

# Watch them Grow

Unmarried-cohabitant and Solo  
parenthood in Ireland

An analysis of the **Growing Up in Ireland** infant cohort data  
Waves 1 and 2

## Key Findings 3: Parents' Health and Parenting

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Founded in 1976, Treoir is a membership organisation that promotes the rights and best interests of unmarried parents and their children.

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- Operates the free, confidential **National Specialist Information and Referral Service** on all aspects of unmarried parenthood for
  - ✓ unmarried expectant parents
  - ✓ unmarried parents living apart
  - ✓ unmarried parents living together
  - ✓ teen parents
  - ✓ opposite and same sex parents
  - ✓ grandparents and other relatives
  - ✓ those working with unmarried parents and their families.
- Advocates on behalf of unmarried parents and their children.
- Co-ordinates the 11 local **Teen Parent Support Programmes** at national level.

### Treoir Principles

1. Treoir recognises the diversity of family life in Ireland
2. Treoir recognises that all families, including unmarried families have the same rights to respect, care, support, protection and recognition
3. Treoir supports and promotes the rights of all children as outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
4. Treoir believes that all children have a right to know, be loved and cared for by both parents

# Key Findings 3: Parents' Health and Parenting

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## Introduction

This Key Findings document outlines select findings of interest concerning **Parents' Health and Parenting** presented in Treoir's report on the first two waves of data from the infant cohort (collected at 9 months and again at 3 years) of the *Growing Up In Ireland* (GUI) Study, entitled *Watch them Grow: Unmarried-cohabitant and Solo parenthood in Ireland*.

The report focuses on primary caregivers (PCGs) and their infant children, exploring differences in outcomes across a range of domains, including parental health and parenting, child health and wellbeing, childcare, work and welfare. In doing so, the report employs the tripartite scheme used by Kiernan to distinguish marital status categories as follows (Kiernan, 2005) :

- **Married:** those who were 'ever married' and currently cohabit with a partner
- **Unmarried-cohabitant (UC):** this category comprises only those who indicated they were 'never married' and all of these respondents have cohabiting partners
- **Solo:** this group combines single parents, none of whom cohabit with a partner, whether they were 'never married' or whether they are lone parents who are now separated, divorced or widowed

Complete details of the methodology and findings can be found in the full report which is available for download on the Treoir website at [www.treoir.ie](http://www.treoir.ie). The report was researched and written by Dr Owen Corrigan and generously funded by the HSE Crisis Pregnancy Programme. Other Key Findings documents are also available free to download on the Treoir website covering a range of topics. The complete collection of Key Findings documents covers:

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|---|--|
| • <b>KF1: Marital Status, Family Transitions and Solo Parents</b> | • <b>KF4: Child Health and Wellbeing</b> |
| • <b>KF2: Childcare</b>   | • <b>KF5: Work and Welfare</b>           |
| • <b>KF3: Parents' Health and Parenting</b>                       | • <b>KF6: Crisis Pregnancy</b>           |

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## Context

The report focuses on changes in parental health outcomes between waves 1 and 2 of the study, and in particular on outcomes that have been linked to outcomes for children. The report looks specifically at stress and depression scores, as measured by the self-report items in the GUI questionnaires at both waves, as well as at aspects of parenting style and the quality of parent-child interactions.

Higher maternal stress has been linked to a higher risk of maternal depression (Lancaster et al., 2010; Webster-Stratton and Hammond, 1988) as well as to negative parenting behaviours which are sometimes implicated in child socio-behavioural outcomes (Anthony et al., 2005; Crnic et al., 2005; Deater-Deckard, 1998; Pinderhughes et al., 2000). A number of studies have found higher levels of mental health disorders like depression among single mothers when compared to mothers in cohabitant living situations (Murphy et al., 2008). High levels of maternal stress co-occur with adversity experienced by the mother, such as socio-economic hardship, poverty, overcrowding, poor neighbourhoods etc., and single mothers are at higher risk of economic hardship (Bradley and Corwyn, 2002).

The GUI data allow for the exploration of a number of different parenting practices, including parental attitudes and allowances made towards the prevalence of television and books in the home and the frequency with which parents engage their child in stimulating games and/or learning activities.

Longitudinal research has shown that early television exposure in children (at 1 years or 3 years) is associated with attentional problems later in life, with the authors noting that television viewing at such young ages is controversial and discouraged (Christakis et al., 2004). Results showed that hours of television watched per day at age 1 or age 3 was significantly associated with having attentional problems at age 7.

Findings regarding infant health and wellbeing are presented in a separate Key Findings document. All findings along with more detailed descriptions of results and methodology can be found in the full report.

## Findings

### ***Parents' health***

#### *Parents' stress and depression scores at wave 2*

Fig. 1 overleaf shows stress and depression scores by wave of the GUI study and by marital status; the bars on the right of each graph show these scores for those who transitioned into a new marital status over time. Analysis controlling for other factors relevant to stress and depression scores shows:

- Solo and Unmarried-cohabitant parents had significantly higher scores on both indexes of stress and indexes of depression at wave 2 controlling for other factors

#### *Change in parents' depression scores from wave 1 to wave 2*

- Transitions between family status types from wave 1 to wave 2 were seen to be associated with higher depression scores, whether transitioning from UC parenthood into marriage or from UC parenthood into Solo parenthood
- Increased stress, parent-child conflict and hostile parenting styles were all associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing increased depression scores as opposed to no change between waves of the GUI study

#### *Change in parents' stress scores from wave 1 to wave 2*

- The majority of parents, whatever their marital status (59-66%), recorded a decrease in their recorded self-report stress scores from wave 1 to wave 2
- However, Solo parents were significantly more likely to report an increase in stress than other marital status types, controlling for other factors
- Higher scores on the depression index and/or higher levels of parent-child conflict were also associated with higher stress levels, indicating the complex interrelationship of these factors

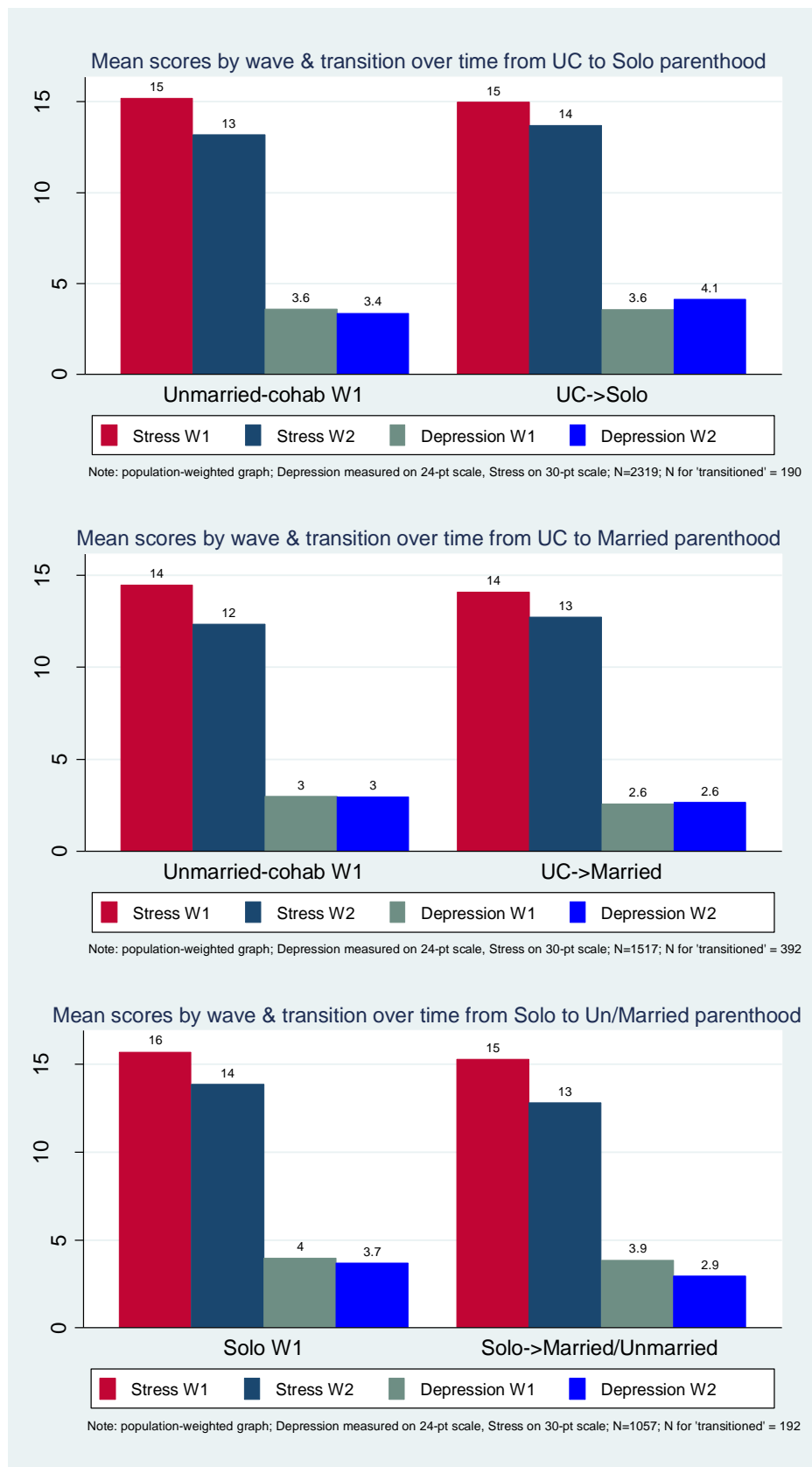


Fig. 1

## **Parenting**

### *Parent-child relationship: Conflict (Pianta) scale*

The Pianta Child-Parent Relationship Scale – Short Form (Pianta, 1992) – looks at both positive and negative aspects of the parent-child relationship, on separate ‘positive aspects’ and ‘conflict’ scales. Caregivers were asked to relate statements about their relationship with the study child on a 5-point scale (from ‘definitely does not apply’ through to ‘definitely applies’). Higher scores on each scale indicate more conflict and more positive aspects in each case.

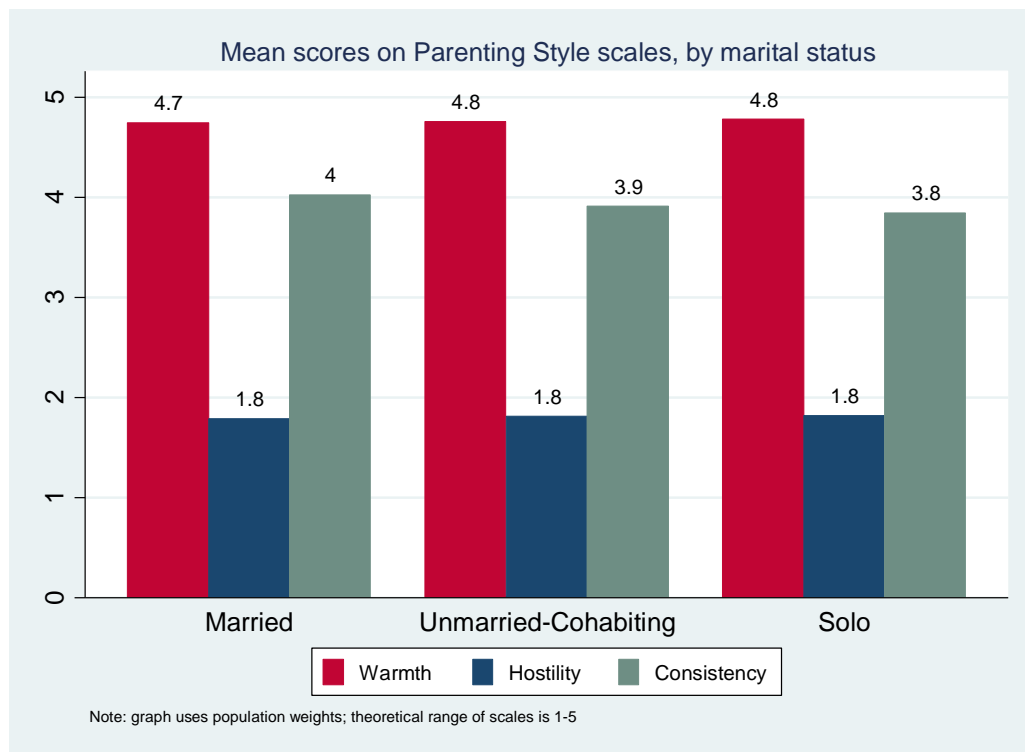
- There was no variation by marital status on these indicators, controlling for other factors
- Increase in reported parental stress over time was associated with higher levels of parent-child conflict
- Any change in reported depression scores over time – either positive or negative – was weakly associated with higher levels of parent-child conflict, however the magnitude of these effects was about half that of an increase in parental stress

### *Parenting style: warmth, consistency, hostility*

There were some small though significant differences in parenting style by marital status even controlling for other factors, where parenting style was measured in terms of warmth, consistency and hostility on a self-report instrument with higher scores indicating more of each trait in each case (i.e. more warmth, more consistency, etc.). These small differences are represented graphically in Fig. 2 below:

- Solo parents exhibited slightly less parenting hostility than Married parents;
- Unmarried-cohabitant parents exhibited slightly less consistency than Married parents
- Change in depression scores over time, either an increase or a decrease, was associated with a more hostile parenting style

**Fig. 2**



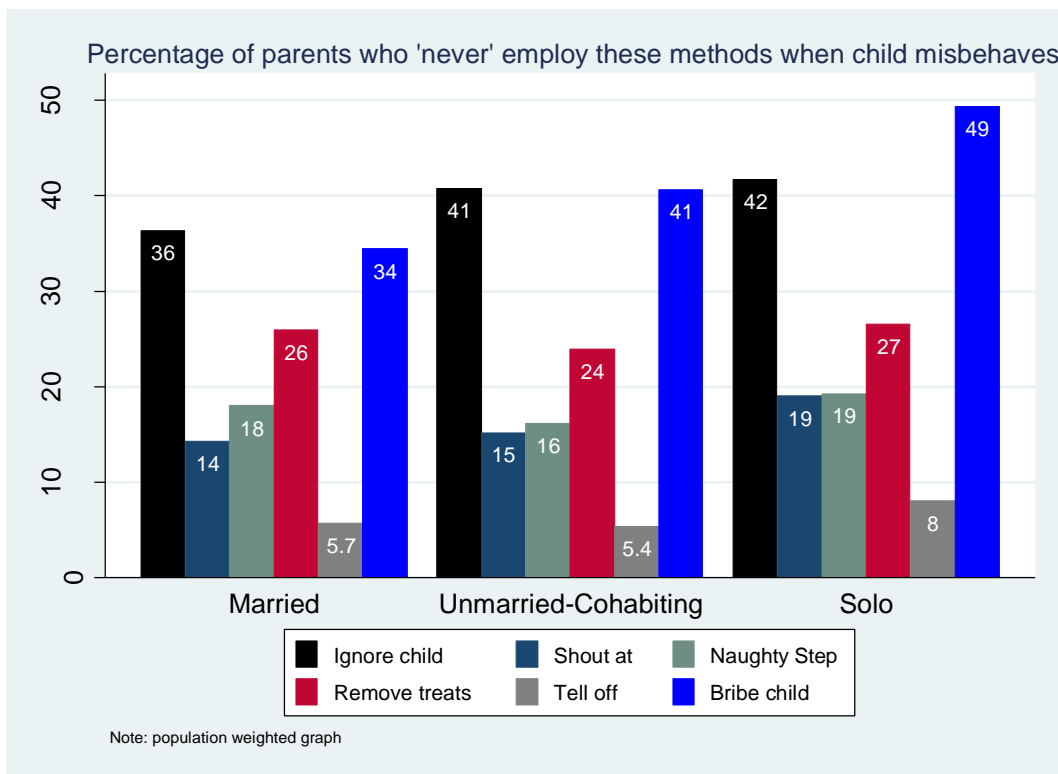
### *Dealing with misbehaviour*

Differences in how parents approach dealing with misbehaviour are graphed in Fig. 3.

