Does it take a village to raise a child? Buffering effect of family support during parenthood.

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Abstract

The goal of this analysis was to investigate the buffering effect of family support during parenthood on the case of Switzerland. We expected that (1) family support in this period increases, and (2) it is positively related to life satisfaction: persons with high family support experience a more positive trajectory of life satisfaction in the period of parenthood than persons with lower family support.

We used Swiss Household Panel data and a combination of statistical methods of fixed-effects models for panel data and cross-sectional regression.

Overall, our results question the generality of the buffering mechanism. They also question the pivotal role of support from relatives in the period of parenthood in contemporary Switzerland. We find no evidence that the invisible net of family support is activated in the care intense stages of parenthood. Frequency of contact with relatives increases in this period, which however does not bring increased support nor clear positive consequences for parental life satisfaction.

Our paper is the first one to explicitly investigate the buffering effect of family support during parenthood. It contributes to understanding the dynamics of family support and fertility in contemporary western countries.

Keywords: Life satisfaction; Parenthood; Relatives; Social support;

1 Introduction

Although in contemporary developed societies parenting is largely a choice, having children comes with a price. Parents, especially of young children, are tired, sleep deprived, and stressed (Evenson and Simon, 2005; Umberson et al., 2010). They experience financial strain (Stanca, 2012) and time pressure. Childcare, an activity only slightly more enjoyable than housework (Kahneman et al., 2004), is in conflict with parents' leisure, freedom, work demands, and romantic relationships (Angeles, 2010; Lyubomirsky and Boehm, 2010; Nomaguchi and Milkie,

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2003; Twenge et al., 2003). All this suggests that parenthood (as a whole, or some of its stages) may be considered a difficult life event.

Theoretical approaches postulate that social support, from family or other sources, may be an important resource to alleviate the negative consequences of difficult life events. The mechanism playing the role here is called 'buffering mechanism' (Cohen, 1985; Thoits, 1982). However, despite the theoretical developments, the role of family support for life satisfaction of parents remains underexplored. This paper attempts to partly fill this gap by examining if support received from non-residing relatives (including parents, sibling, and other relatives) improves life satisfaction of parents. Family support is here defined as availability of networks on whom one can rely for practical help and with whom one has emotional ties. In other words, we test if family support acts as a buffer during the period of parenthood.

In the analysis we distinguish two possible elements of buffering mechanism. First we investigate if the contacts with relatives and the support received from them increase after people become parents. We also examine how does support change at various stages of parenthood. Second, we investigate if life satisfaction of parents who receive high family support is higher than among parents who receive less support. We also examine how changes of support contribute to parent's life satisfaction at various stages of parenthood.

1.1 Previous research

Although parenthood, for many who experienced it, is often considered one of the most important life experiences, literature consistently fails to show a strong positive effect of parenthood on life satisfaction. Some evidence that parenthood lowers well-being comes from cross-sectional analyses (Margolis and Myrskylä, 2011; Stanca, 2012). In contrast to that, longitudinal studies question the negative correlation between parenthood and life satisfaction. Most of such analyses show a temporary positive correlation, which is substantial especially for women and especially for the first birth. Life satisfaction of mothers increases already 2-5 years before the first childbirth, peaks during the pregnancy and in the year directly following the birth, and subsequently declines (Baetschmann et al., 2012; Clark et al., 2008; Kohler et al., 2005; Myrskylä and Margolis, 2012). If the decline that occurs in the early stage of parenthood lowers life satisfaction below the pre-birth levels or not is still debatable and may depend on the social context.

The literature consistently points out the heterogeneity of the effect of parenthood on subjective well-being. For instance, Galatzer-Levy et al. (2011) showed that the well-being of majority of parents did not change in response to the birth, and only 7% experienced a sustained decrease, and 4% experienced a strong increase. Moreover, research documented systematical differences between groups of parents. More satisfied with their lives are typically parents who were older rather than younger at birth (Kohler et al., 2005; Myrskylä and Margolis, 2012; Umberson et al., 2010), who were married rather than single (Angeles, 2010; Evenson and Simon, 2005; Frey and Stutzer, 2000; Nomaguchi and Milkie, 2003; Umberson et al., 2010), and – among men – those with higher education (Myrskylä and Margolis, 2012).

