

First edition | 2021

# The Parenting Index

## The Parenting Index

The Parenting Index was commissioned by Nestlé as part of its ongoing commitment to support families in the first 1,000 days of life, with a methodology developed and executed by Kantar. The Parenting Index provides a new framework for understanding the experience of parenting around the world today.

The first edition of the Index is based on data from a survey conducted by Kantar in January and February 2020. A nationally representative sample of mothers and fathers of babies 0-12 months were surveyed in 16 countries. Wave 1 involved 8,045 interviews. Wave 2 included 900 interviews (300 in China, Spain and the US) to gauge early indications of the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on the Index.

## KANTAR

Kantar is the world's leading evidence-based insights and consulting company. It has a complete, unique and rounded understanding of how people think, feel and act; globally and locally in over 90 markets. By combining deep expertise, data resources and benchmarks with innovative analytics and technology, Kantar helps their clients understand people and inspire growth.

## Nestlé

Nestlé is the world's largest food and beverage company. It is present in 187 countries around the world, and its 291,000 employees are committed to Nestlé's purpose of unlocking the power of food to enhance quality of life for everyone, today and for generations to come. Thanks to The Parenting Index, Nestlé will be able to better support new generations of parents. To deliver real change, Nestlé is calling on everyone who shares this belief to help drive forward a new conversation that can make being a parent in today's world easier.

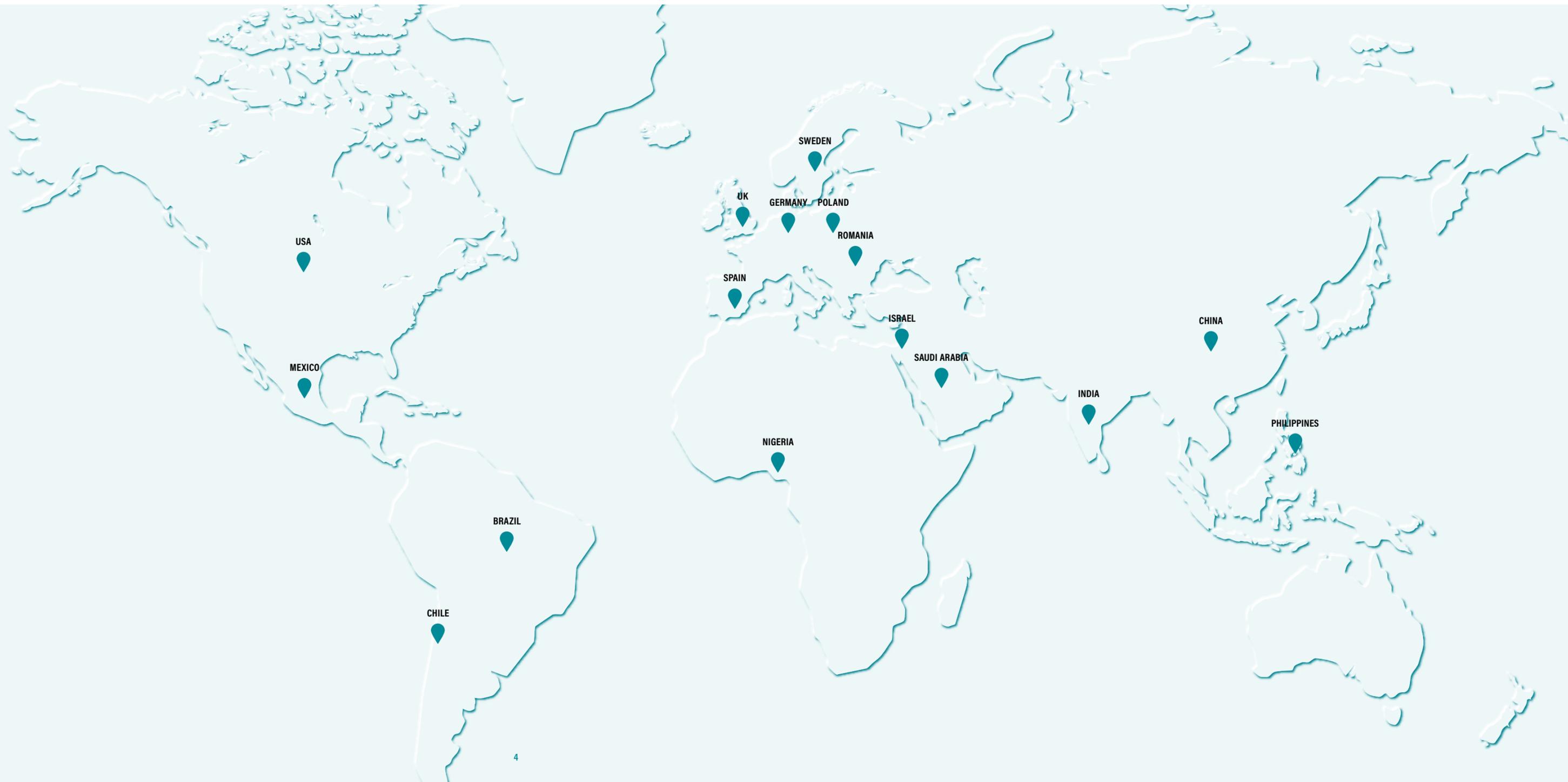
# The Parenting Index

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# The Parenting Index 2021

## Welcome to the first edition of The Parenting Index.

The Parenting Index is a unique new lens on the experience of parenting around the world. It was inspired by the understanding that parenting is life-changing and incredible – but never easy. It provides a new framework for understanding the experience of parenting today through comparable and quantifiable data, and it acts as a benchmark to track these changes over time.

Parents around the world are all doing their very best to raise their families, and it is important to understand why some feel greater challenges than others. For the first time, The Parenting Index ranks countries by how parents perceive the “ease of parenting” in their country, breaking down the key factors that influence these perceptions.

The 16 countries around the world selected for the first edition of The Parenting Index represent a diversity of cultures, social norms, political and economic situations and geographical locations.

The Parenting Index is not a measure of whether parents in different countries are better or worse than one another – there is no “right” or “wrong” in parenting, and no judgment to be found in the Index. Instead, it is an investigation into where parents face greater challenges or greater ease as they make their way along the parenting journey.

A better understanding of the challenges faced by parents is the first step in improving the parenting journey – so they have the help they need to focus on the task at hand: raising a happy, healthy family.

# Statement of Methodology

## The rankings in the inaugural edition of The Parenting Index (2021) are based on data from The Parenting Index Survey conducted by Kantar.

The rankings in the inaugural edition of The Parenting Index (2021) are based on data from The Parenting Index Survey conducted by Kantar from January 14 to February 27, 2020.

The Parenting Index Survey has two components: three central questions to calculate the Index, and a survey to understand parents' perceptions of all aspects of the parenting experience. The Index was created to make parenting measurable and comparable.

The Parenting Index rankings indicate the "ease of parenting" in different countries.

To build The Parenting Index, a nationally representative sample of mothers and fathers of babies aged between 0-12 months were surveyed in 16 countries. Only fathers involved in childcare for the baby were interviewed

(i.e. those that do at least three baby related tasks once a week). The panel included only households with regular income and literacy skills, and the sample had representative quotas on income/education and first/ subsequent child.

Wave 1 of the study involved 8,045 interviews (500 per country in 16 countries). This was followed by Wave 2 which included 900 interviews (300 in China, Spain and the US) to gauge early indications of the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic on the Index.

The Parenting Index ranking is based entirely on a combined metric derived from answers to three central questions. These questions are designed to reflect the full complexity of parenting today (material, emotional and social aspects of parents' lives). Each is rated on a 7-point agreement scale to capture strength of feeling related to each question, and weighted in the combined metric with an importance factor according to the correlations of each central question to the structuring factors of parents' perceptions.

The three questions are:

- All things considered, would you agree that being a parent today is easy?
- Parenting today is full of challenges I cannot control.
- All in all, I feel supported in my role as a parent.

The results of these three questions were combined into one metric which was then used to produce an Index score between 0 and 100. Statistical analysis was used to look for correlations in the data that would explain the country rankings in The Parenting Index.

A clear set of data-driven clusters emerged from the survey answers, describing eight universal factors that influence the experience of parenting today. They are Absence of Pressure (internal and external), Financial Resilience, Supports for Working Life, an Easy Baby, Health and Wellbeing Resources, a Supportive Environment, Shared Parenting, and Parenting Confidence.

These eight factors explain 85% of the variance in the Index – further exploration was carried out to identify other factors to explain the variance. An analysis of global data from the past five years relating to economic, education, health and demographic variables as well as household structure identified a further three factors which explain another 9%. They are length of paid maternity leave, GDP PPP per capital and Gini coefficient (a measure of income inequality in a country). In total, the survey questions and the external data explain 94% of the Index variance across countries.

The breadth of sampling and the focus on macro-environmental issues (such as maternity leave, GDP and Gini coefficient, chosen from a corpus of various macro-economic indicators to complete the explanation of the variance of the Index on top of the 8 perception factors) provides confidence that The Parenting Index is a rigorous and robust measurement of the "ease" of parenting.

# Methodology

## Sample

- Mothers and fathers of babies 0-12 months – fathers interviewed provided they are involved in childcare for the baby (i.e. do at least 3 baby related tasks once a week).
- Including only households with regular income and literacy skills.
- Quotas on income/education, first/subsequent child, region (India, Nigeria, Mexico, Philippines, Romania, Saudi Arabia), ethnicity (US) to ensure representative sample.

Wave 1: 8045 interviews (500 per country in 16 countries)  
Wave 2: 900 interviews (300 in China, Spain and the US)

## Data collection

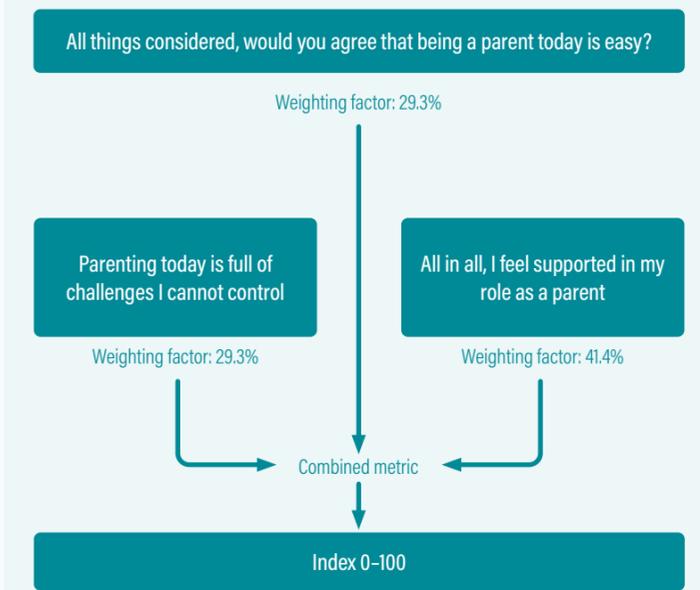
Self-completed online or on-tablet questionnaire

	Recruitment method	Fieldwork Wave 1	Wave2
Brazil	Face-to-face	Jan 23 – Feb 3 2020	
Chile	Face-to-face	Jan 23 – Feb 12	
China	Online	Feb 5 – Feb 24	June 8 – June 22
Germany	Online	Jan 24 – Feb 3	
India	Face-to-face	Feb 10 – Feb 25	
Israel	Online	Jan 22 – Jan 30	
Mexico	Face-to-face	Jan 31 – Feb 18	
Nigeria	Face-to-face	Feb 4 – Feb 27	
Philippines	Face-to-face	Jan 31 – Feb 10	
Poland	Face-to-face	Jan 24 – Feb 10	
Romania	Face-to-face	Feb 3 – Feb 20	
Saudi Arabia	Face-to-face	Jan 29 – Feb 25	
Spain	Online	Jan 23 – Jan 31	June 8 – June 15
Sweden*	Telephone/Online	Jan 22 – Feb 10	
UK	Online	Jan 14 – Jan 30	
USA	Online	Jan 14 – Jan 29	June 8 – June 20

\*Part of the recruitment conducted by telephone

## Index calculation

The Parenting Index is calculated from 3 questions, each rated on a 7-point agreement scale



The Parenting Index methodology and findings have been reviewed by Ming Cui, M.S. in Statistics and Ph.D. in Sociology, Fulbright U.S. Scholar and Professor of Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University (U.S.A.). Professor Cui has expertise in parenting and child development across cultures and research methodology. Full review and insights can be found at the end of this report.

# Chapter 1 Understanding The Parenting Index

Why do some countries rank higher than others? The Parenting Index seeks to answer this question.

The responses given to the three central questions of The Parenting Index Survey builds a country's score out of 100 and determines its ranking in the Index.

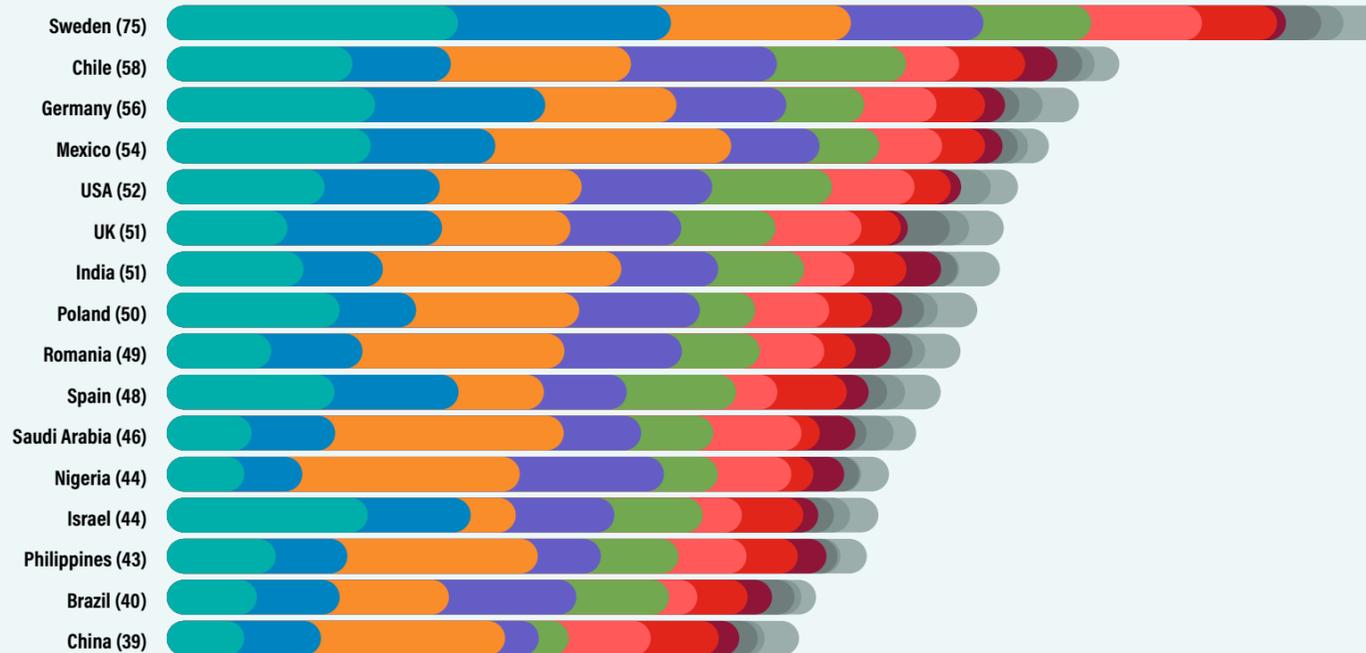
The questions are:

- All things considered, would you agree that being a parent today is easy?
- Parenting today is full of challenges I cannot control
- All in all, I feel supported in my role as a parent

In countries which have the highest Index scores, parents generally feel they face fewer challenges and feel more supported, with a greater sense of ease as they navigate the parenting journey.

In total, 11 factors were found to explain the Index rankings: eight of them based on the survey data, and three based on global social economic data.

## The Parenting Index

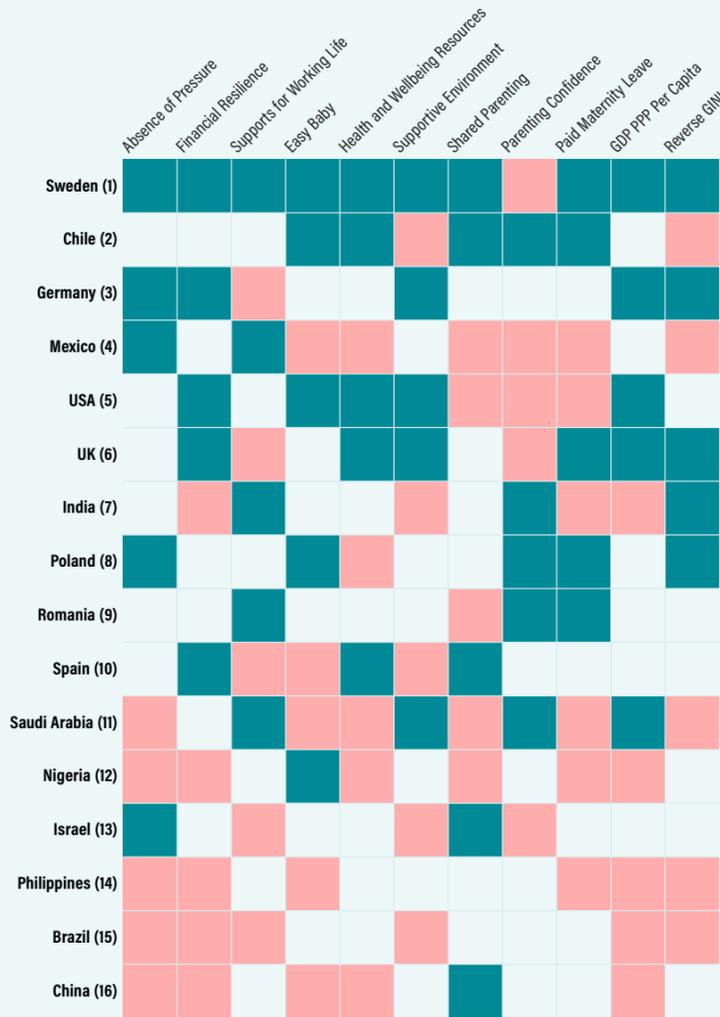


# The Factors



# Top & bottom factors by country

Overall, Sweden ranks highest as the place where parents experience the greatest ease with an overall score of 75/100, 17 points ahead of Chile. The rest of the countries in The Parenting Index 2021 have scores along a spectrum, with only 19 points between 2nd and 16th place.



**1 Sweden** stands significantly ahead with an Index score of 75/100. This means that most factors are positively experienced by parents in Sweden, with almost all conditions aligned to provide an experience of parenting with greater ease. Only one – parenting confidence – is something parents report less satisfaction with.

**2 Chile** is 2nd with a score of 58. Parents report positive or optimistic experiences with most of the key factors. They feel confident, at ease with their baby and that they share parenting responsibilities. While some factors have room for improvement – such as pressure and feelings of financial resilience – parents in Chile report that their greatest pain point is needing a more supportive environment for parenting.

**3 Germany** ranks just behind Chile in 3rd position with a score of 56. Parents in Germany report lower pressure and stronger feelings of financial resilience, but feel they lack support for working life and this needs improvement. Parents in Germany feel that they live in a baby and parent-friendly environment.

**4** Ranking 4th with a score of 54 is **Mexico**. Parents in Mexico also report lower feelings of pressure, and they feel positively about the supports for working life they have access to. However, many of the factors indicate that parents are less satisfied – including feeling that they need their partner to share parenting more fully and that they lack confidence as a parent.

**5** Completing the top five is the **US**, scoring 52. In the US, parents feel generally positive. Whilst they report more pressure than their peers in Sweden, good access to health and wellbeing resources, as well as the feeling of having an easy baby help with this positive outlook. Areas for improvement in the US include both shared parenting and their own confidence as parents.

**6** The **UK** ranks 6th with a score of 51. While parents report some positives, including feeling they have good financial resilience, access to health and wellbeing resources and a supportive environment for parenting, these are counterbalanced by feelings of pressure. Two areas – supports for working life and parenting confidence – are reported as pain points.

**7** Ranking 7th is **India** which ties with the UK at 51. India ranks in the top five for only two factors – positive feelings about supports for working life, and parenting confidence. The main challenges for parents in India are a high level of pressure, worries about financial resilience and the perception that they do not have a supportive environment.

**8 Poland** is 8th with a score of 50. Parents here have a mixed experience – their answers place Poland in the top five for three of the key factors, including the absence of pressure. However, because each factor has a different level of impact on the ranking, when they are all added up the overall picture for parents in Poland reveals the need for better support in a number of areas.

**9** In 9th position with a score of 49 is **Romania**. Parents report very positive perceptions of the supports for working life in Romania and they lead the world in parenting confidence. Their most significant pain point is a feeling that shared parenting needs improvement – and for the rest of the factors, parents report feeling relatively neutral. They experience quite high levels of pressure and lower financial resilience.

**10 Spain** ranks 10th with a score of 48. While only separated from Romania by one point, the experience of parents in the two countries is very different. Parents in Spain report less satisfaction with supports for working life and fall into the bottom

five for perceptions of having an easy baby and living in a supportive environment. They have a very positive experience of shared parenting and also feel they have access to health and wellbeing resources.

**11 Saudi Arabia** is ranked 11th with 46 points, falling into the bottom five on four key factors: pressure, easy baby, health and wellbeing resources, and shared parenting. While parents in Saudi Arabia report feeling quite satisfied with supports for working life, and that they live in a supportive environment, these do not outweigh the impact of the pressure they feel.

**12 Nigeria** is in 12th place with a score of 44. Parents in Nigeria face high levels of pressure, low confidence in their financial resilience, and a lack of shared parenting. They also feel they lack access to health and wellbeing resources. While they trail only Sweden in feeling positive that they have an easy baby, parents in Nigeria identify many areas where they need more or better support.

**13 Israel** ranks 13th, tied with Nigeria with a score of 44. Their experiences are also very different. Parents in

Israel report some of the lowest levels of pressure (behind only Sweden and Germany) and high levels of shared parenting. However, they have a more neutral overall experience of most factors, feeling less satisfied than other parents about the supports for working life provided and having a supportive environment. Their parenting confidence is also low.

**14 The Philippines** ranks 14th, scoring 43. Parents feel pessimistic in three of the key factors, including experiencing high levels of pressure and low financial resilience. Many report feeling that their baby isn't easy. They also report feeling less satisfied across all of the other factors, creating much room for change.

**15** In 15th position is **Brazil** with a score of 40. Parents in Brazil face challenges with high pressure, low financial resilience, and lack of satisfaction with the supports for working life around them. They also feel that they do not live in a supportive environment. Parents in Brazil do not report high levels of ease in any aspect of their parenting experience.

**16** At the bottom of the ranking with a score of 39 is **China**, where parents report high levels of pressure and low financial resilience, plus a feeling that they do not have access to the health and wellbeing resources they need. However, they do experience some of the highest satisfaction with shared parenting.

There is no significant clustering of countries nor is there any significant correlation between factors that would provide a systematic roadmap for change. What is noteworthy is that each factor is present in every country, making them universal for parents. What differs is how they are experienced – and how strongly – by parents from one country to another.

*The factors are described in the following two chapters.*

## Chapter 2 Summary of Key Findings

Parenting is one of the greatest joys in life – and it is also full of challenges. Parenting is a highly emotional journey, requiring a constant balancing of choices and compromises through moments of joy and pain. Parents do this while also navigating a changing and often unpredictable world.

The age of digital parenting makes information – once only accessible through healthcare professionals – available to parents at the touch of a screen. While this empowers parents, the digital environment can also make life more stressful, especially with the continued rise in online judgment and shaming.

Around the world positive changes are being seen: women are continuing to challenge traditional roles and more women are balancing work with motherhood; same-sex partners are finding greater support as they start their families; and dads are becoming more involved in many aspects of childrearing<sup>2</sup> (although

moms continue to carry most of the childcare responsibilities).

Parents continue to face many challenges however, not least of which is the stress and financial uncertainty from global economic slowdowns and more recently COVID-19.

From navigating societal and financial pressures – to juggling home and work life and building their confidence – parents' experiences are influenced by many things, often beyond their control.

The Parenting Index has uncovered a set of universal factors that impact parenting no matter where they are in the world.

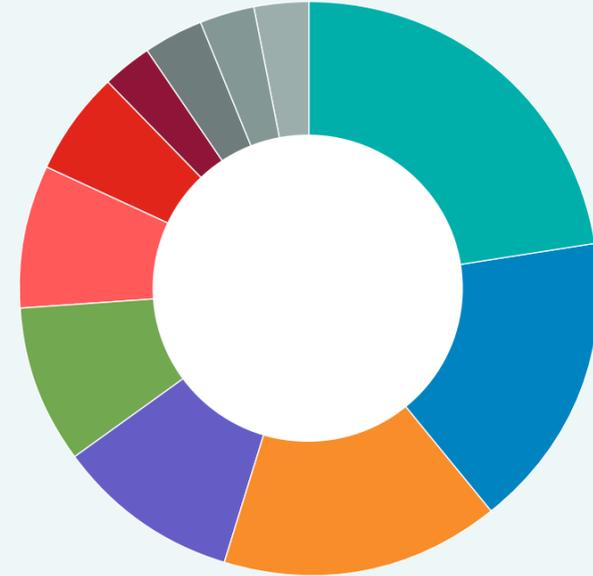
Across the 16 surveyed countries, parents have very different experiences – and all have areas where they experience greater ease and greater challenges. The truth is, there is no perfect place to raise a family (yet).

**The first three factors make up 54.9% of the Index score.** They are the absence of pressure (both internal and external), financial resilience, and supports for working life.

**The remaining five factors identified through the survey contribute 35.6%** – having an "easy baby", health & wellbeing resources, a supportive environment, shared parenting, and parenting confidence.

**The three remaining socio-economic factors explain the final 9.4%.** They are length of paid maternity leave, GDP (PPP) and reverse Gini coefficient.

*Chapter 3 explores detailed findings for each factor.*



- Absence of Pressure
- Supportive Environment
- Financial Resilience
- Shared Parenting
- Supports for Working Life
- Parenting Confidence
- Easy Baby
- Paid Maternity Leave
- Health and Wellbeing Resources
- GDP PPP Per Capita
- Reverse GINI

## The factors impacting parents today

**The highest-ranking factor, Absence of Pressure (Inside and Out), contributes 22.6% to the Index score.** This factor correlates two different kinds of pressure: the internal pressure that parents put on themselves, and the external pressures that come from the world around them. The lower the pressures that parents feel, the higher the country's score. These internal and external pressures have the biggest negative impact on parents around the world and they're something parents have the least control over.

Of the two kinds of pressures, external pressures are by far the stronger. This is true in all countries in the survey except one, Sweden. Parents in Sweden feel internal pressures more than external ones, although this is still at the lowest rate globally.

This factor reflects how stressful it can be when everyone around a new parent offers an opinion on how to raise their child – whether that opinion is asked for or not. Even if well intentioned, when everyone has a point of view, a parent can feel judged, unsupported

and overwhelmed. This is intensified by social media, where online parent shaming has become a serious issue.

Internally, parents report feeling unprepared for the realities of becoming a parent and that they need to make more compromises than expected. Being a parent is more difficult than they thought it would be. Parents envision an ideal, but real life is messier and more complex than anticipated and babies come with their own unique personalities and behaviors. Even though this is a universal experience, new parents – especially moms – take on a lot of guilt, which can have a long-lasting impact.

Sweden (1) ranks highest, reflecting a more relaxed approach to parenting, bolstered by supportive families and a general absence of unsolicited advice. Parents in China (16) report the greatest pressures, in part due to the legacy of the one child policy and the enormous pressures placed on parents to succeed while adhering to close family ties.

**The second most significant factor is Financial Resilience, which contributes 16.7% to the Index score.** This factor is about the capacity of family finances to bear childrearing costs, including the costs of medical care. It is not about whether a family is rich or not, although it is reasonable to assume that those in a more comfortable financial situation will have greater resilience (and those countries ranking lowest broadly have the lowest GDP PPP).

Parents who feel they are relatively stable financially have higher resilience and are therefore less negatively impacted by this factor.

Nigeria (12) ranks lowest here. Nigeria is one of the countries with disparities in wealth distribution within the population. This means the average Nigerian parent may find it more difficult to access basic necessities compared to what is obtainable in developed countries. Brazil (15) also ranks in the lower third in this factor. While the past decade of economic success has brought significant

improvements in poverty reduction, inequality remains at relatively high levels.

**The third factor is Supports for Working Life, which contributes 15.6% to the Index score.** It reflects the impact that Government policy and employment protections (including paid parental leave) plus access to affordable childcare have in enabling parents to stay home or return to work. This is not just about length of parental leave as this factor reflects parents' perceptions of whether they had/have enough maternity or paternity leave before returning to work, if that's what they choose to do.

Parents in Brazil face some of the greatest challenges in this factor. While official paid maternity leave is four months, 41% of the workforce is made up of informal workers with no rights to such leave. This increases the pressure on moms to return to work after the birth of their child. Chile (2) emerges as a top-ranked country in this factor. Since 2011, maternity leave has been

increased by 12 weeks to 24 weeks<sup>3</sup>. During this period, moms receive a state-funded maternity allowance, which provides roughly eight out of 10 women with 100% of their income during these additional 12 weeks.

**The fourth factor is the parents' perception of having an "Easy Baby", contributing 10.1% to the Index score.** When parents feel they have an easy baby that feeds and sleeps well and does not suffer major health issues, they report more positive feelings. Whilst this might appear to be a quantitative measure, the perception of what makes an easy baby varies widely from culture to culture. Nigeria (12) moves into the third ranking for this factor. Regardless of the challenges that parents might face, starting a family is a duty and children are considered a blessing, which means babies are not perceived as being "difficult". China (16) ranks last. Parents in China put intense pressure on themselves to ensure that their child is happy. When the effort made to ensure a child's complete happiness

doesn't result in a baby that feeds and sleeps easily, this could explain why Chinese parents don't feel that they have an easy baby.

**Health and Wellbeing Resources is the fifth factor, contributing 9% to the Index score.** It reflects parents' perception that they have access to adequate healthcare for themselves and their child, including trusted information so they can make confident decisions. This includes whether they feel that they or their partner had easy access to childbirth recovery and postpartum health support, and how happy they feel about their feeding decisions. Parents in Nigeria (12) face greater challenges in this factor. Political instability, corruption, limited institutional capacity and an unstable economy are major factors responsible for the poor development of health services in Nigeria, which may impact how parents feel.

**Supportive Environment is the sixth factor and contributes 8% to the Index score.** It reflects how enabling the environment is for parenting; having infrastructure that makes parenting outside the home possible, in a society with a parenting-

positive attitude. This includes opportunities for social connection through activities and groups and a baby-friendly environment where nursing and changing facilities are available.

**Shared Parenting** is very topical in the media and online today, as new dads move beyond stereotypes of the past to become more equal partners in parenting. While this is a positive development, The Parenting Index found that **this factor contributes only 5.8% of the Index score**, showing that even a complete shift to fully shared parenting has a limited overall impact on the ease of parents' experience. The data also indicates that while collaborative parenting is becoming much more commonplace, moms still tend to experience parenting challenges most deeply, as the main burden/responsibility of most parenting tasks still lies with them. Parents in more traditional societies including Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Mexico report low levels of shared parenting.

**Parenting Confidence contributes 2.7% to the Index score** and represents how parents feel about themselves: their

sense of confidence, satisfaction and resilience when it comes to raising their child and the challenges linked with it. This factor includes perceptions of fulfillment and if parents feel that they always make the best decisions for their child. While important, this factor contributes very little to the Index ranking – reflecting perhaps that parents put themselves last and would consider themselves fulfilled no matter the challenges they face.

The final three external factors explaining the Index ranking are length of paid maternity leave (3.5%), GDP PPP per capita (3.1%) and reverse Gini (2.8%). These are structural factors which reflect the impact of the political environment and global macro-economic dynamics such as the equal distribution of income and wealth.

**MATERNITY LEAVE** **Paid Maternity Leave** is employment-protected leave of absence for employed women directly around the time of childbirth (or in some countries, adoption). The International Labour Organization (ILO) convention on maternity leave stipulates that the period of leave should be at least 14 weeks, but it is currently variable around the world, reaching a high of almost 85 weeks full-rate equivalent in Estonia<sup>4</sup>. The global average is approximately 18 weeks and only one developed country – the United States – has no maternity leave legislation.<sup>5</sup>

**GDP** **Purchasing Power Parity (GDP PPP)**<sup>6</sup> is a measurement of prices in different countries that uses the prices of specific goods to compare the absolute purchasing power of the countries' currencies. In many cases, PPP produces an inflation rate that is equal to the price of the basket of goods at one location divided by the price of the basket of goods at a different location. The PPP inflation and exchange rate may differ from the market exchange rate because of poverty, tariffs, and other transaction costs. PPP exchange rates are widely used when comparing the GDP of different countries.<sup>7</sup>

**GINI** **The GINI index (also called the GINI ratio)**, is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income or wealth distribution of a nation's residents and is the most commonly used measurement of inequality. The Gini index is a simple measure of the distribution of income across income percentiles in a population. A higher Gini index indicates greater inequality, with high income individuals receiving much larger percentages of the total income of the population. Global inequality as measured by the Gini index increased over the 19th and 20th centuries but has declined in more recent years.

The lower the Gini ratio, the higher the score for that factor in The Parenting Index and so the factor is named **Reverse Gini**.

## The Parenting Index

51%

of parents feel intense social pressure on how they raise their babies



43%

of parents believe becoming a parent was more difficult than they thought



32%

of parents feel lonely in the first months after birth



62%

of parents say raising a child has a strong impact on family finances



74%

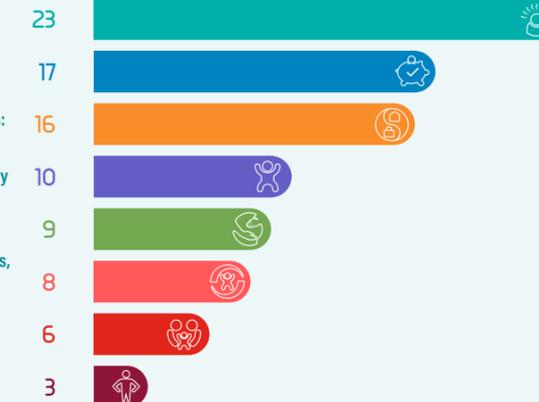
of parents have flexible working hours to take care of their child



## Global view

The Parenting Index derives from 3 questions: all things considered, would you agree that being a parent today is easy?; parenting today is full of challenges I cannot control; all in all, I feel supported in my role as a parent. Whilst the Index can be explained by 11 factors, it is different from the sum of the factors. These include 8 data-driven factors, 3 macro factors and an optimism/pessimism adjustment to reflect cultural differences.

Overall contribution of factors to the Index



Absence of Pressure



Financial Resilience



Supports for Working Life



Easy Baby



Health And Wellbeing Resources



Supportive Environment



Shared Parenting



Parenting Confidence

49%

of parents agree that childcare responsibilities are equally shared in their household



73%

of parents feel well-equipped to make informed parenting choices



25%

of new moms suffer from baby blues



# Additional insights on the ease of parenting

## Flexibility at work is key for parents around the world

While there is no magic formula that will solve challenges for parents, one thing did emerge consistently across all countries.

Parents everywhere reported that having flexibility at work plays an essential role in helping them navigate the parenting journey, and those who said they have this flexibility were also more likely to report feeling a greater sense of ease.

This is a positive finding, as 74% of parents globally report that they have the flexible working hours to allow them to take care of their child.

It is also a reminder that there is more work to do, as 26% of parents do not currently feel satisfied that they have the level of flexibility they need in order to care for their child as they would like.

## Parents staying at home report higher levels of challenges they cannot control

There is no statistical difference when it comes to perceptions of ease and support between parents who work and parents who stay at home. However, parents that stay at home report feeling challenges at a higher level than those who work – stay-at-home parents are more likely to say that parenting is full of challenges they cannot control.

## Parents' support networks can do more to help

When asked what would have helped most at the time their child was born, 45% of parents said that they would have liked more or better support from friends and family. For 44% of parents, greater support from their partner would have made the most difference, while 42% indicated that they would have liked to have this from healthcare providers.

Reflecting on their own role, 37% say that being better prepared in the beginning would have helped the most.

## Trusted sources of information about how to raise their child

For 66% of parents their first stop for advice is doctors, paediatricians and nurses. This is followed closely by mom, mother-in-law and other family members (62%). Parents value the expertise of their healthcare providers, yet they also find reassurance in gaining guidance and wisdom from those they love and trust. 44% of parents say they turn to their partner for advice.

There are some changes to this list though, depending on who is answering. For first time parents, only 41% say they turn to their partner – this rises to 47% after the birth of a second child. Dads are slightly less likely to seek advice from healthcare providers (62%) and family (56%). Instead, 53% of dads say they turn to their partner.

As baby grows beyond six months of age, and parents develop more skills and confidence, they seek their partner's advice less – dropping from 46% to 43%.

Parents also turn to digital sources (blogs, forums and parenting websites) for advice at a global rate of 23%. However, this is widely variable around the world, from a high in China where 49% of parents report relying on digital sources (the only country where this ranks in the top three), to a low in India (2%).

## 'Baby blues' remains a prevalent issue among moms

Globally, 25% of respondents reported experiencing "baby blues" or postpartum depression<sup>9</sup>. Responses by country vary – highest in China (47%), the US (40%), UK (38%) and Spain (37%), and lowest in Poland (6%), Romania (12%), Israel (15%) and Nigeria (16%). The most severe form of this is postpartum depression (PPD), which a recent study estimates is experienced by 17.7% of moms globally. The authors of that study found much of the difference between countries can be explained by economic and health disparities between nations and the level of equality within them<sup>9</sup>.

Parents who report experiencing baby blues were more likely to answer the three central questions in the negative, finding the experience of parenting more difficult, feeling less supported and finding themselves faced with more challenges they cannot control.

## Parenting does not get easier with a second child

The Parenting Index shows that parenting does not become easier with a second child, nor as the baby grows older. First time parents and parents who have two or more children answer the central questions in the same way, with no statistical difference at all. This is also true of parents whose children are still infants and those whose children are older.

While parenting confidence might grow, and parents become more adept at tasks such as feeding, changing and play, the factors which create the greatest challenges are not related to these areas.

Parents, no matter how experienced they are, will still face pressure and judgment and be impacted by the stresses associated with financial resilience, in addition to the need to find a work-life balance. Some of these things may even become more acute as their family grows.

## Chapter 3 The Factors that Influence the Ease of Parenting Today

The responses given by over 8,000 parents from 16 countries to the central questions of The Parenting Index Survey builds each country's score out of 100 and determines its ranking.

To understand the ranking further, the Index can be explained by 11 factors, which contribute to the ease of parenting in each country.

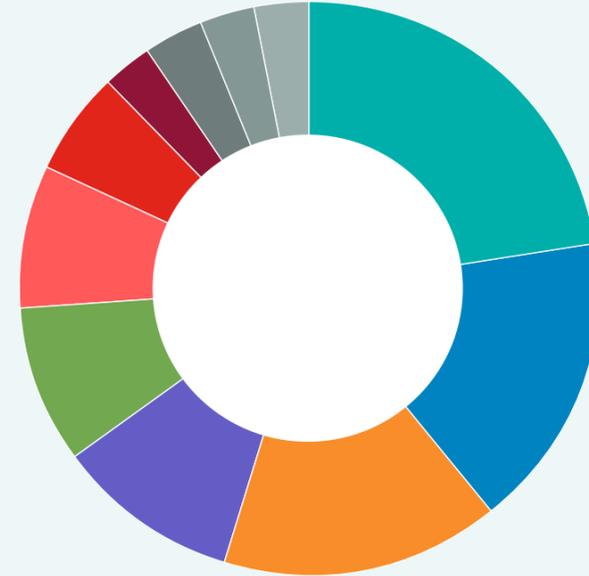
These factors are based on parents' lived experience and perceptions, as well as socio-economic conditions. They help to explain the different country rankings around the world and identify ways to improve the ease of parenting in each country.

They can provide insight into how governments, employers, communities, families, friends and partners might offer improved support for parents in today's changing and unpredictable world.

Three of the factors – length of paid maternity leave, GDP PPP per capita and reverse Gini – are structural factors which reflect the impact of the political environment and global macro-economic dynamics.

Statistical analysis of parents' responses correlates a further eight factors: Absence of Pressure (inside and out); Financial Resilience; Supports for Working Life; an Easy Baby; Health and Wellbeing Resources; a Supportive Environment; Shared Parenting, and Parenting Confidence.

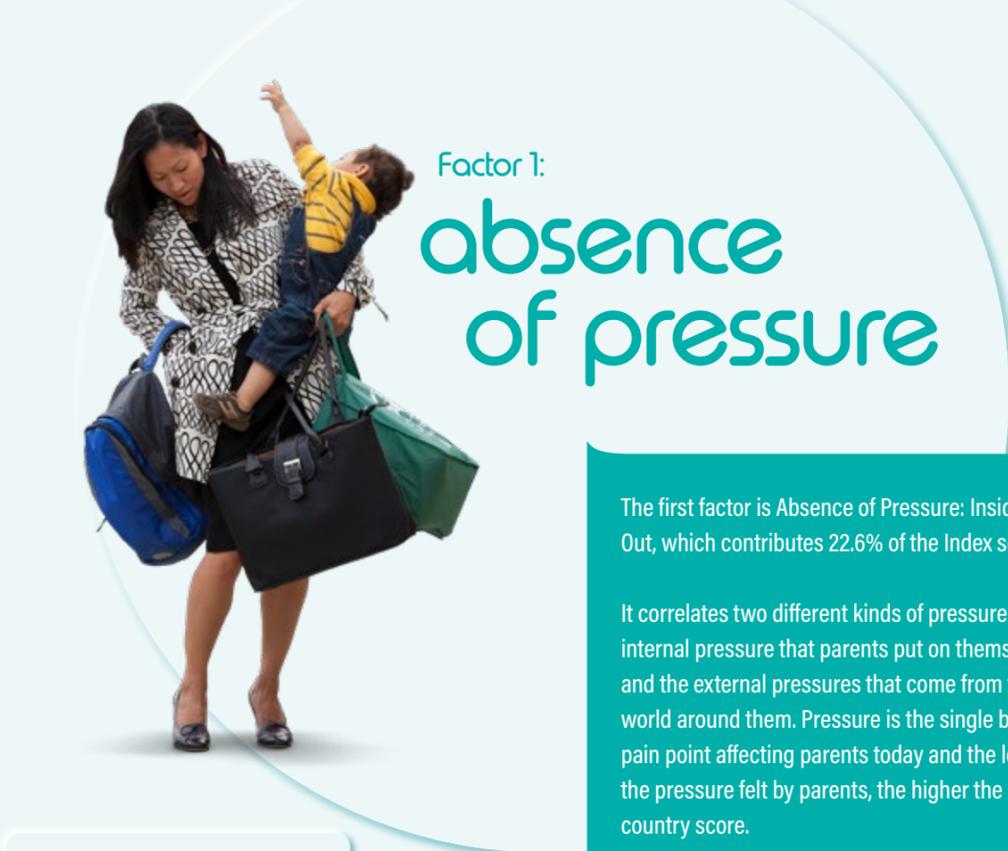
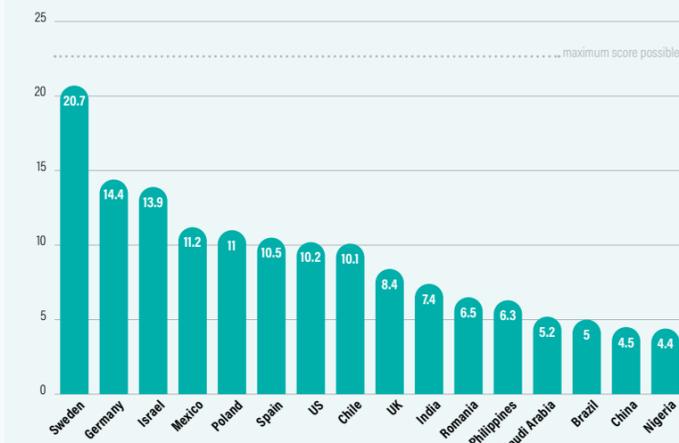
These eight key universal factors arising from the data are the focus of this section of The Parenting Index.



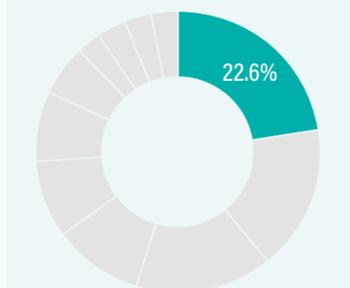
**E**xternal pressures start before a baby is even born. As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, and from the moment a pregnancy is announced, that village raises its voice. Whether advice is asked for or not, it is offered by friends, family, colleagues and strangers. Even when it's well-intentioned, it can be overwhelming. The instinct to offer encouragement and help is wonderful. When it is amplified into a chorus of many voices all offering advice at once, it can be deafening – 60% of respondents surveyed report feeling that everyone has a point of view on how to raise and feed their child, whether they want to hear it or not.

When the advice being offered isn't well-intentioned but instead is given in judgment, it can lead to feelings of stress, anxiety, shame and even guilt – something which moms report experiencing more than dads in The Parenting Index. This is particularly intense on social media, where online shaming has become a serious issue. Overall, parents report high levels of social pressure (51%) and judgment from others (40%). The more common and harmful experience of this comes in the form of judgment from strangers – but sometimes even friends – on social platforms. It has become so commonplace that there are even hashtags for it.

Absence of pressure: factor score per country



Absence of pressure: contribution to the Index compared with other factors



The first factor is Absence of Pressure: Inside and Out, which contributes 22.6% of the Index score.

It correlates two different kinds of pressure: the internal pressure that parents put on themselves, and the external pressures that come from the world around them. Pressure is the single biggest pain point affecting parents today and the lower the pressure felt by parents, the higher the country score.

Of the two kinds of pressure, external pressures are by far the stronger. They have the biggest negative impact on parents, and they're things parents have the least control over.

The Parenting Index shows that parenting decisions that are often seen as contentious and where judgment might be expected – including feeding and childrearing approaches – are not the things that parents perceive as a pain point in themselves.

For example, globally, 69% of respondents report feeling happy and comfortable with their decision on whether or not to breastfeed. However, it's once they've made their decision – irrespective of which choice they make – that they report feeling judged by others. They worry that they can't win, and the judgment they experience causes pain and anxiety.

Parents today hold themselves to high standards, as parents have through the generations. They want to be "perfect" and do everything right for their child. They prepare themselves and their nest in anticipation of expanding their family, yet once the baby arrives 31% report feeling unprepared for the full realities of becoming a parent.

Parents report that they feel shocked by the differences between what they expected and the realities of becoming a parent; 53% say they feel they have to make more compromises than expected, and that being a parent is more difficult than they thought it

would be (43%). This may seem like common sense from the outside – it is not a new story – but for a parent trying

**60%**  
of parents globally believe that everyone has a point of view on how to raise their child



to do everything they can to make their child's life perfect, these feelings have a significant impact.

Parents envision an ideal, but real life is messy, and babies come with their own unique personalities and behaviors. Some parents (32%) -

especially moms - also find that even in a hyper-connected world where friends and family are only a text away, with a baby in their arms they can feel profoundly isolated and lonely.

Even though this is a universal experience, 45% agree that new parents – again, moms in particular – take on a lot of guilt, which can often have a long-lasting impact.

#### Pressure varies from country to country

**In the Philippines (14)**, societal and internal pressure comes as a result of a traditional, collectivist culture, strong family ties, and the demands of balancing childcare and work to help provide and care for the family. Many Filipino parents hold highly traditional values and parenting attitudes and they rely heavily on what they remember from their own childhood or on advice from their parents or older relatives (sister, cousin, aunt, etc.).

Parents in the Philippines are likely to live with extended families. Living in close quarters with older family members ensures the preservation of tradition, family values, respect and obedience to elders, and adherence to habits and practices of the previous generations while getting help in

childcare. At the same time, it can also mean being exposed to a great deal of advice and instruction. Being on the receiving end of the opinions and advice of relatives and feeling affected or pressured by this is typical, and 42% of parents report this is what they experience.

**The pressure that parents experience in China (16)** is different, although also rooted in tradition and family. China's well-known "one child policy" meant that each family could focus all of their resources on that child, but it also brought significant pressure because of a feeling that there was no "other chance". While this policy ended in 2016, its legacy persists. First-time parents raised in the one-child era tend to have high expectations and an entire extended family paying them a lot of attention, creating significant pressure.

Young parents in China are making every effort to help their child succeed in a highly competitive society. They often feel pressure for everything to be "the best" and 71% report feeling intense social pressure on how to raise their child. Consequently, there are huge expectations on the next generation: parents feel pressure to be upwardly mobile and give their children more than they had themselves.

**For parents in Brazil (15)** the parenting journey from discovery of the pregnancy, through the pregnancy and into baby's first years comes with doubts, exhaustion, worries and loneliness, with 50% saying that becoming a parent was more difficult than they had expected. At the same time, paradoxically, this time is also filled with a deep love and sense of intense dedication to their child. Parents' support networks are mainly made up of people and places that support mom (dad remains relatively uninvolved in childrearing responsibilities<sup>10</sup>, although this factor started to change in recent years), including grandmother and other family members, friends and even the internet.

Grandmothers are often a primary source of support in Brazil, and also the main influence on decisions about how to raise their children. In addition to the grandmother, other family members such as sisters, aunts, grandfather and dad also provide support. While these powerful family bonds can give a parent confidence and help, parents also report this as a huge pressure – 71% of parents in Brazil say that everyone has a point of view on how they should raise their child and that they feel intense social pressure.

**Parents in Saudi Arabia (11) also report high levels of pressure when it comes to parenting.** Saudi Arabia is a strong collectivist society, and this comes with pressure to be in line with social norms and the "right way of doing things". Extended families live in close proximity to each other and most new moms stay home during their child's infancy. If they return to work, new working parents face the challenges of being expected to adhere to social norms – being a hands-on mom, putting their child first, being ever-present – all while trying to navigate a career and perhaps the desire to live a more modern lifestyle.

In the case of stay-at-home moms (which 98% of respondents described as a choice, not a constraint), the pressure comes from having to do things or lead a lifestyle that is in line with family norms (often that of the husband's family) which may not be what mom necessarily desires for herself and her child. Whatever pressure a new parent feels is not something that is discussed openly, and new parents may feel isolated as a result, with 41% of parents reporting feeling lonely (11 points higher than the global average).

#### Countries Navigating Pressure

**Parents in Mexico (4) experience less pressure than many of their peers around the world, ranking 4th in this factor.** Only 39% of respondents report feeling intense social pressure about how to raise their child (in contrast with 51% globally), and 31% feel that becoming a parent was much more difficult than they thought it would be (43% globally).

There are a number of potential explanations for this. One is that 70% of moms don't have formal employment in Mexico, so they can focus on motherhood, allowing them to feel good about how much time and attention they are able to give their child. Mexico also has a strong tradition of collective upbringing, where children "belong" to everyone and the village contributes to child-rearing. Extended families are highly valued as positive influences on children, especially grandmothers who often act as a significant support for the wellbeing of both mom and child.

This ranking may also reflect how motherhood has evolved in Mexico for the generation of parents starting families today. Post-millennial women's expectations have evolved towards a more flexible idea of motherhood,

where there are no specific theories to adhere to or milestones to hit, recognizing that not all children are the same and there is no perfect way to parent.

**In Germany (3)** parents have high expectations of themselves, and moms feel social pressure to "get everything right", though at lower levels than many other countries, ranking 2nd in this factor. This includes the expectation that they will arrange baby care so that they can have the best of both worlds – childcare that stimulates their child and success in their working life. Parents in Germany do not report this as a pain point. Instead, they seem to feel prepared to navigate this challenge,

**2 in 5**  
parents in the UK say they have experienced loneliness

**44**  
**444**

with only 22% reporting that becoming a parent was more difficult than they thought it would be. Although the new and unfamiliar experiences of a new baby have also led to 30% of German parents reporting not feeling prepared for the full experience of becoming a parent. And even though they report less pressure, this is still a part of life – and life with a new baby is often completely different from life before children arrived.

**Parents in Spain (10)** benefit from strong family ties – it is a part of the fabric of Spanish culture, where a strong sense of community and connections abide. It is not unusual for children to live at home long into adulthood and only move out of the family home when they get some economic independence, enjoying their new freedoms before starting their own families. While Spain ranks 6th in this factor, 33% of parents report feeling surprised at the difference between what they expected and the realities of parenting, and that they have to make more compromises than they like.

**In the UK (6)**, The Parenting Index shows that 40% of UK parents feel particularly lonely. In the UK there is a broad awareness that loneliness is a serious issue that affects people of all ages and

backgrounds – including parents. There is a national conversation about its impact – including campaigns by high-profile organizations such as the Red Cross<sup>11</sup> and Cadbury's<sup>12</sup> – and a Minister for Loneliness in UK Government. This national conversation has perhaps made UK parents more comfortable acknowledging their feelings of isolation and loneliness – an encouraging step in tackling this issue head on for parents.

**US (5) parents** navigate pressure in 7th position. Parents want their child to "have it all," which can manifest as stress and anxiety, further compounded by pressure from others, which 49% of US parents report experiencing. The prevalence of "helicopter" parenting, especially among wealthier families, demonstrates how parents will do whatever it takes to help their child succeed.

With the rise of social media, US parents are constantly comparing themselves to others, especially online influencers who show the "good" but not always the "real," often leaving parents feeling inadequate. Additionally, social media opens parents up to scrutiny among other parents about their choices, adding to further insecurities of parenting.

**P**arents who feel they can rely on relative financial stability have higher financial resilience and are less negatively impacted. Globally, 62% of respondents agreed that raising a child has a strong impact on their family finances.

While 37% of respondents globally said that the costs of medical care for their child are too high, this is widely variable around the world. From a low of 6% in Sweden to a high of 57% in the US, parents have very different experiences of the financial impact of healthcare for their children. This will reflect the nature of the health system in any given country. A public system that doesn't require payment

at the point of care may give parents more resilience than a private system, where an unexpected illness or chronic condition could bring on high medical bills.

This factor also reflects things that parents cannot control – the global, regional and local economic dynamics that affect employment, income and growth. Parents' perceptions are also likely to be influenced by how stable their employment is. If they are in a low-paying or low-qualification job with few contractual protections and a short notice period, they are perhaps more likely to feel they have fewer protections against unexpected unemployment.

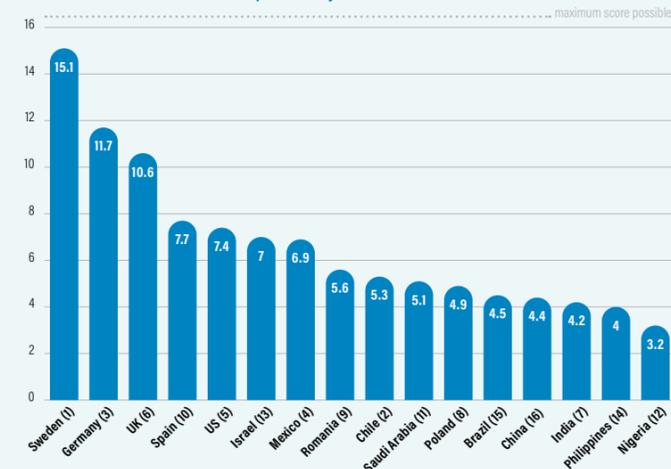
## Factor 2: Financial resilience



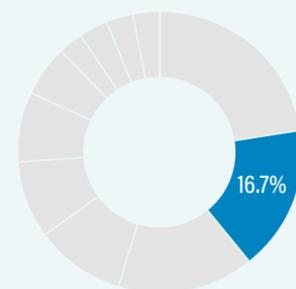
The second most significant factor is Financial Resilience, which contributes 16.7% of the Index score. This factor is about the perceived capacity of family finances to bear childrearing costs, including costs of medical care. It is not about whether a family is rich or not, though it is reasonable to think that those in a more comfortable financial situation will have greater resilience.

The ranking is generally higher in western countries and lower in Asia, South America and Africa. Income per capita (GDP PPP) also positively impacts the Index, complementing what parents report.

Financial resilience: factor score per country



Financial resilience: contribution to the index compared with other factors



This factor also reflects the tension between what parents feel they can afford, and their desire to have a family. Whether a longed-for addition or an unexpected surprise, parents will do anything for the sake of their child – even facing financial hardship or vulnerability.

**Nigeria (12) ranks 27th** globally for its GDP (PPP)<sup>13</sup>; 68% stated that raising a child has a significant impact on their family finances and 43% said the cost of healthcare for their child is too high. Parents starting families today in Nigeria are doing so in a country with one of the fastest growing economies, but yet one navigating the social and cultural impacts of growing urbanization and globalization. With this comes opportunity, but also challenges for the many parents raising families in the current context.

**Parents in the US (5) feel relatively positive about their financial resilience.** At the time of the survey, the US was experiencing record low unemployment and home values and the stock market were at an all-time high. Americans were feeling optimistic about their finances.

According to a study conducted by the USDA in 2015, the majority of child-rearing costs go to food and housing. Although the US has

higher medical care costs than most other developed countries, only 9% of their money is reportedly spent on healthcare for 0 to 2-year-olds. Additionally, nearly all Americans have insurance coverage through their employer, Medicaid, or state programs such as Children's Health Insurance Program & Basic Health Program. Insurance covers many of the child-bearing costs, leaving only a portion that needs to be covered by the family – with 18% of costs going to feeding. There are many programs, such as community food pantries, National School Lunch Program<sup>14</sup>, WIC and SNAP<sup>15</sup>, to support parents.

**Brazil (15) ranks in the lower third** in this factor. While the past decade of economic success has brought significant improvements in poverty reduction, inequality remains at relatively high levels for a middle-income country. The economic crisis of 2015-2016 and poor growth performance in 2017-2019 have had a number of impacts on families, including an increased need for both parents to work or for women to take on the role of head of the household, leaving behind their role as sole caregiver in order to help their family's income.

However, this is not the only challenge that women in Brazil face when it comes to financial stability – they still earn 20.5% less<sup>16</sup> than their male counterparts. On top of their formal employment, women still do more hours of work than men in the home. According to Brazil's official data agency (IBGE), women who are employed dedicate 18.5 hours a week to household tasks, while men who are in this same situation spend only 10.3 hours. The division of household

income is not necessarily reflected in the distribution of domestic tasks.

**Parents in the Philippines (14) and India (7) also feel low levels of financial resilience.** In the Philippines financial constraints are further exacerbated by the economic situation of the country, and most Filipino moms tend to continue working after giving birth in order to help provide for the family and keep them afloat. Moms in this situation fear appearing neglectful of their child,

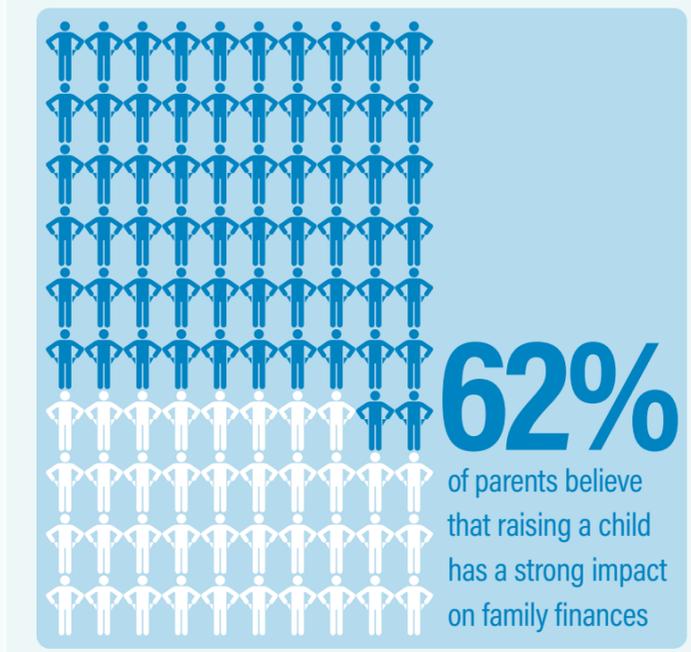
as they struggle to manage their time and address the daily demands of juggling work and childcare.

In India (7) public health expenditure is 1.28% of GDP. Per capita public expenditure on health in nominal terms has gone up from Rs 621 in 2009-10 to Rs 1657 in 2017-18<sup>17</sup>. Many parents turn to private healthcare for their child and this creates higher financial costs and lowers feelings of resilience.

In India, raising children is considered of the utmost importance, and children may be given a higher proportion of essentials – food, hygiene, medical care, schooling, etc. This also creates financial pressures.

**One country where this may be on an upswing is Poland (8)**, where popular changes to government policy have extended child benefits, giving parents 500 PLN/month<sup>18</sup>. This support has changed the socio-economic situation of households with children, and consequently influenced perceptions these families have of their financial situation, supporting people who might otherwise face financial barriers to start a family.

There has been some backlash in social media about this program, with judgments that families are having children just to make the 500+ PLN benefit.



**G**lobally, 53% of parents say they felt they had enough maternity/paternity leave after the birth of their youngest child before returning to work. This differs significantly from country to country, influenced by the regulatory environment and parental leave provisions of employers.

Parents in Israel are the least satisfied (with only 19% agreeing they had adequate leave), which is significantly lower than the next lowest, Spain (32%). This is markedly different from what parents in Sweden experience, with 77% satisfaction.

This factor also includes whether parents were able to find satisfactory childcare solutions and how easy it

was to balance their work and personal lives – to feel that there is time for work, family and themselves. Only 52% of parents globally feel it is/was easy to find a satisfying childcare solution.

Countries with the most positive perceptions of this factor include Nigeria (61%), India (62%), Romania and Saudi Arabia (both 74%). These countries all report strong traditions of multi-generational child-rearing or supports from extended family. However, similar traditions exist in China (42%) and Israel (23%) where parents report significantly lower ease, showing that this is a highly contextual experience influenced by resources, culture and familial pressures.

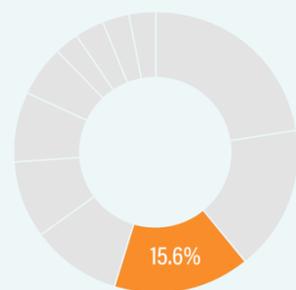
## Factor 3: supports for working life



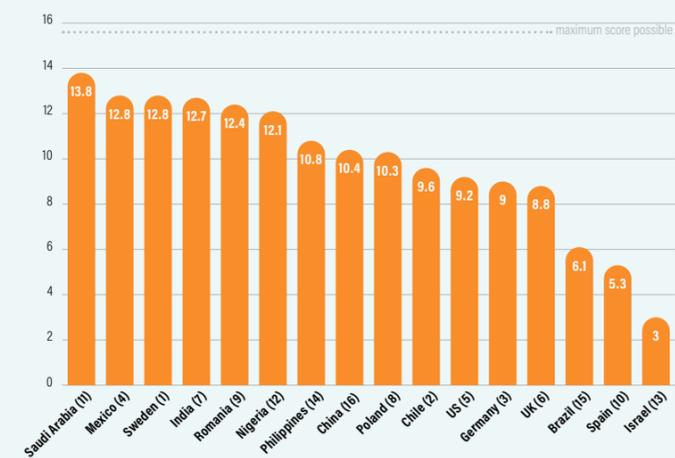
The third factor is Supports for Working Life, which contributes 15.6% of the Index score. This factor reflects the impact that government policy and local employment protections (including paid parental leave) plus access to affordable childcare have in enabling parents to stay home or return to work.

This is not just about length of parental leave. Supports for Working Life reflects parents' perceptions of whether they had/have enough maternity or paternity leave before returning to work, if that's what they choose to do.

Supports for working life: contribution to the Index compared with other factors



Supports for working life: factor score per country



This factor is also arguably the one with the greatest diversity. Returning to work after having a baby is strongly impacted by a wide range of influences including culture, structural issues such as poverty and education, social safety nets including affordable childcare and the financial autonomy of women. With all of this to consider, only 51% of parents globally say they feel it is easy to balance work and personal life.

In the UK, Sweden, Romania, Poland and Germany, moms benefit from the longest leave before returning to work after birth. However, the length of leave itself does not equate to a more positive perception by parents – both Germany and the UK rank in the bottom five of this factor, Poland in the middle at nine and Romania at five. Many other considerations will affect how parental leave is accessed and whether a parent feels satisfied by the length they can take – including family finances, the nature of their work and whether they qualify for full protections – and worries about the impact of a career break.

While no single solution would improve ease of parenting around the world equally for everyone, flexibility at work is a keystone factor which appears to significantly ease the parenting experience. Respondents

who report they have flexibility at work are more likely to agree that “all things considered, being a parent today is easy” and “I feel supported in my role as a parent”.

**Parents in Brazil (15)** face some of the greatest challenges in relation to supports for working life. While official maternity leave is four months, 41% of the workforce is made up of informal workers with no rights to maternity leave. This increases the pressure on moms to return to work after the birth of their child. What's more, it's not unusual for women to lose their jobs shortly after returning from maternity leave<sup>19</sup> (official paid maternity leave is four months in Brazil), while others leave because they're unable to balance the demands of work and childcare.

**India (7) ranks 4th in this factor**, where there have been significant increases to structural protections for moms. The Maternity Benefit Act in 2017<sup>20</sup> increased the duration of paid maternity leave available for women from 12 weeks to 26 weeks. It also added provisions for adoptive moms (of 12 weeks). The Maternity Benefit Amendment Act also introduced a provision to “work from home” for moms, which may be exercised

after the expiry of the 26 weeks' leave period<sup>7</sup>.

The Act also makes crèche facilities mandatory for every business with



50 or more employees. Moms are permitted by law to visit the crèche four times during the day<sup>7</sup>.

From a societal context, in India it is also common for households to include the grandparents. This creates a supportive environment and allows new moms to return to work when their leave ends. The presence of this overall support system (formal and informal) is

perhaps one reason for India's strong ranking in this factor.

**The UK (6)** ranks in the bottom five in this factor despite its developed economy and ranking sixth in the Index. This is perhaps a result of heightened perceptions of the struggle to secure adequate, affordable childcare. In recent years, government programs to subsidize childcare, intended to create more spaces in daycares/crèches, have been controversial and indicate that many parents still struggle to secure a space that is affordable and provides flexible hours of care. A two-child family in England spends an average of 40% of its disposable income on childcare. This may drive women back to work earlier than they wish or result in parents working for longer hours than they'd like, despite the existence of relatively good legal protections for parents.

**For parents in Spain (10)**, parental leave has been a topic of wide political debate during recent years. Maternity leave has been protected at 16 weeks for many years. Paternity leave, however, is being progressively increased from two weeks in 2007 to 16 weeks in 2021<sup>21</sup> when it will be of equal duration to maternity leave. This represents progress in Spain and a profound change in traditional gender

roles. However, maternity leave has not been extended beyond 16 weeks despite public support for change. Parents in Spain, along with China and Israel, have the highest proportion of new moms and dads who are working full-time.

**Israel (13) is another country where parents also feel there is poor support for working life.** There is significant inequality between men and women in the workplace<sup>22</sup> (including in leadership roles, salaries, working hours, etc.). This puts more pressure on women today to achieve career fulfillment and find balance and enjoyment in being a parent.

It is not surprising that **parents in the US (5)** are not satisfied with maternity/paternity leave. The US does not have a national statutory paid maternity, paternity or parental leave. While the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA)<sup>23</sup> enables some employees to take up to 12 weeks unpaid maternity leave, only 60% of workers are eligible. Additionally, FMLA only pays a portion of salary, which not all parents can afford with the added expenses of parenthood.

Roughly 40% of employers offer a corporate paid maternity or paternity leave<sup>24</sup>, although this number is growing each year. The US government

now offers federal employees 12 weeks of paid leave. Other companies are extending the amount of leave offered, though the average corporate paid leave is currently 4.1 weeks<sup>25</sup>.

Still, only 9% of workplaces in the US offer paid paternity leave to all employees<sup>26</sup>, and 76% of fathers are back to work within a week of birth or adoption. US men are more likely to report inadequate paternity leave and have difficulty balancing work/personal life compared to women. This fact alone contributes highly to the inequality of parenting responsibilities between men and women.

**Parents in Germany (3)** also report this as a pain point. Germany is a modern and secure country with a high quality of life. On the one hand there is a wide-ranging safety net of state benefits for pregnant women and parents with a baby. This includes national health insurance coverage, protection against dismissal from the beginning of pregnancy, and parental leave for up to 36 months per parent after birth, of which up to 14 months are covered by a parental leave allowance (the "Elterngeld"). Both parents can divide the period relatively freely between them to care for the baby. Additionally, there is a job guarantee

for moms and dads for the time of their parental leave.

However, there is a strong social expectation that moms take full care of their babies during the first year of life. This means that many women feel they have to put their careers on hold or even permanently trade in their careers for "project baby". Women face the risk of not being able to continue their career with children, with fewer career opportunities, lower income, greater dependence on a partner, and even the risk of pension poverty due to significant gaps in employment. When they do return to work, securing childcare can be difficult, require a long commute and be very restrictive in terms of hours and expense.

**Parents in Sweden (1)** are amongst the most satisfied with supports for working life and more dads and moms report taking parental leave there than in other countries (14% and 60%, respectively), keeping in mind respondents are all parents of babies aged 0-12 months. As in the rest of the Nordics, Swedish income taxes are high compared to most other countries<sup>27</sup>. A large share goes into subsidizing work/life balance at a societal level. Swedish parents are entitled to 480 days of paid parental leave when their child is born. Offering paid parental leave is

one way to enable parents to combine work with family life and as a result Swedish parents are among Europe's most successful in balancing work and family responsibilities.

Maternal employment rates are also among the highest in Europe<sup>28</sup> as the country's family policy is designed to support the dual-income family model and ensure the same rights and obligations regarding family and work for both women and men. Childcare responsibilities are typically shared equally between both parents and dads are generally more active and engaged in childcare than in previous generations. Generous spending on family benefits, flexible leave and working hours for parents with young children plus affordable, high-quality childcare or early childhood education are some of the main things that provide support for working life.

**Chile (2) has emerged** as a powerhouse in Latin America, benefiting from sustained growth and modernization and a more stable market-oriented economy that supports improved education, health and social systems<sup>29</sup>. Younger Chileans are navigating a shift from traditional culture to a more globalized and urbanized life. In 2011, paid maternity leave was increased and

women are now entitled to 30 weeks of paid maternity leave. During this period, moms receive a state-funded maternity allowance. The calculation of this amount actually provides more than 8 out of 10 women with 100% of their income during these additional 12 weeks<sup>30</sup>.

**In Mexico (4)**, recent regulations provide new moms with 14 weeks' fully paid maternity leave, with the possibility of an additional 14 weeks if the mom or child have any medical complications<sup>31</sup>. Mom can take this maternity leave before or after the child is born. There are also strong protections against dismissal for pregnant women. A key influence on this factor in Mexico may also be the presence of global employers, who have parental policies that are more flexible, putting in place parenting plans with greater benefits (aligned to their global company policies) than those provided by the government.

**Saudi Arabia (11)** leads the Index in this factor, perhaps in part because many new moms don't intend to return to work and turn to family structures for support rather than protected parental leave. A recent national drive to encourage more younger women to work in Saudi Arabia<sup>32</sup> is associated with positive sentiments among new

parents and is seen as a strong signal of the opening up of Saudi Arabia to the world. Having set maternity leave mandates in place (among other family-related benefits) provides support to moms who want to plan a career in parallel with motherhood, something that was previously considered controversial and not in line with social norms.

It is also not unusual in Saudi Arabia for new parents to have a helper or nanny at home – ensuring sufficient supports for parenting that allow parents to achieve a greater work/life balance. Additionally, the close proximity of extended family including grandparents to help look after the children also helps new parents to be able to focus on work.

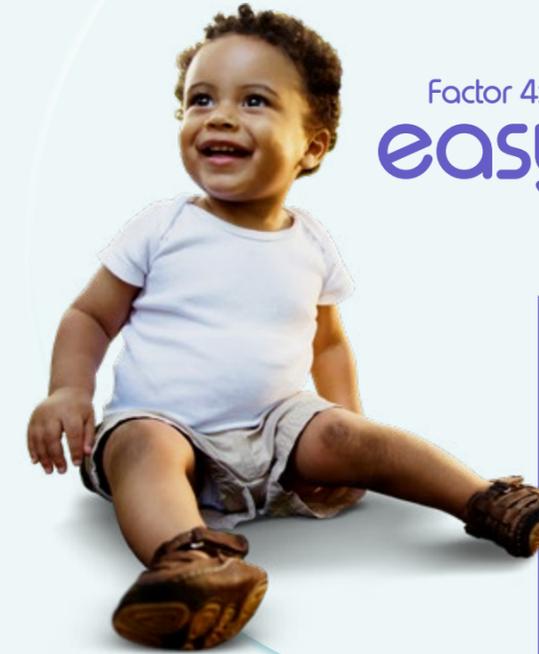
**Supports for working life is the highest of all factors in Romania (9)** where parents feel strongly helped across the board with adequate parental leave, childcare solutions that work for them and a sense of satisfaction with their ability to balance work and personal life. Parents are entitled to as much as two years of leave<sup>33</sup> (mostly taken by moms), plus a minimum level of financial support offered by authorities during the period of parental leave.

**The perception of what makes an easy baby** varies from culture to culture and with parenting experience and confidence. The outlook from parents is largely positive. An average of 77% of parents globally report that their child does not have many health issues (big or small). Parents in Sweden (89%) and the US (87%) feel the most positive, with parents in Mexico (60%) and the Philippines (65%) feeling the least positive – however, this is a relatively consistent experience around the world.

This is also true of perceptions of whether a baby sleeps well – 71% of parents globally think their baby does. Other aspects of having an easy baby

are not so consistent. While a global average of 75% of parents say that feeding their baby is easy, this is true for only 49% of parents in China.

**Nigeria (12)** is in 3rd place for this factor. Having children remains the social norm – children are highly valued in African cultures and Nigeria is no stranger to this. Starting a family continues to be a priority and a social responsibility deeply rooted in culture and tradition. Even as society modernizes, young parents still take this to heart. Regardless of the challenges a parent might face, starting a family is perceived as a duty and children are considered to be a

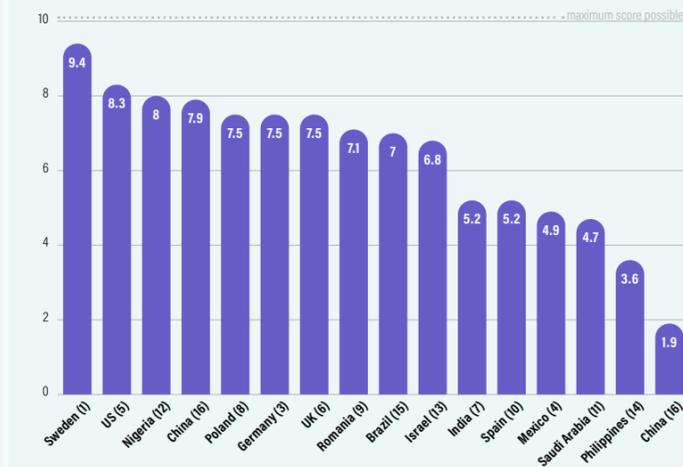


## Factor 4: easy baby

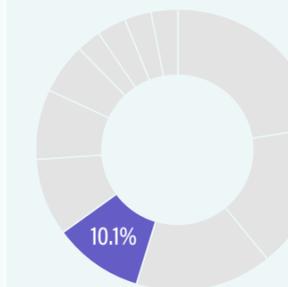
The fourth factor is about whether parents feel they have an "easy baby" or not and contributes 10.1% to the Index score. Unsurprisingly, when parents feel they have an easy baby that feeds and sleeps well and does not suffer major health issues they have higher performance against this factor.

Note that this does not refer to children who live with serious chronic health conditions or are dealing with acute illness.

Easy baby: factor score per country



Easy baby: contribution to the Index compared with other factors



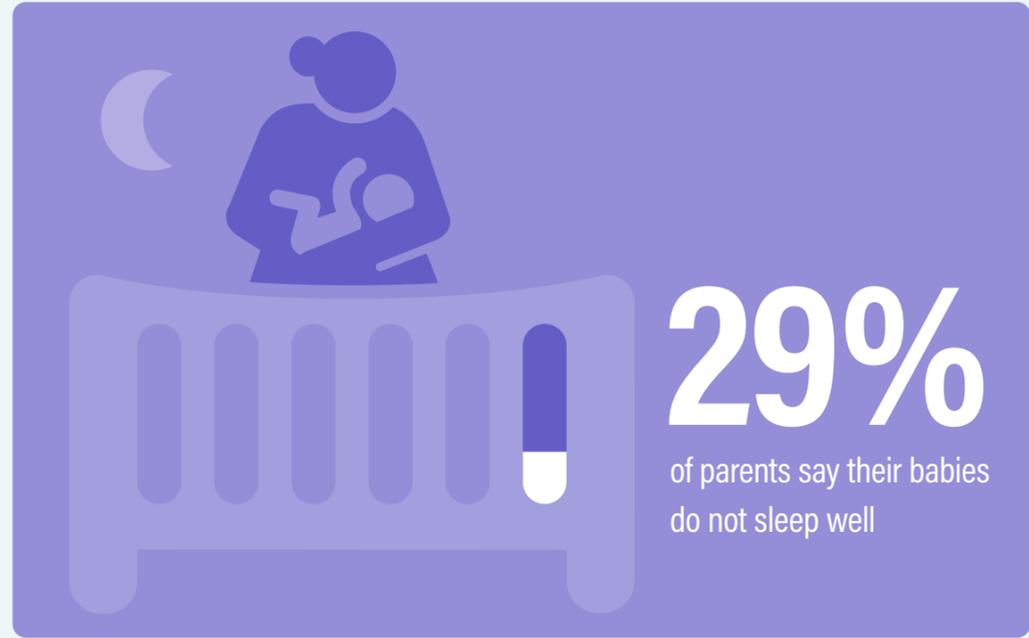
"blessing" and are rarely perceived as difficult.

**Parents in China (16)** put the same cultural value on having children, but for parents there this factor is experienced very differently. Parents in China put intense pressure on themselves to ensure that their child is happy. But feeding and raising a baby is not always easy, and babies cry and fuss regardless of how much effort parents put in. When the effort made to ensure a child's complete happiness

doesn't result in a baby that feeds and sleeps easily, this could explain why Chinese parents don't feel that they have an easy baby.

**Parents in the Philippines (14) place 15th in this factor.** Parents' goal is to have a strong, healthy (not sickly or fussy), happy, sociable, independent, self-reliant, "can-do" child who can learn quickly and figure things out with minimal supervision. They dream of giving their child every advantage – to give them a better, happier, more

comfortable life better than what the parents themselves experienced growing up. For many, financial instability makes it a daily struggle to provide for the family's basic needs (food, house, etc.), and to give their children what they need in order to reach the big dreams they have of having a better life (education, stable job, comfortable life). Parents dote on every nuance of their child's behavior, and this may explain their perception that their baby is not easy.

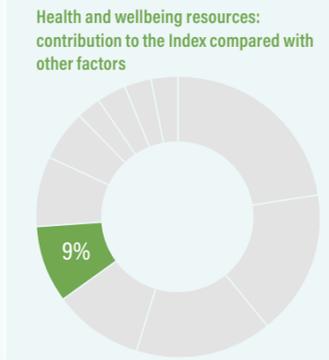
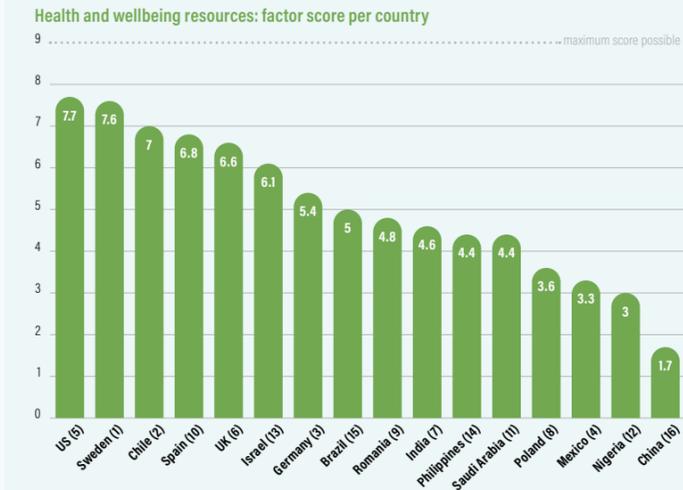


**G**lobal data often focuses specifically on the accessibility (structural or financial) of healthcare systems. The Parenting Index shows that for parents, access to that system is only one aspect of a bigger set of supports they turn to.

The findings paint a positive picture: 71% of respondents to The Parenting Index report that they can easily access adequate healthcare for their youngest child, 68% report satisfaction with levels of postpartum support for themselves and their partner, and 73% say they had access to the information they needed to make the right choices about their child's development and wellbeing.

While doctors, pediatricians and nurses remain the main source of information (66%), 62% also turn to their mom, mother-in-law or other family members and 44% say they rely on their partner for information. When thinking about what would have helped them the most when their child was born, 42% of parents said better support from healthcare providers (doctors, nurses and midwives).

**For Nigeria (12)** healthcare reforms to address public health challenges are in progress but will take time to reach all parents. The low number of healthcare practitioners per inhabitant (0.38 per 1000 inhabitants<sup>34</sup>) forces some parents to opt for paying out-of-



## Factor 5: health and wellbeing resources

Health and Wellbeing Resources is the fifth factor, contributing 9% to the Index score. It reflects whether parents feel they have access to adequate healthcare for themselves and their child, including sources of information they trust as they make decisions for their child.

This factor also reflects whether parents feel that they and their partner had the support they needed through birth and the postpartum period.

pocket for private healthcare services that are quite expensive, making health a stress factor for them. Additionally, parents may feel a lack of access to trustworthy information for health-related matters.

**Parents in Poland (8)** indicate they feel a lack of access and support when it comes to health and wellbeing resources. They face a dual health system, including a public system which most parents use, which is perceived as "behind the times" in how it approaches parenting, perhaps adhering to out-of-date knowledge. In this public health system, there is also a perception of what is called "daily kindness" – people feeling that doctors are unsatisfied, underpaid, and don't enjoy their work, and as a result are not as kind and empathetic as they might be. The private system can be expensive – and therefore a barrier to many parents – but there is a perception that patients with private healthcare are more satisfied.

**Mexico ranks 14th in this factor,** reflecting access to these supports and the infrastructure challenges that exist away from urban areas. However, the government has recently launched The Health Institute for Wellbeing (INSABI) to benefit as much of the population as possible to increase Social and Health security access.

Mexico also has the highest number of teenage pregnancies amongst OECD countries<sup>39</sup> and a high prevalence of unplanned pregnancies, which has led to the development of a national strategy for the prevention of pregnancy in teenagers. Both of these issues could lead to a sense of being overwhelmed, and may leave parents feeling unsure of who or what to rely on when making decisions.

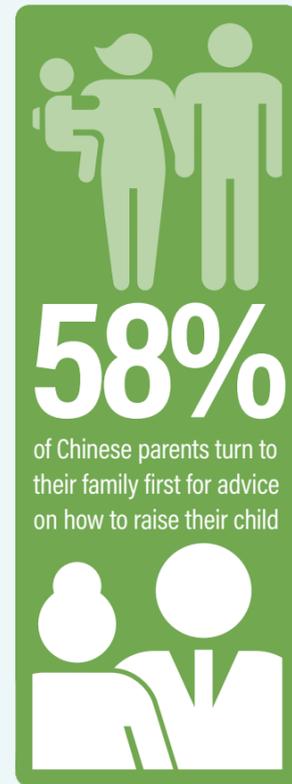
**In the UK (6) parents feel quite positive about this, ranking 5th in the factor.** The UK National Health System (NHS) provides comprehensive public healthcare for all families and for most routine pregnancies women will be under the care of a midwife and their GP (primary care doctor). All moms-to-be are offered two scans, one at about 8-14 weeks and another at about 18-21 weeks as well as a host of different screening and blood tests. Parents will also be offered antenatal classes, which cover creating a birth plan, staying healthy during pregnancy and looking after and feeding the baby.

Over 95% of births take place in an NHS hospital<sup>39</sup>, and women have the right to choose what kind of birth center they wish to use, although in more rural areas there may not be much of an option. All four countries of the UK have or are implementing

the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative. The length of time mom and baby stay in hospital has been decreasing, and they will usually go home between 6-24 hours after an uncomplicated birth. This is the shortest stay of any developed country. Midwives and then health visitors will make a number of visits to check on both mom and baby (though recent cuts in services and then COVID-19 have created more restrictive access).

**China (16)** may be significant in terms of total GDP and population, but GDP per capita is relatively low and so is the average level of healthcare support<sup>38</sup>. As children are so precious to their families, they are taken to large hospitals instead of community ones even for minor medical issues because parents want access to the "best" doctors. China is the one country where respondents say that their first choice for advice on how to raise their babies is their own family – putting their mom, mom-in-law and other family members (58%) over healthcare professionals (54%). It is also the only country where digital sources (mom blogs, forums and parenting websites) are one of the top three sources of advice, with 49% of moms turning to them. While in some ways this makes it easier for parents to access information, it can also cause

parents to feel overloaded by too much and sometimes conflicting information. **For parents in Brazil (15)**, this factor is one of the areas where Brazil moves out of the bottom five, climbing to 8th position. Health and wellbeing support for their children is one of the main concerns for parents in Brazil, which had one of the worst infant mortality rates in the OECD in 2019<sup>39</sup> and the highest birth rate of underweight



babies (8.5% of children born in the country). Brazilians are also among those who have the least time with healthcare professionals, with fewer than three consultations per year.

While Brazil has one of the most inequitable distributions of income in the region with significant gaps in its public systems, it is considered the largest health system in the world<sup>40</sup>. At the same time, most middle-income families have health insurance that enables access to private healthcare. This reality is perhaps what has been giving parents in Brazil greater confidence in health and wellbeing supports.

However, there is emerging evidence that this may not be sustainable, as Brazil closed 2019 with a 17% increase in medical inflation. This percentage is equivalent to five times official inflation and the fourth highest per capita inflation in health systems globally.<sup>41</sup>

**This includes opportunities** for parents to participate in social activities and make connections through activities and groups, participating in society and feeling connected. Globally, 57% of parents say they can easily access special parent/baby activities if they want to (such as friendly-family parks or classes).

The majority of parents globally (71%) feel that they are connected to the people around them, belonging to a group of friends, family and/or neighbors.

This factor also includes living in a baby-friendly environment where nursing and changing facilities are available, which only 47% of parents

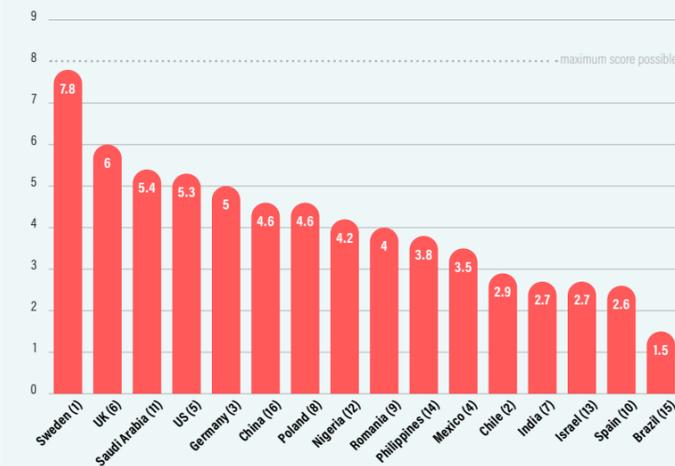
globally agree they have access to. And only 57% of parents agree that it is or feels comfortable for a mom to breastfeed outside the home.