- Different methods of dealing with misbehaviour – ignoring, shouting at, telling off, or bribing one’s child, along with removing treats or placing the child on the naughty step – are patterned by family type
- Solo and Unmarried-cohabitant parents are less likely than Married parents to engage in certain practices, e.g. less likely to ‘bribe’, shout at, or ignore their misbehaving child
- Different methods of dealing with misbehaviour are associated with child socio-behavioural outcomes at three years
- Children of parents who ‘never employ’ these methods have better socio-behavioural outcomes (lower scores on the index from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) developed by Goodman (1997)) than children of parents who use these methods, even controlling for other factors



Fig. 3



### ***Parent-child activities and learning***

- There are no differences by family type (when controlling for other factors) across a number of indicators of activities that parents might engage in with their infant, including reading, practicing the alphabet, and counting
- However, Solo parents are significantly less likely to engage in physical games than Married parents
- Working outside the home, feeling they do not get enough help from outside the home, and having a larger family were all factors frequently associated with a lower likelihood of parents engaging in these kinds of learning activities
- The availability of books for children in the home was associated with marital status; Solo parents tended to have fewer books than Married or Unmarried-cohabitant parents, and UC parents tended to have fewer books than Married parents

- Differences in hours of television watched per day were explained by differences in income and education, not by marital status, with factors such as the mother's age (young mothers let their children watch more TV), mother being in poor health, or working outside the home also being relevant
- Television or video games in child's room: Unmarried-cohabitant parents and Solo parents were significantly more likely to allow this than Married parents, controlling for other factors
- TV or video games in child's room: having a larger family, being a younger parent, or a family history of poverty were other relevant factors associated with allowing this

## Policy Implications

- Increased stress, parent-child conflict and hostile parenting styles were all associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing increased depression as opposed to no change between waves of the GUI study. These factors are all inter-related in a complex manner, making it difficult to pinpoint causation with certainty. Interventions aimed at helping parents cope with stress and the problems caused by stress should take account of the complex connections between these areas. Holistic strategies seem likely to be more effective than piecemeal approaches
- The finding that family type transitions – whether into marriage or out of cohabitancy into Solo parenthood – are associated with higher depression scores may suggest the utility of targeting information at those making such transitions and at those working with them. Raising awareness about available mental health or other (e.g. financial, advice, support, mediation) services may help to ameliorate emotional or practical challenges presented by making such transitions<sup>1</sup>
- An increase in parental stress over time is associated with a higher degree of parent-child conflict; this finding should inform any information, advice or other interventions directed at parents who may be experiencing, or at risk for, a high

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted here that the results do not indicate that those making such transitions are more likely to be 'depressed' in a clinical sense, merely that they register higher scores on an index of depression scores.

degree of stress and should likewise inform the practices of those working with such parents. This issue may also be linked to the issue of **childcare** insofar as difficulties arranging childcare at wave 1 have been shown to be associated with higher levels of reported parental stress levels at wave 2

- Similarly, the finding that experience of crisis pregnancy is associated with higher levels of parent-child conflict may be an issue worthy of the attention of healthcare and other specialists, such as public health nurses or pregnancy counselling agencies, involved in the post-pregnancy care of those women whose pregnancies were stressful and unintended
- Likewise, the somewhat weaker finding that an increase in depression scores is associated with more hostile parenting styles is in line with previous research and should be taken into account in the planning or preparation of information, advice or other interventions concerned with parents who may be at an elevated risk for depression
- Excess exposure to television at a very young age may be detrimental to children; raising awareness about this with the types of parents more likely to expose their children to TV at a young age – younger mothers, those working outside the home, those in poor health, those with low income or education – may have benefits for children over the long duration
- Mothers working outside the home, while being more likely to allow more television, were also less likely to engage in learning activities with their infant. This issue may also be linked to childcare, highlighting both the importance of flexible childcare – and work – options for mothers so as to facilitate greater mother-child interaction, while also underscoring the importance that working mothers have access to *quality* childcare which provides stimulation and learning opportunities for their infants

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