Analyses of social support as a factor moderating the effect of parenthood on life satisfaction are scarce. Few studies addressed the effect of grand-parenting in low-risk family settings (see: Coall and Hertwig, 2010). There is also evidence of a beneficial effect of egalitarian couple

arrangements for subjective well-being of parents (Twenge et al., 2003; Umberson et al., 2010) and for subsequent fertility (Mills et al., 2008; Torr and Short, 2004), which suggests that receiving help with domestic and household duties may improve well-being of parents. Moreover, research shows that residing close to grandparents seems to increase the chance of (another) birth.

These scarce research results stay is a stark with a common sense belief that relatives and grandparents are important source of support during the challenging period of raising children. Families provide extensive help to parents of young children, mainly by offering childcare and housework, advice and information, as well as material support (Bengtson, 2001; Chan, 2009; Chan and Ermisch, 2011; Coall and Hertwig, 2010; Hank and Buber, 2009). Previous research has also shown that families are the source of support which activates in response to critical, difficult events (Eggebeen and Davey, 1998; Schoeni, 2002; Silverstein et al., 2006). Because family relationships are more stable than friendships or work or community networks, they are considered a reliable source of support also during transitions which largely restructure economic and social life of an individual. It is plausible that the experience of parenthood belongs to this category because parenthood strongly affects the aconomic activity and living conditions, as well as social networks of parents.

1.2 Conceptualization of buffering effect

Current research attempts to fill these knowledge gaps by analyzing buffering effect of family support during parenthood. We verify the hypothesis that family support improves the experience of parenthood and we focus on two components of buffering effect.

1. First, we provide systematic evidence on changes of frequency of contact with relatives and the support received from them in the period of parenting: both during entering parenthood and later, as children are getting older. We expect that family support increases following the childbirth (H1), and it is highest during the care-intense period of parenthood (H2).

2. Second, we test if life satisfaction of parents positively correlates with frequency of contact with the relatives and with the amount of practical and emotional support received from them (H3).

Our analysis of buffering effect during parenthood consists of following stages.

1. We start by investigating how does frequency of contact with relatives and support received from them change over the course of parenthood. The fixed-effects methodology allows us to focus on changes and to control for the overall differences between individuals in the level of support.

2. We supplement this analysis with a between-persons approach, which allows us to understand who on average receives higher and who receives lower support from relatives.

3. We move to the investigation of consequences of support for life satisfaction. We begin by comparing persons with overall high and with overall low level of support. That is to

say, we check how does the life satisfaction trajectories of parents with high support differ from the trajectories of parents who receive less support.

4. We finish by analyzing the dynamic relationship between changes of support and changes of life satisfaction. This part of analysis focuses on changes of support experienced by individuals, rather than – as in point 3 above – comparing high-support and low-support individuals.

2 Data and method

2.1 Data

We are using data from the Swiss Household Panel (SHP), which aims to observe social change, in particular the dynamics of changing living conditions in the population of Switzerland. Data are collected annually using computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI). The survey started in 1999, with a refreshment sample initiated in 2004. Last data available at the time of analysis were for the year 2012. However, the measures of family support used in this analysis have not been recorded in the last two waves. For this reason, in our analysis we used 12 waves of observation for the main sample and 7 years for the refreshment (1999-2012).

2.2 Measures

Life satisfaction is captured with the question: *"In general, how satisfied are you with your life if 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely statisfied'?"*. The variable approximates a normal distribution, is negatively skewed, and peaks at the value of 8 which is both its overall mean and median.

Family support is approximated with a set o measures, concerning relatives living outside of respondent's household, with whom the respondent is on good terms and enjoys a close relationship. Our analysis used mainly the three measures listed below.

- Frequency of contact is measured with the question *"How frequent are your contacts with these relatives? (If variable according to the person involved, talk about the relative with whom the contacts are more frequent. Include telephone contacts."*
- Practical support is captured with the question: *"If necessary, in your opinion, to what extent can these relatives or your children who do not live in your household provide you with practical help (this means concrete help or useful advice), 0 means 'not at all' and 10 'a great deal'?" ("Even people who do not need any help should consider possible ways in which they could get support. If some ... can help a great deal and others not at all, indicate "a great deal". Practical help = e.g. doing the shopping for them when sick, taking them to the doctor or giving useful advice in case of problems or when looking for specific information.")*
- Emotional support is measured with the question: *"To what extent can these relatives or these children be available in case of need and show understanding, by talking with you for example, 0 means 'not at all' and 10 'a great' deal"? ("Even people who do not need any*

help should consider possible ways in which they could get support. If some ... can help a great deal and others not at all, indicate "a great deal").

In the analysis we also considered co-residence with parents and parents-in-law as possible support measures, however the low rates of co-residence in Switzerland precludes analysis of the effects of co-residence (for details see the Appendix). Part of the analysis refers also to the number of relatives with whom the respondent is on good terms and enjoys a close relationship.

In part of analysis we focus on differences between persons rather than on changes experienced over time. Specifically, we divide respondents into 'high support' and 'low support' groups, taking the average support declared by an individual over all observation periods as the measure of 'support overall.' We classify respondents with the average support equal to of higher from median as 'high support'; those under the median enter the 'low support' category. For some details on sample size and distribution see Table 1.

Table 1: Number of individuals who experience overall high and low levels of contact and support.

	Contact frequency		Practical support		Emotional support	
	high	low	high	low	high	low
overall	14606	9361	9705	14262	6496	17471
%	60.9	39.1	40.5	59.5	27.1	72.9
have child 0	399	87	284	202	198	288
%	82.1	17.9	58.4	41.6	40.7	59.3
have child 1-2	840	201	592	449	398	643
%	80.7	19.3	56.9	43.1	38.2	61.8
have child 3-5	1043	256	713	586	455	844
%	80.3	19.7	54.9	45.1	35.0	65.0
have child 6-24	3447	1122	2104	2465	1285	3284
%	75.4	24.6	46.0	54.0	28.1	71.9

Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Sample: all respondents and parents.

Control variables In fixed-effects models we account for age (both linear and quadratic component), marital status (single and divorced/separated, with marriage as a reference category; we also include dummies marking the year of marriage and the year of divorce), satisfaction with own health, household income (per capita using equivalent household size), and own unemployment. Moreover, in the analysis of how the level and the changes of family support correlate with life satisfaction we also control for changes of support received from partner, neighbors, and close friends. For each of these sources of support we use an index constructed as the average of emotional and practical support, after recording the missing values indicating no network of given type (e.g. "no close friends") into the minimal level of support.

Furthermore, in the (between-individual) analysis of correlates of high family support we control also for educational level, cohort of birth, being a parent, and age at first births. All these variables are operacionalized as measures stable for individuals.

2.3 Statistical method

2.3.1 Dynamics of family support and of life satisfaction during parenthood

We run this part of the analysis with fixed effects regression for panel data. Fixed effects models control for the time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity of individuals (Allison, 2009), which may be particularly important in case of parenthood, because selection plays a role here (e.g. Parr, 2010, showed selection of happier persons into parenthood). Consistently with previous results, we estimate separate models for the first, second, and third child, as well we stratify the analysis by gender (Myrskylä and Margolis, 2012).

We regress (1) family support and (2) life satisfaction on a set of dichotomous variables marking the stage of parenthood. Our analysis covers the period preceding the birth (4 and more, 3, 2 and 1 year before the birth), and we follow the parents up to the moment when their child is 24 years old. Formally, our model describing the dynamics of family support for parents of the first child is described by Equation 1.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{Support}_{it} = {} & \beta_{BB3}BB_{4+it} + \beta_{BB3}BB_{3it} + \beta_{BB2}BB_{2it} + \beta_{BB1}BB_{1it} + \\ & + \beta_{Age1}Age_{1it} + \beta_{Age2}Age_{2it} + \cdots + \beta_{Age23}Age_{23it} + \beta_{Age24}Age_{24it} + \beta_{Age25+}Age_{25+it} + \\ & + \beta_{Birth2}Birth_{2it} + \beta_{Child2}Child_{2it} + \cdots + \beta_{Birth5}Birth_{5it} + \beta_{Child5}Child_{5it} + \\ & + B_K X_{it} + (\alpha_i + u_{it})\end{aligned} \tag{1}$$

In Equation 1, coefficients β_{BB4+}-β_{BB1} describe the dynamics of family support 4 and more, 3, 2, and 1 year before the birth (*'BB'* refers to 'before the birth'). The coefficients β_{Age1}-β_{Age25+} describe how family support changes with the age of the child. The reference category is the year of birth of the child. We choose this reference category, because birth of the child is a natural moment when the level of support might change. The coefficients β_{Birth2}-β_{Birth5} and β_{Child2}-β_{Child5} control for the birth and presence of other children (in the case of first child other children include: the second, third, fourth, and fifth child). X_{it} is a vector of effects of control variables and B_K is a vector of respective β coefficients.

With a similar model we estimate the dynamics of life satisfaction, focusing on the difference between parents with high and low family support. The model, again for the first child, is described by Equation 2.

$$\begin{aligned}\text{LS}_{it} = {} & \beta_{BB3}BB_{3it} + \beta_{BB3S}BB_{3it}Sup + \cdots + \beta_{BB1}BB_{1it} + \beta_{BB1S}BB_{1it}Sup + \\ & + \beta_{Age0}Age_{0it} + \beta_{Age0S}Age_{0it}Sup + \beta_{Age1}Age_{1it} + \beta_{Age1S}Age_{1it}Sup + \cdots + \\ & + \beta_{Age24}Age_{24it} + \beta_{Age24S}Age_{24it}Sup + \beta_{Age25+}Age_{25+it} + \beta_{Age25+S}Age_{25+it}Sup + \\ & + \beta_{Birth2}Birth_{2it} + \beta_{Child2}Child_{2it} + \cdots + \beta_{Birth5}Birth_{5it} + \beta_{Child5}Child_{5it} + \\ & + \beta_{Birth2S}Birth_{2it}Sup + \beta_{Child2S}Child_{2it}Sup + \cdots + \beta_{Birth5S}Birth_{5it}Sup + \beta_{Child5S}Child_{5it}Sup + \\ & + B_K X_{it} + (\alpha_i + u_{it})\end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

Equation 2 differs from Equation 1 in two aspects. First, as a reference category we use the period 4 years of more before the birth, and not the birth as in the model of family support. This is consistent with literature showing that life satisfaction of (prospective) parents starts increasing already about 3 years before the birth (anticipation effect). Second, the model includes interaction terms (Sup) between dummies marking the age of the child and the dummy indicating the level of family support (low vs. high). The interaction terms test if the dynamics of life satisfaction of parents with high family support differs from the one of parents with low family support.

We estimate both above mentioned models on the full sample of respondents rather on the sample restricted to parents, because analyses on the full sample show a similar dynamics as the results estimated for parents, but they are more robust. In particular, on the full sample we are much better able to distinguish between the effects of aging of the child, aging of the parents, and period change (wave).

2.3.2 Determinants of belonging to high-support group

To investigate with factors increase probability of belonging to the group of persons receiving overall high support, we run a simple OLS regression on the level of individuals (for the whole sample and for parents separately). In this analysis we do not make use of the panel structure of the data and we limit the analysis to time-invariant predictors. Such approach allows us to focus on differences between individuals,rather than changes occurring over time.

2.3.3 Association between changes of support and of life satisfaction at various stages of parenthood

In the final part of the analysis we use first difference models to analyze how changes of support correlate with changes of parental life satisfaction at various ages of the child. We do this by estimating separate first difference models for each age of a child. Example of such model for the birth of the first child is formalized in Equation 3.

$$\begin{aligned} \mathrm{LS}_{i\ t} - \mathrm{LS}_{i\ t-1} = \beta_S(Support_{i\ t} - Support_{i\ t-1}) + \\ + B_K(X_{i\ t} - X_{i\ t-1}) + \epsilon_i \\ \text{if } t \text{ is the year of birth of the first child} \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

Here, similarly as in Equations 1 and 2, X refers to the vector of control variables (expressed as first differences, i.e. $X_{i\ t} - X_{i\ t-1}$) and B_K is a vector of respective coefficients.

3 Results

3.1 Changes of family support during parenthood

We start with investigating factors whose changes correlate with changes of family support, including frequency of contact with relatives, practical support, and emotional support from the non-residing relatives (Table 2.)

Table 2: Fixed effects regression of contact frequency, practical support, and emotional support on parenthood and other individual-level factors. Models for men and women separately.

	Contact frequency		Practical support		Emotional support	
	women	men	women	men	women	men
childless (ref)	–	–	–	–	–	–
	–	–	–	–	–	–
has a child aged 0	0.10	0.60	−0.00	0.03	0.01	0.11
	(0.720)	(0.017)*	(0.985)	(0.739)	(0.926)	(0.261)
has a child aged 1-2	0.75	0.09	−0.04	−0.06	0.02	0.07
	(0.001)***	(0.649)	(0.623)	(0.481)	(0.819)	(0.381)
has a child aged 3-5	0.13	0.14	−0.01	0.04	−0.07	0.10
	(0.482)	(0.403)	(0.875)	(0.542)	(0.205)	(0.142)
has a child aged 6-24	−0.03	0.09	−0.28	−0.33	−0.11	−0.23
	(0.871)	(0.663)	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.097)+	(0.004)*
has a child older than 24	0.18	−0.04	0.16	0.29	0.26	0.29
	(0.467)	(0.867)	(0.049)*	(0.006)*	(0.001)***	(0.003)*
age (centred)	−0.02	−0.07	0.05	0.05	0.02	0.04
	(0.201)	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
age^2 (centred)	−0.00	−0.00	0.00	0.00	−0.00	−0.00
	(0.058)+	(0.786)	(0.289)	(0.585)	(0.001)*	(0.056)+
single	−0.51	0.13	0.14	0.02	0.36	0.27
	(0.197)	(0.696)	(0.278)	(0.866)	(0.003)*	(0.044)*
divorced or separated	−0.23	0.48	0.05	0.14	0.11	0.26
	(0.556)	(0.220)	(0.730)	(0.375)	(0.345)	(0.084)+
year of divorce	−0.19	−0.37	−0.19	0.02	0.26	0.05
	(0.756)	(0.560)	(0.346)	(0.952)	(0.159)	(0.850)
year of marriage	−0.40	0.59	0.00	0.14	0.07	0.25
	(0.395)	(0.123)	(0.994)	(0.359)	(0.619)	(0.091)+
satisfaction with health (centred)	0.09	−0.02	0.06	0.05	0.07	0.05
	(0.001)*	(0.549)	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
yearly hh income eq net (centred)	0.00	−0.00	−0.00	−0.00	0.00	−0.00
	(0.493)	(0.798)	(0.854)	(0.521)	(0.365)	(0.128)
unemployed	−0.05	0.67	0.05	−0.02	−0.03	−0.02
	(0.907)	(0.071)+	(0.707)	(0.890)	(0.829)	(0.913)
Observations	45168	35971	44861	35737	44960	35768

Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Sample: all respondents

Contrary to the common belief, we observe no systematic increase of family support when the children are small (0-5 years old), which may be considered the care intense stage of parenthood. The only increase concerns the frequency of contact: it occurs among fathers when the child is 0, and for mothers when the child is 1-2 years old. Furthermore, parents of older children (6-24 years old) receive systematically less support than the otherwise similar childless persons.