**Parents in Spain (10) face many challenges when it comes to a supportive environment.** Although the everyday environment is improving, there is a sense that Spain is perhaps not progressing quickly enough. The social environment around new parents provides few amenities for childcare. It remains unusual to breastfeed out of home – breastfeeding rooms can be hard to find, even in workplaces.

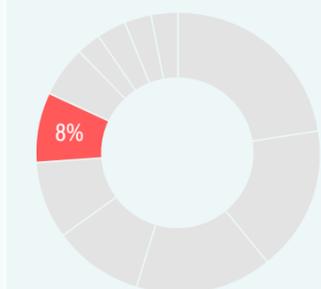
This creates barriers for parents, especially in a country where socializing out of the home is part



Supportive environment: factor score per country



Supportive environment: contribution to the Index compared with other factors



Supportive Environment is the sixth factor and contributes 8% to the Index score. It reflects how enabling the environment is for parenting; how parents feel about their access to the infrastructure that makes parenting outside the home possible, in a society with a parenting-positive attitude.

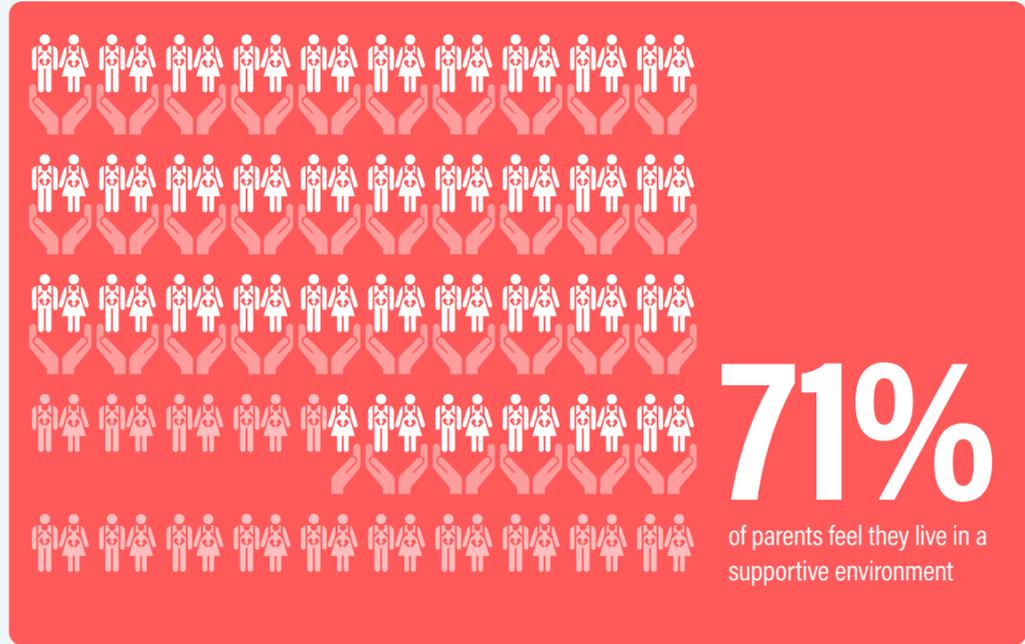
of the cultural DNA. The current generation of parents is advocating for change, and thanks to social media and its ability to mobilize, there is a sense that perhaps progress is at hand.

**In the US (5) parents feel generally positive about living in a supportive environment.**

The US has increasingly become "baby friendly". In 2007, less than 3% of US births occurred in approximately 60 Baby-Friendly designated facilities. In 2018, these numbers have risen to more than 25% of births in more than 500 Baby-Friendly designated facilities<sup>42</sup>. Breastfeeding rates are also rising due to increased support for moms. Nursing rooms or "pods" are popping up in airports, offices and other public facilities. It has become increasingly less "taboo" to breastfeed in public thanks to advocates, including celebrities and influencers.

The US has many popular free or low-cost programs for children, such as nice parks/playgrounds, story time at libraries, and more. Additionally, parents can easily find mommy groups for support on social platforms or through local communities, so they don't have to feel they face parenting alone.

**Parents in Sweden (1)** report by far the most supportive environment



for parenting. The Nordic family-focused view contributes to this, making parenting outside the home easy and doable. As many Swedes highly value outdoor activities<sup>43</sup>, having child-friendly facilities such as easy access to parks and playgrounds helps families plan activities with their children. Dining and transport providers are mostly well-adapted to accommodate families and there are nappy-changing facilities in most toilets (both men's and women's).

**This is one of the strongest factors for China (16).** Public facilities and supports such as playgrounds and early childhood education experiences are getting more and more accessible in China. The previous one-child policy led to a generation of only children and as a result, young families today get support from their own extended families on both sides which creates a strong sense of connection and helps them to engage in social opportunities. What's more, as women

leave traditional roles behind, they are more proactive in seeking out the company of other new moms to share experiences, tips and support.

**O**f all respondents, 62% believe that dads are more active and engaged in childcare than previous generations. There is room for growth in this area, as only 49% report that childcare responsibilities are equally shared between mom and her partner.

This factor may also reflect changing family structures, with more same-sex couples parenting<sup>44</sup> and more children growing up in multi-generational family homes than a generation ago, with role models across the gender spectrum<sup>45</sup>.

However, two things are important to note:

First, this factor contributes only 5.8% of the Index score. Even when

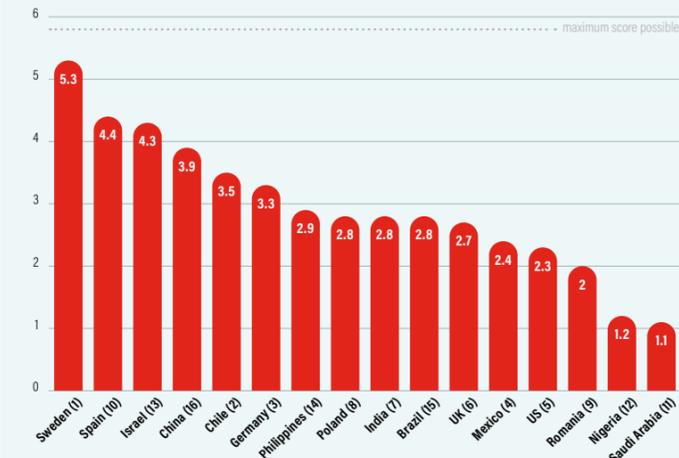
parenting duties are completely shared, this has a limited overall impact on the ease of parents' experience.

Second, although collaborative parenting is becoming much more of a norm in the changing parenting landscape, the research tells us that moms still experience parenting challenges most deeply. While 73% of parents agree that their partner is very much involved in childrearing and 64% consider their partner to be very much involved in caring for the household, moms are more likely than dads to feel that parenting today is full of challenges they cannot control.

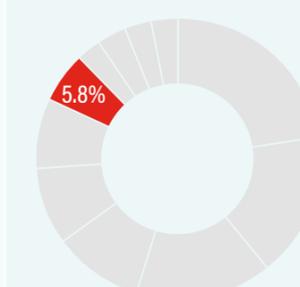


Factor 7:  
**shared parenting**

Shared parenting: factor score per country

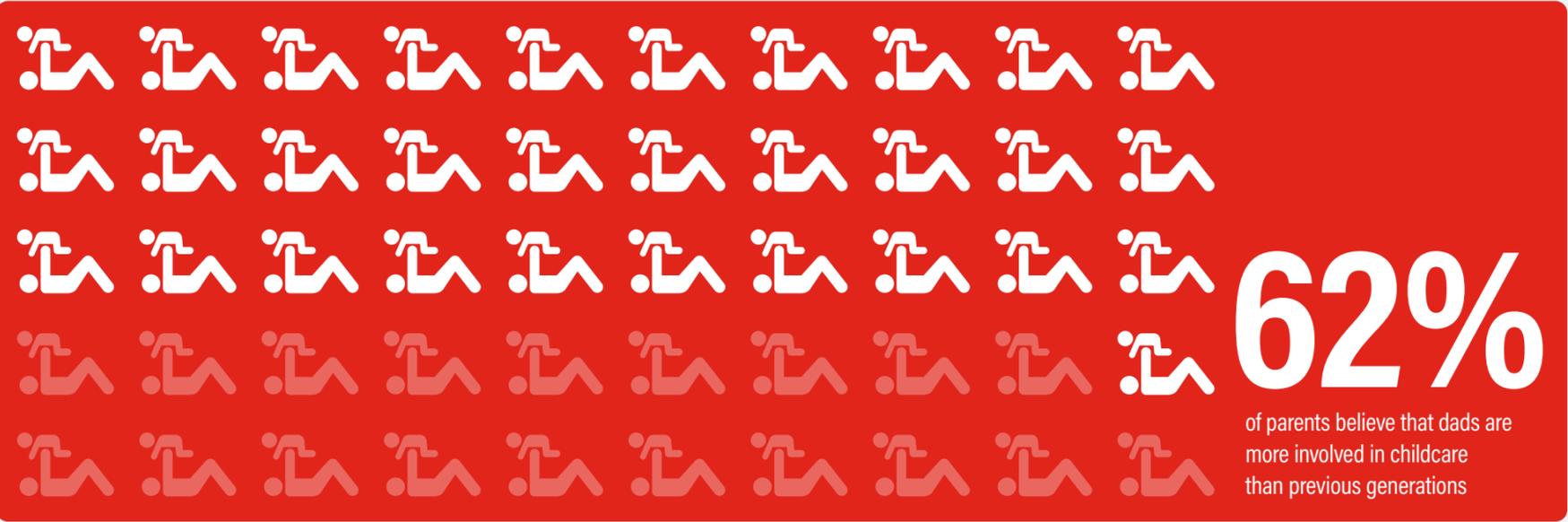


Shared parenting: contribution to the Index compared with other factors



Shared Parenting contributes 5.8% to the Index score, and is a topic that is often in focus in media and social channels today, as new dads move beyond stereotypes of the past to take on a bigger share of parenting responsibilities. Having an equal partner in parenting makes a positive impact, so this is certainly a change in the right direction.

This factor reflects that dads are becoming more involved and emotionally engaged in parenting decisions and responsibilities and taking on childcare duties is a growing part of their role and identity.



This should in no way minimize the value of having an active, involved partner in the parenting journey. As moms juggle career and parenting responsibilities with the challenges this can bring, an involved partner can provide support and care, enabling her to pursue her objectives without barriers.

**In Nigeria (12),** where there remains a clear division of parenting roles, parents do not report a positive experience of shared parenting. While childrearing is seen as a shared responsibility of the extended family,

even if fathers are getting more and more involved, they are not held to the same standards and moms are almost always the primary caregivers. This is also highly influenced by patriarchal attitudes that remain rooted in the culture.

**In Chile (2),** there is a feeling of more equal distribution of household roles, including parenting, which is reflective of the increasing number of working moms in today's culture. Young men are becoming more active as parents, but there is a sense that they still consider themselves more

of an assistant to mom than an equal caregiver. In reality, dads' participation in parenting is limited, particularly when it comes to activities such as caring for sick children, cooking and laundry.

**Dads in Mexico (4)** only have access to five days' paternity leave. This is a signal of the current state of shared parenting – there is a long way to go. Dads aren't particularly as involved in housework and childcare as mom and are mainly seen as family providers and protectors rather

than responsible for raising and feeding children.

**In Romania (9), shared parenting** is also something that many parents feel is a long way off. Respondents did not see an improvement compared to older generations, with half feeling that their partner is less involved in raising the children and talking care of the household. Dads are typically more likely to work, with moms staying home to care for young babies. Cultural habits acquired from older generations play a significant role, with dads remaining less involved in childcare

than with providing financial support for the family.

**For parents in Germany (3),** caring for the family and housework is still mainly mom's work – in addition to her day job. The imbalance is also reflected in parental leave take-up rates amongst dads. When dads do take parental leave – and about 50% choose to do so – this will typically only be the amount specifically identified as paternity leave (two months) and not sharing the broader parental leave allowance, while moms usually take 12 months.

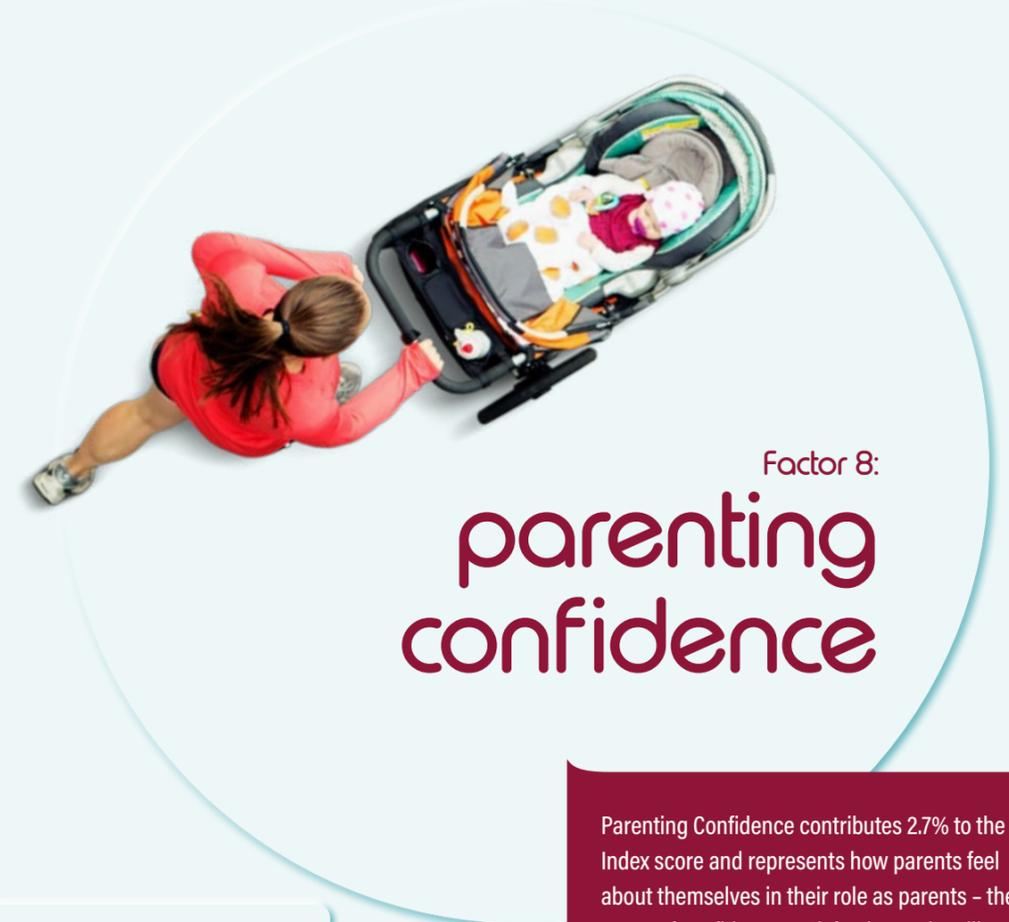
**W**hile this is important, this factor contributes a small amount to the Index ranking (2.7%). Perhaps this reflects the fact that parents tend to put themselves last and would consider themselves fulfilled no matter the challenges they face.

When it comes to parenting confidence, the findings of The Parenting Index are broadly positive: 80% of parents report feeling completely fulfilled as a parent. With all the challenges, stresses, unexpected changes and surprises parenting can bring, the majority of parents say they feel in good physical and mental health (72%) and an equal number say they feel they always take the best decisions

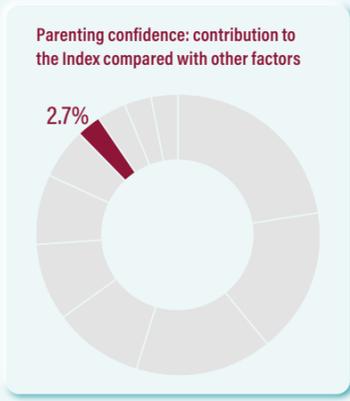
when it comes to their child. While there is room for improvement, parents generally report feeling confident.

**Parents in Nigeria (12) have broadly positive feelings of parenting confidence.** Culturally, parenthood is considered to be one of the most important and respected social roles. Having children remains rooted strongly in tradition, and parents feel a sense of strong purpose and achievement when they start their family.

