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Children as young as three have improved mental health if their parents are better off than others

Children as young as three have improved mental health if their parents are better off than other families living in their area, the British Sociological Association's annual conference in Leeds heard today. [Thursday 24 April 2014]

Researchers at the universities of Manchester and Stirling analysed survey data on 14,000 children, almost all aged three, and found that the higher the family's income, the better was the children's mental health.

The researchers also found that in better-off families the children's mental health got an extra boost if their parents were higher up in the income ranking than others in their area. However, income rank was not important to children in low- or middle-income families.

The children's mental health was measured using a parent's assessment of aspects of their behaviour, such as depression and hyper-activity. The researchers found that, in families in the highest third for income, being at the top of the income ranking for their area meant the children's overall score for mental health was 39 per cent better than for those at the bottom of the ranking.

Children of parents in the middle third and lower third of income groups weren't affected by the income ranking of their parents.

One of the Manchester researchers, Elisabeth Garratt, told the conference: "We found not just that children aged three have better mental health if they live in better-off families, but that in better-off families the parents' ranking in the scale of income in their region was also important for the child. However, ranked income position was not important to mental health among children in less well-off families.

"Several explanations for these findings are possible. An awareness of ranked income may emerge earlier in the lives of more advantaged children. These children may be more cognitively advanced or there may be a greater importance of income-based status in wealthier families."

Ms Garratt, of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Manchester, carried out the study for her PhD, working with Professor Tarani Chandola and Dr Kingsley Purdam, also of Manchester, and Professor Alex Wood, of the Stirling Management School.

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Notes

- The researchers used data from the Millennium Cohort Study on 14,053 children born in 2000 and aged from two and half to three and a half at the time of the survey, and their parents. Of these, 98 per cent of the children were three years old, 2 per cent were four years old and less than one per cent were younger than three.

- The measurements of parents' income were based on income from all sources (both pay and benefits) and adjusted for family size, which is accepted practice in research.
- When comparing parents' income ranking, this was calculated within the region they lived in. There are nine regions in England – and Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are each a region.
- The association between higher mental health for children and their parents ranking in the income table was recorded after isolating its effect by removing other factors statistically, such as family's housing tenure (owner, social renter, private renter, other), family type (natural couple parents, lone parents and families where at least one parent is not a natural parent), number of parents in work and the highest educational qualification held by the child's parents.
- The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association's mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729. Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk