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## Parenting and SES: relative values or enduring principles?

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### Abstract

The quality of parenting is a complex and multiply determined construct that is strongly influenced by the larger ecological context in which it evolves. A substantial body of literature has documented associations between socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting but has been limited in its consideration of factors that may explain or moderate the nature of this relation. The socioeconomic conditions within which a family lives may powerfully influence parenting through its effects on parental mental health and via differential access to resources. Parents' childrearing knowledge and cultural values may also vary along a socioeconomic gradient, with downstream effects on parenting. Further, both socioeconomic factors and parenting can independently shape children's health and development. A more comprehensive understanding of linkages between SES and parenting may inform preventive intervention efforts to support families from disadvantaged environments.

### Keywords

Socioeconomic status; parenting; family; culture

### Introduction

The *parenting* construct is often examined at the individual or dyadic levels (e.g., individual traits that shape parenting practices, effects of parenting on child outcomes). However, parenting is strongly influenced by and situated within the larger social ecology in which it unfolds, including the socioeconomic context. Research on the association between socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting has been substantial but narrow in its scope, with studies primarily, and at times mistakenly, examining parenting as a pathway through which socioeconomic status influences child development. For example, although deficient dental hygiene among poor children is often attributed to parental neglect of hygienic teaching, evidence suggests that earlier exposures to cariogenic bacteria, along with stress-related, structural compromise of the primary dentition are more likely the causes (Boyce et al., 2010).

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Despite the variability in parenting across the SES gradient, limited research has examined the nature of the relation between SES and parenting itself. This selective review aims to address this gap in the literature. We begin with a summary of empirical support for the association between SES and parenting, followed by a consideration of factors that may mediate or moderate this relation. We conclude with suggestions for future research that recognize the complexity of socioeconomic effects and advance our understanding of the dynamic processes that influence parenting practices across the SES gradient.

## Parenting in context: Examining associations with SES

### Defining SES and parenting

The multifaceted nature of SES requires defining for the purposes of the present review, especially since relations with parenting may differ depending on the specific aspects of SES being addressed (Callahan & Eyberg, 2010). Measures of SES may be comprised of “social” indicators that describe rank or class-based positioning (e.g., occupational classification systems, educational level), “economic” factors that are material-and resource-related (e.g., income), or both (Hoff, Laursen, Tardif, & Bornstein, 2002). SES may also be assessed objectively or subjectively — the latter using self-perceived social status relative to one’s peers (Adler et al., 1994) — or conceptualized using person-or neighborhood-level indicators (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). Most widely used in the parenting literature that is summarized in the present article are SES indicators based on objective measures of parental income, education, and/or occupation. Of note, measures of SES must be contextualized, as what constitutes “low” or “high” SES is relative and may differ across geographic locations.

The construct of parenting may include parental style (e.g., authoritative, authoritarian, permissive; Baumrind (1967)), parents’ goals for their children, beliefs regarding parenting, or specific parenting practices (Hoff et al., 2002). Literature on the SES-parenting relation has predominantly explored the latter. Of great importance to this review is recognition that studies on parenting have largely been conducted by high-income, well-educated developmental clinicians and researchers. Thus, the judgments that have been made about “good” and “bad” parenting are influenced by the backgrounds and rearing experiences of those in the position to draw such conclusions, a caution that also applies to the authors of this review. Although parenting quality must, to some degree, be defined as context-specific (Cabeza de Baca & Ellis, in press, this issue) and “in the eye of the beholder”, we also do not deny the reality of parenting practices that can be deemed good or bad irrespective of circumstance (Mesman et al., 2015). Thus, we recognize the harmful nature of abusive, neglectful, or other clearly adverse parenting practices, as well as the supportive, attentive and nurturing behaviors that characterize good parenting. Extant parenting research often applies middle-class parenting standards across the socioeconomic gradient, rather than considering the relative functionality of specific rearing practices. Existing literature must be reviewed with this caveat in mind – a qualification to which we will return in our discussion of future research directions.