Other predictors of family support include age (older people receive more support, but among men the frequency of contact declines with age) and satisfaction with own health (both practical and emotional support; which suggests that family support may have positive effects for health). Moreover, single persons receive more emotional support from the relatives than married persons.

We now move to investigating how do various aspects of family support evolve over the course of parenthood. The results of models (as in Equation 1) are shown in Figures 1-3.

Figure 1 shows the dynamics of the predicted frequency of contact with relatives. The overall dynamics associated with parents' aging differs among genders: whereas among men the frequency slowly declines, among women it grows with age. The effects of parenthood are visible and significant. Both for men and women, the frequency of contacts increases with the first birth. However, in case of second and third births the effects occur only for men.

The frequency of contact with relatives decreases among fathers of the first child already when the child is 1 and 4 years old). At older ages of first and second child contact with relatives remains comparable with the one of the overall population. However, parents of three children declare less frequent contact with relatives than their age would imply.

Figures 2 and 3 show the predicted dynamics of practical and emotional support from non-resident relatives. For both variables the overall trajectory is positive: people get more practical support as they grow older.

We see no signs of increase of support in the period surrounding the birth. Only among men having their second child the support experienced 4 years before the birth was lower than in the year of the birth. This is an exception as we see no similar increase, neither for men nor for women.

Furthermore, parents receive less family support that their age would imply. This negative effect of parenthood on family support is more systematic for men than for women, and concerns more strongly the practical support than the emotional support. This may be a consequence of selecting to parenthood the happier, and overall 'better functioning' persons. If this is the case, childless persons would more often than parents need the support of their relatives . The nuclear family consisting of partners and children may support each other efficiently, so that the need for external family support may be lower.

We also investigated how the number of relatives (who do not reside in one's household and with whom respondents are in good terms) changes over the course of parenthood (results not shown, available upon request). Overall, this number decreases steadily with the time of parents, as family members age and pass away. This occurs for men and women at similar rate. We see no effects of early parenthood on this dynamics. However, at older ages of the child mothers of two and three children temporarily declare a larger network of relatives than could be predicted from their age. On the contrary, fathers declare overall smaller networks.