**Moms in Chile (2)** are very confident and this self-confidence grows as they experience motherhood. Motherhood remains a strong anchor of female identity for those who choose to



Factor 8:  
**parenting confidence**



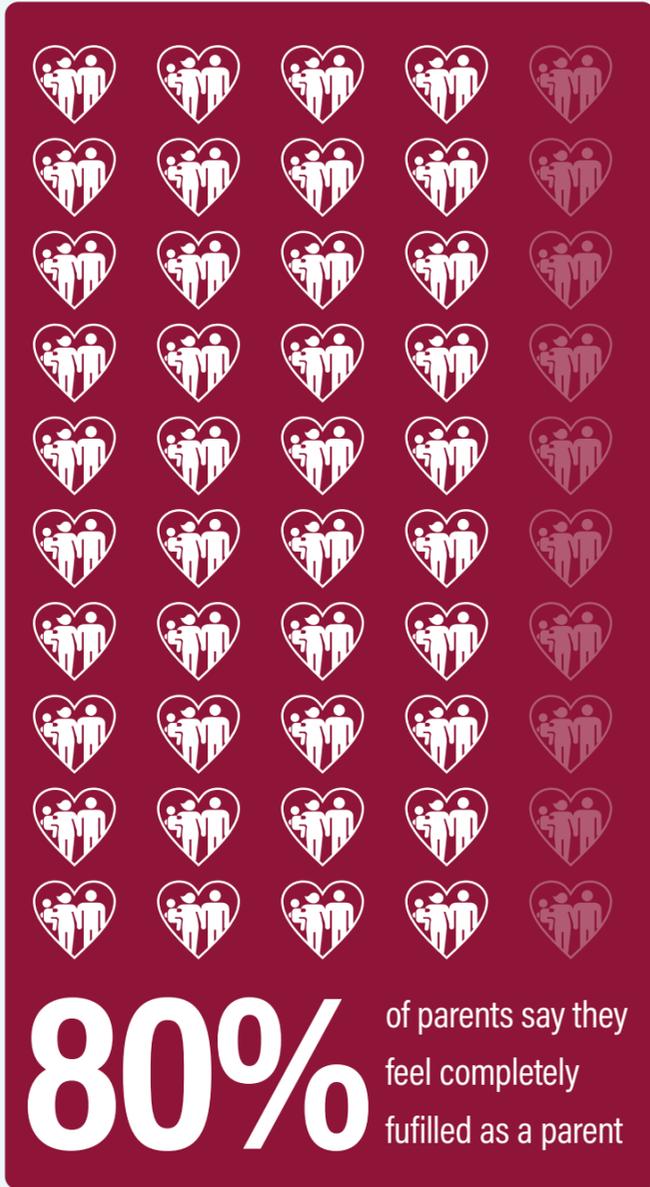
Parenting Confidence contributes 2.7% to the Index score and represents how parents feel about themselves in their role as parents – their sense of confidence, satisfaction and resilience. This factor includes perceptions of fulfillment and whether parents feel that they always take the best decisions for their child.

have children and their experience as moms validates this even further. Moms in Chile often see parenting as their sole responsibility, staying at home to take care of their children. Some traditional families see paid work as something secondary and not part of what shapes their identity.

**Parents in Romania (9)** rank highest across all countries studied for parenting confidence. This may be explained by their satisfaction in being able to access the information, education, and childcare solutions they want, as well as improvement of the living standards of some of the parents.

**For parents in India (7)** the traditional family structure and well-connected community help parents develop confidence. In part, because they rarely experience isolation post birth as they are always surrounded by someone to share their personal experiences with and to learn from – 77% of parents in India rely on their partner for advice and 76% on their family.

**In the Philippines (14)**, parents are comfortable and confident in their parenting decisions, which are grounded in tradition and family values. Despite financial and economic difficulties, Filipino parents are relatively confident in their parenting



skills and the upbringing of their children. This could be down to the upholding of traditional family values, characterized by a culture of respect, believing that older family members are always right and sticking with how things have always been done .

**Despite Sweden (1)** having a very parenting-positive attitude there are some important differences in how well supported Swedish parents are compared with how they feel about themselves. Swedes, to a large extent, question their own decision-making when it comes to parenting. Regardless of how much of a support system is in place, Swedish parents are at times overwhelmed and feel inadequate in their parenting roles.

With confidence levels at the bottom of the global scale, it is likely that expectations about being a parent are not always matched with the reality and the image of the perfect parent seeds feelings of self-doubt. Comparing one's self or one's child to the seemingly perfect lives of others adds to feelings of insecurity. As Swedes are among the heaviest users of social media, being surrounded by so much information can end up causing parents to experience stress and anxiety, clouding their confidence and trust in their abilities.

**In Israeli (13)** society, becoming a parent and raising a family is a social role seen as the highest of callings. Accordingly, the birth rate in Israel is the highest among OECD members, and currently stands at 3.1 children per woman on average<sup>46</sup>. Unlike other developed countries, where there is an inverse proportion between education and birth rate, in Israel those two trends go together, which leads to a higher proportion of children who are born to older and more academic parents (compared to other OECD countries<sup>47</sup>).

Alongside this, young parents in Israel are ambitious and have high self-expectations that they should excel at both parenting and their career, putting significant pressure on them. Together with low work/life balance, the effect on parenting confidence can be significant.

## Chapter 4 Understanding Parenting Pressures

The factor that has the most impact on parents is how much pressure they experience – both the pressures that come from the world around a parent, and the internal pressures they put on themselves. The absence of pressure provides ease to parents, yet in every country surveyed parents feel it to some extent.

Wherever a country ranks in The Parenting Index, pressure is something all parents experience in small or large doses – and it's something they have very little control over. Parents are impacted in many ways that can make their parenting journey challenging and emotionally draining. The impact of pressure is very real, and these stories bring those experiences to life.



A zillion comments from random strangers is EXACTLY what I needed.

### The Voice of the Village

As the saying goes, it takes a village to raise a child, but these days “the voice of the village” can often be overwhelming and stressful for new parents. Although friends and family may provide a strong support network, new parents can often feel barraged by a chorus of opinions on how to raise their baby. The same is true for those outside the couple's immediate circle – with everyone from colleagues to complete strangers ready to offer their unsolicited advice.

It is no surprise that childrearing strikes a universal chord with the general public. In the simplest terms, children represent our future – and offering advice is a way to help steer new parents around everyday pitfalls. Advice is given as a way to nurture the child, and by extension, the community, which can often be amplified during times of crisis and civil unrest. At its core is an instinct to look out for one another. This can be a welcome source of comfort for young moms and dads new to the day-to-day of parenting. That being said, advice can also have the opposite effect in any given situation.

Metaphorically speaking, parenthood is a journey, and as with any journey, it takes time to find one's stride. New parents may struggle between feelings of having to figure things out on their own versus reaching out to others for help, whether that's just a temperature check

“Metaphorically speaking, parenthood is a journey, and as with any journey, it takes time to find one's stride.”

on how they're doing, an extra set of hands, or an actual how-to for handling a new situation. When the advice is sought after it can be received as an act of love and generosity. But then, not all advice is asked for.

Receiving unsolicited advice from the community can create a type of crowd-induced stress that varies from country to country and culture to culture. In China, parents feel significant pressure to succeed while adhering to close family ties – while contending with a legacy of tiger-mom-style parenting. Enormous expectations are placed upon new parents, whether it's about keeping to the same social class or moving to a higher one. This pressure comes not only from inside the extended family unit, but as a form of rivalry with other parents competing to surpass one another. As one popular Chinese slogan goes, “Do not let your children lose at the starting line.”

Sweden, on the other hand, has a far more relaxed approach to parenting, bolstered by supportive families and a general absence of unsolicited advice. Yet despite a parenting-positive attitude there are some striking differences in how Swedish parents feel supported by their community versus how they feel about themselves. When it comes to things like personal confidence, satisfaction and resilience, Swedes often question their own decision-making. This could be because their expectations of being a parent might not meet their reality, and the image of the "perfect" mom or dad is causing them further doubt.

Global economic superpowers like the US, Germany and the UK tend to benefit from less stressful parenting environments, with young moms and dads feeling a greater sense of agency. Although a direct correlation hasn't been shown, there are parallels that can be drawn between lower-stress parenting cultures and countries that tend to have higher household incomes and greater access to education and childcare.

Where Swedes and Germans show some of the lowest rates of parenting stress, Brazilian and Chinese parents see some of the highest – with Saudi Arabian parents experiencing some of the greatest burdens of social pressure and shaming. The need to fall in line with social norms and the "right way of doing things" is rooted in the culture's collectivist society in Saudi Arabia, driven by deep social norms and extended families living within close proximity. New working parents must still adhere to strict social expectations around family, and stay-at-home moms are expected to adopt the family norms of the husband's family, relinquishing any sense of autonomy.

In countries like Saudi Arabia, Poland and Mexico, where the act of parenting falls entirely on the shoulders of one partner, most notably the mom, the pressure to "succeed" can be especially intense. Conversely, sharing responsibility between partners can alleviate that sense of pressure if only for the fact that the pressure is shared.

Regardless of culture, it could be said that a community's overwhelming interest in the day-to-day of parenthood is simply a testament to how much people care about the wellbeing of a child. But it's important to remember that not all advice is the right advice. Every baby is different, and so is every household. What works in one may have the opposite effect in another. Rather than offering opinions on what should be done, simply showing support – being present and available – can help young parents feel like they have room to navigate the journey in their own way, mistakes and all, with the confidence of a supportive network ready to lend a hand.



**"But it's important to remember that not all advice is the right advice. Every baby is different, and so is every household."**



A night out? Yes, I'm free on Saturday – in about 6 months' time...

### Loneliness in a Connected World

The birth of a child is a profoundly joyous occasion in parents' lives. For those around them there's a general sense that all is good, and despite some challenges the new parents are doing just fine, invigorated with a renewed sense of purpose. But while the child may bring a bright new dimension to their lives, the months following the baby's birth can often be some of the loneliest and most isolating.

Bringing a child into the world can foster a deep sense of collaboration between the expecting parents, but once the baby arrives, the realities of caring for the child and financially supporting the family become the new priorities. Often, these are pursued in a "divide and conquer" approach where one partner takes on the responsibility of childcare while the other returns to work. In a way, this could be seen as a continuation of the collaboration forged during the pregnancy; the reality, however, is that each of these roles can be isolating in its own unique way. Although an encouraging shift is happening with

more dads and partners staying home to care for the baby, in countries across the globe it's still primarily the moms who are home alone in the first month after birth, experiencing the highest levels of loneliness.

For the partner providing the childcare, life quickly becomes all about the baby, with little to no room for their own life, social or otherwise. At the same time, the working partner may feel cut off from the nurturing routines of parenthood and the baby's development. In each scenario, the parent is faced with his or her own feelings of isolation and loneliness, which can be hard to see from the outside looking in.

New parents often make a show of happiness and contentment to those around them, whether to manage people's perceptions, or to ward off their own insecurities. It can be difficult to get new parents to communicate how they truly feel, even with close family and friends. Many fear they'll seem inadequate, or ashamed about making the experience about them and not solely about the baby.

New moms often find themselves in a "loneliness paradox" – an overwhelming feeling of loneliness with a beloved baby in their arms. Cooped up at home with little to no interaction with anyone but the child, a new mom may feel as though she's lost her own identity – as a woman, a friend, a partner, and a professional – forced to make compromises she never saw coming. New moms can also experience baby blues, postpartum depression and loneliness, which can only amplify these feelings of disconnection and isolation.

For many new parents, the only way to participate in the world outside the home is through social media. While these platforms offer a way for new parents to remain connected with friends and family, they can also be a sobering reminder of their former lives and freedoms, before they were inundated with responsibilities. Every post from a friend – a get together, a work event, a vacation photo – becomes a double-edged sword, sparking a complex feeling of connection and disconnection all at once. The isolated parent may feel like a rift has formed between their old life and the new, accompanied, perhaps, by a crisis of identity – "I used to be so outgoing and fun. Now I'm just a robot stuck in the house."

But that's not to say social media is the only culprit. New parents can feel out of step the moment they leave the house, attempting to engage with an outside world that seems to be bustling along without them. Keeping up with friends, the news, pop culture – all of these things beg for time they no longer have. It can make parents feel like no one around them understands them and what they're going through. What's worse, these feelings of isolation can make people sink inward rather than reaching out for help.

**"Everywhere they turn, from a grocery run to scrolling through social media, young parents are constantly observing the abilities of other parents."**

Suffering some of the highest rates of loneliness, the UK has adopted a very public and active anti-loneliness initiative, promoting an openness around the subject and encouraging people to talk about it. They've even appointed a Minister of Loneliness to spearhead the movement.

Saudi Arabia is another country experiencing high levels of loneliness, especially with moms expected to stay home with their young children, essentially cutting them off from any type of social life or feeling integrated within the larger community. In China, new moms are expected to submit to a "one-month confinement" directly following the baby's birth in which they're not allowed to leave the house, see visitors, or engage in any activity outside of caring for the child – not even showering.

Conversely, in Spain – where shared parenting is more of a norm – young parents seem to have far less trouble with loneliness, if only because they're managing the responsibilities together. Spaniards feel deeply tied to their communities even as they transition into parenthood. Having a child doesn't separate them from their social lives – if anything, the child is simply an extension of the couple, seamlessly incorporated into their daily lives.

Today, as the world adopts a more mindful view of mental health, managing loneliness is at the heart of the effort. Although some countries like Nigeria are still working through cultural stigmas around loneliness and mental health, the UK is a good example of where the world may trend in the future, taking a more holistic view of citizens' health and a corrective approach to the expectations, assumptions and cultural nuances around parenting.

One way that we can all be more sensitive to the loneliness of others, especially in this highly connected age, is to be more direct with the way we reach out to the people in our lives – whether that's looping them into a conversation on a group chat, offering words of encouragement and praise over social media, or simply arranging a one-on-one catch-up session. All of these send a reaffirming message of appreciation and belonging and can make an enormous difference in a person's daily life.

While technology may often seem like the culprit for our ever-intensifying feelings of isolation, it might also be our most powerful ally in defending ourselves against it. Perhaps if we approach our digital lives as an organic extension of our truest selves, we can enjoy a more fluid, conscious and constructive life both online and off – where a positive comment feels less like a "thumbs up" icon and more like a much-needed hug.





## Parenting Guilt

Raising a baby doesn't come with a handbook, but young parents often feel guilty that they're lacking the "expert parenting skills" they see around them. Everywhere they turn, from a grocery run to scrolling through social media, young parents are constantly observing the abilities of other parents, their interactions with their children, and a general "I've got this" attitude – making new parents feel guilty that they're not applying themselves to their new role with the same ease.

Much of the guilt experienced by new parents has to do with their own high expectations and assumptions they've made about what it should feel like to be a parent. In some cases, new parents may be measuring themselves against their own childhoods. Good or bad, these memories can conjure up deep feelings of guilt and inadequacy. For instance, if a parent had a tough childhood, the stakes suddenly become that much higher for them to give their child

**"One of the toughest challenges in correcting this cycle of guilt is that it is largely invisible."**

a better experience. Conversely, if they had an extraordinary childhood, they may feel guilty that they're not offering that same level of presence and love.

The guilt new moms face can be particularly difficult, especially in cultures where the woman is almost entirely responsible for raising the child. All over the world, women feel guilty for not being "perfect" moms – for doubting their decisions, feeling lonely and disconnected, struggling with feeding, or that they're just not doing enough. Moms going through postpartum depression or waves of baby blues can feel guilty about not feeling overjoyed about motherhood.

Guilt is often mercurial in nature – not seeming to come from any one thing. And it's pervasive. All parents seem to experience some level of guilt, regardless of culture or socioeconomic class. This could mean that a parent's guilt isn't coming from a lack of resources, but rather an internal struggle with their own high expectations.

In countries with more limited access to quality/trustworthy information and healthcare, parents can feel guilty about not being educated on how best to raise their child. They may have to rely on the advice of family and friends, giving up a sense of autonomy and making them feel additional guilt for being a burden on those around them. Lack of access is one of the greatest challenges new parents face in countries like India and Mexico where a solid healthcare system has yet to take hold.

Maternity leave, and other resources provided during the first few months of parenthood, are inconsistent in many countries throughout the world. Parents in China, Nigeria, Mexico and Poland especially feel more pessimistic about having enough health and wellbeing support for childbirth recovery and postpartum care. This can have a lasting impact on new parents who may feel guilty that they're not able to find their footing on their own.

One of the toughest challenges in correcting this cycle of guilt is that it's largely invisible. Parents will often put on their best face for the outside world, with the real suffering happening at home. Even if a close friend or family member is aware of these feelings and wishes to help, it can be difficult to unlock the insecurities at the heart of the problem. This is where the real effort comes in. Loved ones need to take on a proactive role in getting young parents out of their own heads and talking about what's really going on with them.

Sometimes just saying something warm-hearted can get the conversation rolling, like: "It must be hard having to seem like a perfect parent all the time, when everyone knows NONE of us had perfect parents." Highlighting the absurdity of perfectness and the common challenge that all parents face can loosen up the mood and get things flowing.



Support can also be shown in more subtle ways by demonstrating respect for what a new parent is going through and making them feel seen. For instance, having a maternity room provided at work can make a young mom feel like her peers are acknowledging the complexity of her dual role as mom and a professional, and are welcoming her back into the fold in the most supportive way they can.

When new parents feel positive about their child's health and wellbeing, they tend to experience far less guilt. Feeling that they're in a supportive environment can bolster their spirits and have a deep and lasting impact on their mental health. For instance, when communities and organizations offer parent-and-baby activities it gives young parents a way to interact with and learn from each other, reminding them that no one is perfect when it comes to parenting. By encouraging these types of connections, communities can show their support for young families, reminding them that raising a child is a responsibility we all share.

The irony is that as parents beat themselves up over not knowing what to do, or criticize themselves for their faults, the baby sees the parent as the light of its life – a real life superhero that somehow manages to provide them with all of the love, comfort and safety they could ever hope for.



**"New parents from vastly different cultures from all over the world seem to have one thing they agree on – becoming a parent was far more difficult and complex than they ever expected."**

## Riding the Roller Coaster

Becoming a parent can be one of the greatest joys in the world – but it comes with some real surprises. New parents from vastly different cultures from all over the world seem to have one thing they agree on – becoming a parent was far more difficult and complex than they ever expected.