## Relations between SES and parenting

Empirical studies have documented associations between SES and parenting practices. As compared to higher SES family environments, parenting within low SES family environments has been observed to be harsher and more punitive (Hoffman, 2003) with greater levels of chaos (Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005) and more instability in day-to-day family routines (Evans, 2004; Fiese, Rhodes, & Beardslee, 2013; Jensen, James, Boyce, & Hartnett, 1983). In their seminal review paper on the consequences of adverse early family relationships, Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman (2002) highlight the association of low SES with “risky” family characteristics, including heightened family conflict, low levels of support, and exposures to family violence. Although economic disadvantage is often conceptualized as stable and chronic, research has found acute declines in income lead often to greater family conflict and higher parental hostility (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994).

Studies investigating the main effects of socioeconomic status on parenting have become less common in recent years, with increasing empirical focus on more complex models of environmental and contextual factors that shape family processes and child development. Significant support for relations between SES and parenting has been derived from statistical models in which parenting is identified as a mediator of the association between socioeconomic factors and child outcomes. For example, a meta-analysis found negative parenting partially accounted for the relation between poverty and children’s mental health symptoms, particularly among male offspring (Grant et al., 2003). Related research on adult populations has found that low SES in childhood is associated with negative early family relationships that subsequently contribute to poorer health outcomes later in life (Lehman, Taylor, Kiefe, & Seeman, 2005, 2009).

## Pathways to parenting: Mediators and moderators of the association between SES and parenting

Parenting is a complex, multiply determined construct and its variability across the SES gradient suggests the presence of mediating and moderating variables (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Although an exhaustive review is outside the scope of the current article, theoretical and empirical research suggest the following four factors may help explain or modulate the nature of the SES-parenting association (see Figure 1).

### Parent distress and mental health problems

Low SES is consistently associated with elevated rates of mental health problems (Chen & Miller, 2013). Developed by Conger and colleagues, the *Family Stress Model* (FSM) model posits that socioeconomic disadvantage contributes to negative parenting practices through higher levels of parental psychological distress and marital conflict (Conger & Conger, 2002; Conger et al., 1992, 1993; Conger et al., 2002). Since its initial presentation nearly 15 years ago, the FSM has accrued an impressive body of empirical support among families diverse in ethnicity, structure, and age of offspring (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). For example, parental depression has been found to mediate the relation between economic pressure and negative parenting in a rural sample of parents during infancy/toddlerhood

(Newland, Crnic, Cox, Mills-Koonce, & Family Life Project Key, 2013), a nationally representative sample of parents during early childhood (Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), and an ethnically diverse sample of parents during the elementary school years (Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002)

### **Access to resources**

The *Family Investment Model* (FIM) purports that parents of higher SES have more capital to contribute to children's higher order developmental outcomes while by necessity, parents in more disadvantages households must attend more to the basic, pressing needs of the family (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Investments may take the form of material goods purchased for children or parental involvement in enrichment activities, both of which have been associated with family SES (Bradley, Corwyn, McAdoo, & Garcia Coll, 2001; Sohr-Preston et al., 2013; Yeung et al., 2002). Greater income and educational status may also confer higher "social capital" that indirectly influences childrearing strategies through the educational and occupational opportunities to which parents guide their children (Conger & Donnellan, 2007). Conversely, parents in economically disadvantaged households may have fewer financial resources to expend on children's material resources and be employed in multiple jobs that make it difficult to spend time with their children (Chen & Miller, 2013).

### **Parental knowledge and expectations of childrearing and child development**

The "knowledge gap hypothesis" suggests parents with higher levels of education and greater economic resources will be exposed to, acquire, and adopt information relevant to parenting practices more rapidly than lower SES individuals (Bornstein, Cote, Haynes, Hahn, & Park, 2010). Parental knowledge, in turn, is purported to assume an important role in the relation between SES and parenting behavior. Research here is limited, but income and education have been shown to be positively associated with parental knowledge (Benasich & Brooks-Gunn, 1996; Morawska, Winter, & Sanders, 2009), and parental knowledge of childrearing mediates the relation between SES and parent-child communication (Rowe, 2008). Differences have been observed in parental expectations of children's development across socioeconomic strata, with higher SES generally associated with expectations for greater educational attainment (Mello, 2009) and faster achievement of developmental milestones (Hoff et al., 2002). Contrasting expectations of children's cognitive and behavioral abilities may also influence parents' behavior and manner of interacting. For example, Davis-Keane (2005) found that greater income and education was indirectly associated with increased parental warmth and engagement in play activities through parents' higher educational expectations for their children.