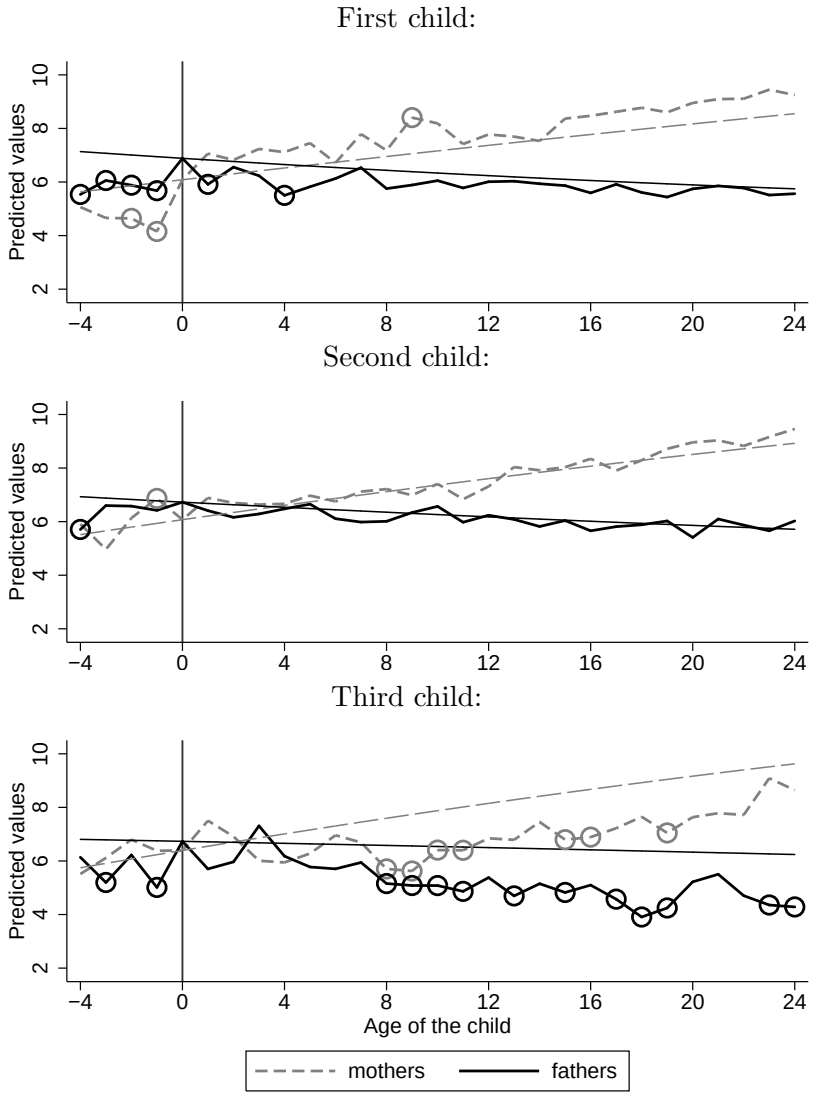

Figure 1: Predicted frequency of contact with non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Estimates as in Equation 1. Reference category is the year of the birth.
Predictions account for age of parent and of the child. The thin lines show the trend associated with aging of the parent; the thick lines show how the trajectory of parents departs from the trend related to aging. The circles mark significant effects of age of a child.

