitudes, and access to a range of social and financial resources.*