### **Cultural norms and values**

Cultural contexts assume a significant role in ascribing value and meaning to parenting practices (Bornstein, in press, this issue; Prevoo & Tamis-Lemonda, in press, this issue). Moreover, the qualitative and historical experience of economic adversity (e.g., antecedents, persistence, geographic concentration, opportunities for improving financial status) may differ across racial and ethnic groups, influencing how SES is related to parenting practices (McLoyd, 1990). Parenting research has predominantly been conducted among Caucasian families (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007), and when available, studies using diverse

samples often confound ethnicity with SES or do not have adequate representation of ethnically diverse individuals across the range of SES (Hill, 2006). The influence of socioeconomic factors on parenting varies across different ethnic groups, but research has yielded mixed findings. For example, SES has been found to relate positively to parental sensitivity (Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008) and to support for autonomy across ethnic groups (Richman & Mandara, 2013). Parke et al. (2004) found the FSM to be similarly applicable across Caucasian and Mexican American families, including relations of economic disadvantage to parenting via parental psychological health. Conversely, other research has found significant differences in FSM and FIM validity as a function of ethnicity (Mistry et al., 2008). Weis and Toolis (2010) observed a positive association between SES and maternal hostility among Latina, but not African American or European American women. The authors hypothesized that “upward mobility” and participation in the labor force may conflict with traditional gender roles and caregiving responsibilities within the Latino culture, creating a more stressful home environment that contributes to higher levels of maternal hostility.

## Conclusions and future directions

In the current U.S. economic climate, 20% of children live in poverty, with nearly half of those residing in households that are 200% below the federal poverty threshold (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2014). Children reared under conditions of socioeconomic adversity are at increased risk for a variety of acute and chronic physical health problems and poorer mental health, as well as greater impairment resulting from these conditions (Chen & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Duncan & Magnuson, 2013; Reiss, 2013; Spencer, Thanh, & Louise, 2013), with lasting consequences that may persist into adulthood (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). Economic and health disparities are growing, engendering strong motivation to find modifiable factors that may be incorporated into preventive and intervention efforts to attenuate the relation between low SES and children’s poor health outcomes. Although an extensive literature has identified parenting as one pathway through which socioeconomic factors exert their influence, the association between SES and parenting is more complex than simple, direct, and linear relations. The current review considered several variables that may explain or shape the SES-parenting association. Building upon these mechanistic pathways, there are several important directions that future research may consider to further clarify the nature of the relation between SES and parenting.

First, and perhaps most significantly, are studies that consider the value, meaning, and functionality of parenting practices across different social and economic climates, rather than universal denotations of “good” and “bad” parenting. Research in this area is scarce, but certain patterns of parental socialization in lower SES households (e.g., interdependence, family orientation, obedience to authority) have been conceptualized as a better match to a social environment in which community members rely on each other for help. Such parental strategies may be at odds with the promotion of autonomy, independence, and self-reliance in higher SES environments (Zilberstein, 2016). For example, *familism values* (normative beliefs in the Latino population that emphasize interdependence and attachment among members of the immediate and extended family) may promote adaptive outcomes among low-income Mexican American youth for whom neighborhood and social support is

particularly important (Gonzales et al., 2011). Similarly, restrictive and controlling parenting practices, while typically considered to be negative, may offer protective benefits in low SES neighborhood environments where levels of crime and violence are high (Chen & Miller, 2013).

Second, additional research is also needed to explore a broader set of SES factors as they relate to parenting. Traditional indicators of parent income and education index a narrow component of the larger socioeconomic context that shapes parenting practices, and multilevel indicators of SES (e.g., neighborhood, school, peer relations and social hierarchy factors) may exert strong, additional effects.