After all the excitement of planning for the baby – picking names, choosing little outfits and packing all the essentials for delivery – most new parents are caught completely off guard by the harsh reality of the full parenting experience. Checklists may cover what supplies to buy and how to baby-proof the home, but they don't tell you how to deal with your feelings or exhaustion when the baby won't settle or sleep. How-to manuals or the advice of a paediatrician may offer some assistance, but even in the best of cases parents still report being utterly overwhelmed by their beloved, yet endlessly unpredictable, new baby.

New parents are often forced to make compromises they never saw coming. A baby has its own unique needs and personality right from the start, and parents often struggle to adapt. Even in the most parent and baby-friendly countries with all the resources they have at their disposal, parents across the board find themselves uninformed or misinformed about what to expect – or that even with a plan, things rarely go as expected.

Surprises pop up right from the start. After the birth and bringing baby home, parents are often in shock at the constant needs of a newborn. With no way of communicating what he or she needs, troubleshooting an upset baby becomes a never-ending game of trial and error. This can be daunting for new parents who may have read up on challenging situations or have reached out to friends or family for advice but are still struggling to find what works. The physical demands coupled with exhaustion can bring an emotional turbulence more extreme than anything parents could have imagined, affecting all aspects of their lives – from their relationship with one another, to friends and family and even work.

In cultures that parents describe as being quite tradition-bound like Nigeria, Romania and China, parents also say they've had to make many compromises after the baby arrived. They say that they found parenting to be much more difficult than expected and that they were ill prepared for the full experience. While parents everywhere experience



Hmmm... think the mom-shamers must've forgotten about me today...

this new parenting roller coaster, for these parents in particular there could be additional pressure in wishing to honor past practices and tradition while trying to adopt a more modern approach to parenting.

New parents in more progressive cultures, on the other hand, like the US, the UK and Chile, have said that their new lives as parents were more in line with their expectations. This could be due to a number of factors – from managing daily stress through shared responsibilities, to being able to “tweak” their parenting model as they go rather than adhere to a strict cultural norm.

One universal truth among parents of all cultures is that those with strong family ties tend to fare the best when it comes to confronting new realities. This goes to show how important a kind word or a shared story can be to a new parent – proof that others have gone through the same trials and tribulations and made it to the other side, stronger and wiser than they ever would have imagined. Luckily, today “family” can be defined however one sees fit – whether that’s extended family, a core group of friends, or a “work family” – all of these can make a new parent feel wrapped with immense love and support.

**“Although parents may feel confident about the decisions they’re making, it’s when they share these things online and become victims of shaming that they suddenly feel pain and anxiety around the subject.”**

### Social Shaming

In today’s social media-obsessed culture, it’s become easier than ever to share one’s point of view, often with little to no regard for how it might make someone feel. For new parents this might come in the form of well-intentioned advice, but it can often have the opposite effect, making the parents feel judged, anxious, and unsupported. And because social media is so visible and immediate, the pressure, shame and judgment just pile on.

With daily access to a family’s activities and milestones, virtually anyone can respond to a post, leaving parents feeling naked to the judgment of others. When a parent posts a simple question, or light-hearted update, it can draw a response that feels like a criticism. The parent might post something as benign as a rhetorical question like “Isn’t she adorable?” or “Doesn’t she look happy?” – only to be met with a stream of unwelcome suggestions. The new parent might simply be seeking a bit of reassurance, or to keep in touch with friends and family. Instead they’re left feeling depleted after reading through the comments. A quick scan through virtually any social media platform will show that all new parents are susceptible to this kind of judgment and shaming, from an everyday mom to a Hollywood megastar.

The most extreme aspect of parent shaming, so-called “Call-Out Culture” or “Cancel Culture”, is a form of shaming where people are publicly humiliated in a digital space. The more common and pernicious experience of this comes in the form of judgment from strangers – but sometimes even friends – over social platforms. It has become so commonplace there are hashtags for it, and parents report high levels of social pressure and judgment because of it.

Some of the most regularly “shamed” parenting decisions are often around contentious topics like feeding and childrearing. Although the parents may feel confident about the decisions they’re making, it’s when they share these things online and become the victims of shaming that they suddenly feel pain and anxiety around the subject. Famous people, even

Royals, are often targets of these harsh drive-by criticisms, as witnessed in the headlines of our daily news feeds. By nature, social media runs on spontaneity – where moments are captured and shared without a second thought of having to explain or defend the content of a post. With a lack of context, people may use their imaginations to fill in the blanks, sometimes twisting the situations into fodder for controversy. This can cause a parent to feel

targeted, humiliated, and inadequate. It plays on the mind and erodes confidence. Even the most resilient parents could be forgiven for taking such judgments to heart.

Social media also tends to incite a deep competitive nature, especially among parents. Comparing one’s self or one’s child to the seemingly perfect lives of others can often fuel new parents’ feelings of insecurity. Being surrounded by so many opinions can cause an overload of stress and anxiety and ultimately undermine their own abilities to navigate the everyday.

It’s important to keep in mind that a lot of what is being portrayed on social media is not real life, but rather a highly curated, seemingly perfect parenting world, fashioned right before our eyes. Confronted with these posts, a new parent can feel a deep internal pressure to level up to what other parents appear to be doing – judging themselves against something that never truly existed.

Ironically, we’re seeing more and more people highlight the damage Call-Out Culture inflicts on others – especially the mental health and wellbeing of new parents. In fact, behaviors are beginning to shift in cultures all over the world. Although social media remains pervasive as ever, new generations of young parents, even those in more traditional societies, are showing an openness to breaking with the norms of the past as a way to minimize the stress of a demanding, highly connected world.

At the same time, social media is collapsing the space between once-distant cultures, revealing a diverse range of parenting methods to draw from – with progressive parents adopting some of the more traditional practices they crave, and conservative families integrating more “modern” approaches to day-to-day parenthood.

Even with its inherent challenges, there is plenty to celebrate about social media, especially in the way it can make us feel more connected than ever. A social platform can be an incredibly powerful tool connecting parents with each other, but even more so providing their children a real global village to be part of – a global conversation that can help us all feel a much-needed common bond and a deep sense of togetherness.



# The Impact of COVID-19 on the Ease of Parenting

Indexes generally reflect macro level changes at a societal level. The first global survey for The Parenting Index was conducted in advance of countries going into different types of isolation and lockdown.

The COVID-19 pandemic is of such significance globally that a second wave of research was undertaken to check the robustness of The Parenting Index and the early impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on different parenting aspects.

Would COVID-19 have any immediate impact on the general ease of parenting? Are parents being impacted in any specific ways? What effect could it be having on the factors that most impact parenting? What could be learned about the changed realities for moms and dads around the world?

The second wave of The Parenting Index Survey was conducted in the US, Spain and China with the same target demographic as the first wave. 300 interviews took place in each country with parents of babies aged 0-12 months. The same survey was used, with the addition of questions on the impact of COVID-19 added at the end to avoid bias. Fieldwork was completed as China and Spain had emerged from lockdown and in the US as states were fully or partially reopened.

The findings of the second wave may be surprising as they paint an overarching picture of resilience and social cohesion, and do not show increased feelings of pessimism, or the erosion of supports for parents.

### Key Findings:

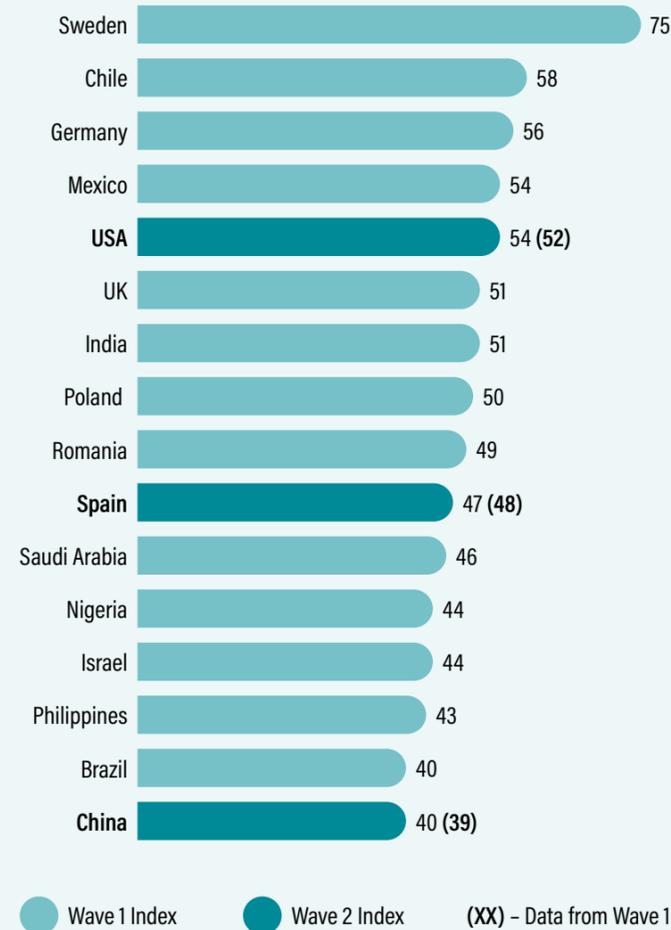
**The COVID-19 pandemic has not changed The Parenting Index.**

The COVID-19 pandemic doesn't appear to have changed how parents feel about their parenting experience. Their perception of the overall parenting experience, the challenges that they face, and the levels of support they receive are currently stable.

This doesn't mean there haven't been significant changes to daily life, but rather that, all things considered, parenting itself has been in some way protected from impact. This is not to say that there may not be changes in the future but that for now parenting has been resilient to negative impacts – at least for parents with young babies aged 0-12 months.

This means there is no noticeable impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on The Parenting Index score and the ranking for all three countries remains unchanged.

### The Parenting Index



### Parents are feeling more mutual support

One potential explanation for the stability of The Parenting Index may be the finding that in all three countries, parents experienced more mutual support during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Though stories in the media highlight uncertainty and evoke fears about the situation unfolding around the world, society has in many ways come closer together as people turn to help one another and communities become tied more closely. The Parenting Index data shows that all parts of society have rallied to help parents face the challenge of COVID-19. This may seem counter-intuitive, for surely when there is a crisis people feel more stressed and anxious? However, social cohesion and our sense of belonging can actually increase in a crisis.

From early on in the COVID-19 pandemic, questions about its impact on social cohesion were widely considered in both popular media and the academic community<sup>48</sup>.

Early indications showed communities responding to the crisis with prosocial behavior, as neighbors organized for mutual support to help the vulnerable and those in need.<sup>49</sup>

This behavior was one factor attributed to increased perceptions of happiness in the 2020 Happiness Report. The editors, interviewed in Forbes, said: "People are pleasantly surprised by the willingness of their neighbors and their institutions to work in harness to help each other."<sup>50</sup>

Some young families have received formal supports such as income support, job retention schemes, and changes to work arrangements (flexible working and working from home). They have also experienced increased informal support, such as greater contact with friends and family who check in more frequently – ensuring that parents had all the love and help their "village" could provide during this period.

### Parents are resilient, and family is the clear priority

Parents are feeling resilient and have adjusted to the immediate changes that the pandemic has brought.

While the provision of formal and informal systems has provided a safety net in many countries, perhaps one of the reasons for their resilience is also that the hierarchy of needs for parents has shifted in response to COVID-19.

Parents will do anything for their family, and they don't consider this to be a hardship. So long as the priorities of safety and security for their children can be met, parents' sense of ease seems stable.

### What impacts might emerge over time?

The Parenting Index cannot forecast the future for parents. As the full impacts of COVID-19 become clearer in the coming years it remains to be seen how parents' perceptions may change, and whether they will feel more or less optimistic in the future.

Only time will tell how findings will change if income and access to health supports continue to be strained as the effects of COVID-19 are fully felt around the world. Fears held at bay today may become more pressing in the coming few years.

While it is not possible to state with absolute certainty what will come, it is reasonable to expect that a predicted global economic slowdown or even recession mean parents would perhaps face real challenges to their financial resilience. Changes to how people work could put pressure on supports for working life, especially around childcare and work-life balance if many people continue to work from home.

At the same time, communities may continue to come together in mutual cooperation through the crisis, and families may draw closer leading to more positive feelings.

There is a hope that the world may emerge from this global experience a kinder, less judgmental place for not just parents, but everyone. Only time will tell.



## Conclusion

This first edition of The Parenting Index 2021 shows us that parenting pain points vary from country to country and there's no perfect place to be a parent (yet!). Even in Sweden, which ranks No.1 in The Parenting Index, some areas impacting the ease of parenting could be improved. While there is no single solution for parents, the wellbeing of parents across the first 1,000 days really matters.

The factors The Parenting Index has identified, show the rich complexity of the parenting experience and how the society in which people raise their families, their individual circumstances, along with culture, socioeconomics and much more, all influence the journey parents take through this amazing but challenging time in their lives.

But while the experience of parenting remains very different from one place to another and from family to family, parenting today is universally affected by factors such as external and internal pressure, financial demands and the available support for working parents (e.g., access to affordable childcare).

In her review of The Parenting Index, Professor Ming Cui, Fulbright U.S. Scholar and Professor of Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University (U.S.A.) points to the importance of parental wellbeing in the parenting process. She recognises that parents from different cultures and socio-economic backgrounds feel pressured to 'do it all' and highlights that 'to promote positive parenting and ultimately children's healthy development, parents should not overlook their own well-being'.

The Parenting Index provides, for the first time, a benchmark of the realities of the parenting experience, to help shine a light on what can be done to make a positive difference for parents. It points to how employers, governments and broader communities can start to come together to address the challenges that parents are facing today.

Over time, The Parenting Index will track changes to the impact of each factor and will be able to identify what underlies these changes, showing us how parenting is made easier or more challenging as global dynamics change.

This first edition is just the beginning.

## The Parenting Index: Expert review

Ming Cui, M.S. in Statistics and Ph.D. in Sociology, Fulbright U.S. Scholar and Professor of Family and Child Sciences at Florida State University (U.S.A.)

### The underlying societal and behavioral aspects that explain these findings: Theoretical explanations

The findings in this report are consistent with a general ecological framework in parenting.

### Social-ecological perspective

From a socio-ecological perspective, parenting is affected by a variety of factors on multiple levels. At the macro level, a parent's parenting beliefs and behaviors are shaped by the socio-economic status and policies in the country s/he resides (external factors: maternity leave policy, GDP, and Opposite Gini).

Parenting is also influenced by the unique social norms in that country (societal pressure).

Related to the macro level, a parent's parenting is bounded in that particular historical time (modern parenting). On a meso level, a parent's workplace and the family's immediate environment are pivotal for parenting (family-work balance, access to health and well-being resources, supportive environment). Finally, on a micro level, a parent's coparenting support, parenting beliefs and efficacy, a family's financial situation, and the temperament and well-being of the

baby all contribute to the variations in parenting (shared parenting, internalized pressure, parenting confidence, family financial resilience, and easy baby).

### Cultural-ecological perspective

In addition to the socio-ecological theory, the cultural-ecological perspective also offers unique lens looking into the cultural similarities and differences found in this report.

The debate of approaching cross-cultural phenomena with a cultural-invariant view versus with a cultural-specific view is constant and ongoing. Findings in this report on the commonalities and differences in parenting (e.g., financial challenges shared by parents from India, Philippines, and Nigeria vs. lack of efficacy and workplace support resonated among parents from UK, Germany, and U.S.) suggest an integration of cultural universalism with cultural relativism and advocate for

embracing the principle of universalism without conformity.

**Taken together, the findings of this report have their roots in established theories and are aligned with most research evidence.**

### Behind the trend of modern parenting

Parenting practice has changed considerably throughout history - evolving from providing minimal care and education and not keeping close emotional ties in ancient Greece and Rome to providing intensive care, investing heavily in education, and maintaining strong relationship bond since the 20th century.

Today's parents are increasingly parenting in a state of anxiety (which can be reflected from findings in this report, such as external/internal pressure, lack of confidence, financial demands).

Influenced by popular media along with technology advances, many parents from different cultures and

socio-economic classes feel pressured to do it all (e.g., being a super mom). In these parents' mind, being "average" is not good enough, and to do anything less would generate fear of being negligent.

Such emerging trend has led many modern parents to practice "hyper-parenting," which, even with the best intention from the parents, is not regarded as a good parenting practice.

### What could be done to address the findings?

**There is no "one-size-fits-all" best parenting practice.**

Parenting is a social construct and a developmental role that changes over time in response to social norms and the developmental needs of children. Though overwhelming research evidence identifies various forms of harmful parenting (e.g., neglectful parenting, abusive parenting, overparenting), there is no ONE best parenting practice.

### Recognize the developmental needs of babies.

The main tasks of parenting babies require establishing feeding processes and sleeping patterns and promoting brain development and emotional attachment. Because of the nature and degree of dependency in infancy, responsive and responsible parenting in infancy is particularly critical.

### Parents' own well-being matters.

As much as the emphasis on being responsive and responsible for parents of babies, parents should also realize that their own well-being matters in the process of parenting. Parenting babies, with the elevated demands and stress, can take a toll on parents themselves financially, emotionally, and physically. Consequently, the sometimes "overworked, overwhelmed, and over the top" parents could spill their negativity over into their parenting behavior (e.g., uninvolved, withdrawn, hostile).

To promote positive parenting and ultimately children's healthy development, parents should not

overlook their own well-being and should take good care of themselves, such as leaving empty spaces on their calendar and taking a break.

### Implement policies and parent education programs.

Findings from this report highlight the practical implications for parents, educators, and policy makers across cultures.

For example, policy makers from some countries could consider extending maternity leave duration and increasing financial benefits for struggling families with babies. Depending on the particular needs from different cultures found in this report, specific parenting education programs could target different aspects of parenting such as providing information on babies' developmental needs, promoting secure attachment and bond, reducing parenting stress, or facilitating parent support network.

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