Third, existing research on SES and parenting is disproportionately focused on mothering. Updated conceptualizations have moved beyond defining fathers solely as “breadwinners”, though the provision of economic resources continues to be an important component of fathering (Waller, 2010), and SES may strongly influence the paternal role (Roy, 2014).

Finally, further research is also needed to disentangle the complex relations between ethnicity and SES. Although the current literature suggests that ethnicity and SES may exert interactive effects, studies are hampered by diverse samples that lack adequate variation across the SES gradient in order to statistically examine the full range of complex relations that shape parenting practices (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000). It may be the case that presumed cultural differences in parenting are better accounted for by variations in SES (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012).

As noted throughout this select review, the study of the SES-parenting relation has often been pursued because of the ensuing effects of low SES on children’s physical and psychological health. Nonetheless, understanding the complexities of parenting within diverse economic climates is itself a worthy and valuable topic of research. Economic hardship may pose significant challenges for positive parenting, and elucidating these processes within the family is essential for understanding how to provide parents with needed support. The efficacy of parenting interventions within low SES families may be improved by addressing factors of parental mental health, resource access, and childrearing knowledge within a culturally-sensitive framework. In sum, moving beyond examinations of simple linear associations between SES and parenting to explore the specific qualities, contexts, and conditions under which these relations arise offers promise for supporting adaptive family processes and promoting resilience among adults and children in disadvantaged environments.

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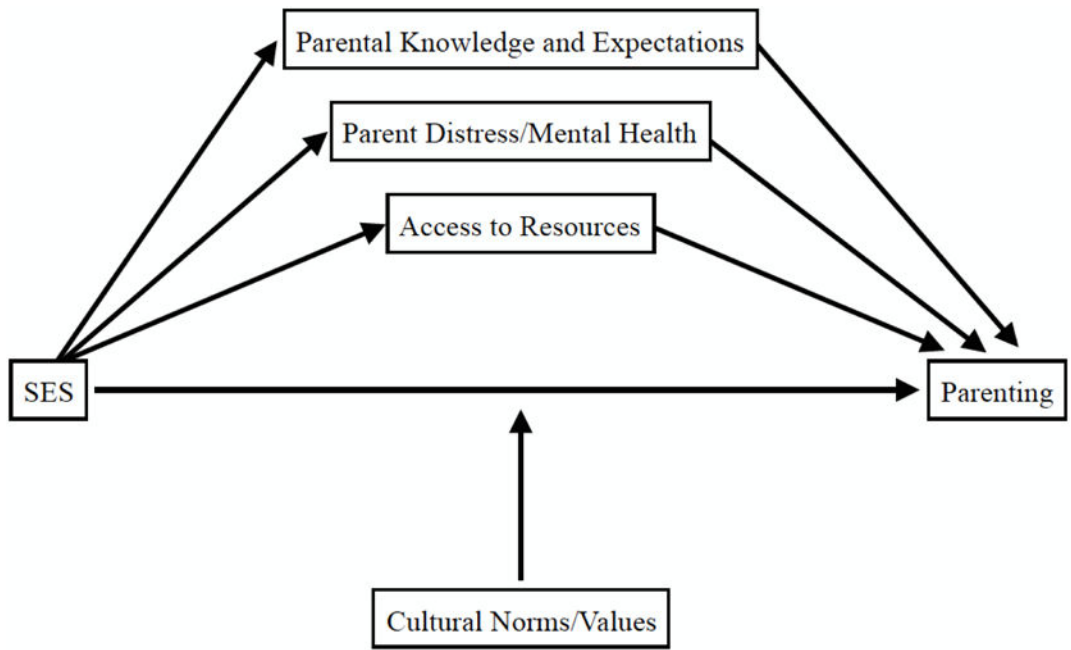


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### Highlights

- The relation between socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting is complex.
- Factors that may mediate or moderate the SES-parenting relation are understudied.
- Along the SES gradient, variability in parental mental health, resource access, childrearing knowledge, and cultural values may shape parenting practices.
- Understanding links between SES and parenting may inform interventions for families from disadvantaged environments.



**Figure 1.** Conceptual model of mediating and moderating factors on the relation between socioeconomic status (SES) and parenting.