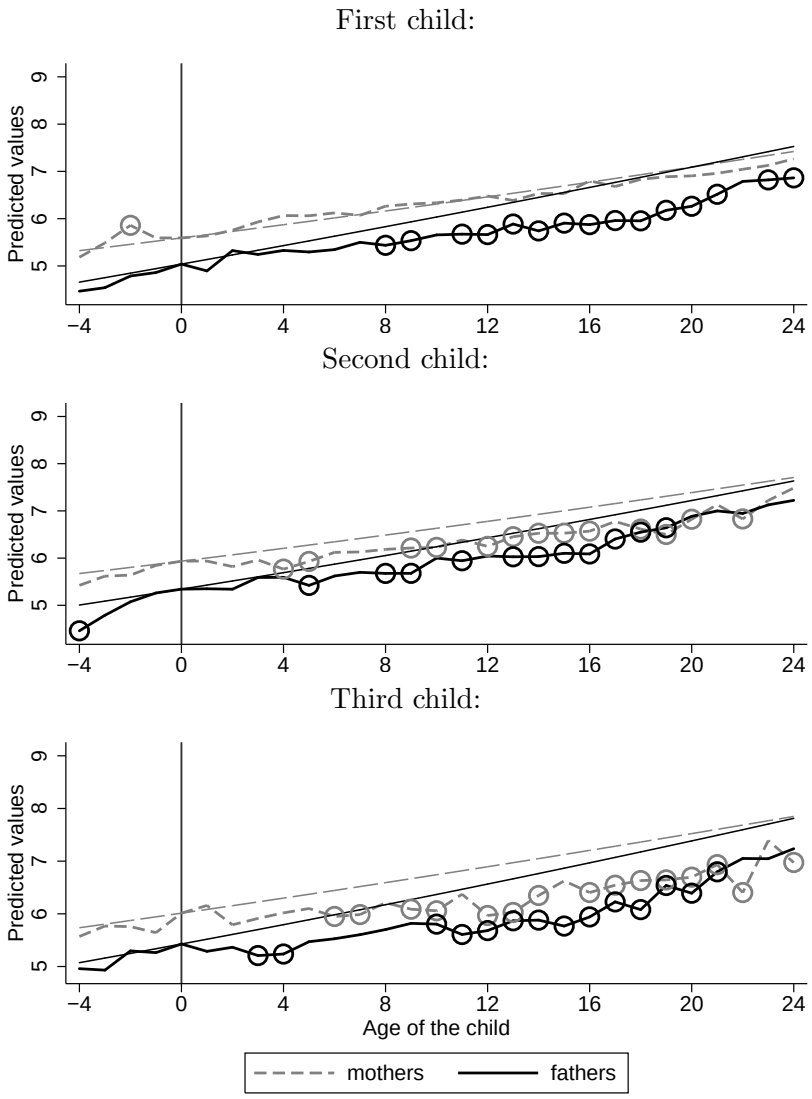

Figure 2: Predicted practical support from non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Estimates as in Equation 1. Reference category is the year of the birth.
Predictions account for age of parent and of the child. The thin lines show the trend associated with aging of the parent; the thick lines show how the trajectory of parents departs from the trend related to aging. The circles mark significant effects of age of a child.

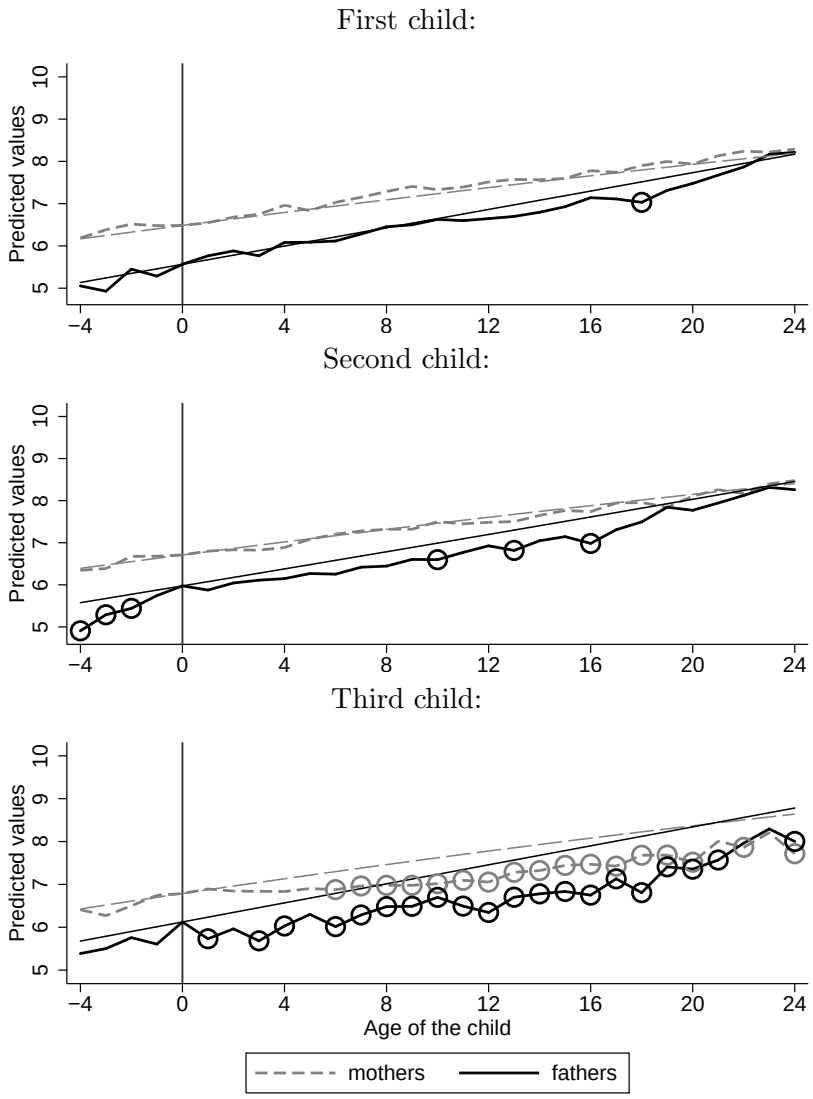

Figure 3: Predicted emotional support from non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Estimates as in Equation 1. Reference category is the year of the birth.
Predictions account for age of parent and of the child. The thin lines show the trend associated with aging of the parent; the thick lines show how the trajectory of parents departs from the trend related to aging. The circles mark significant effects of age of a child.

Summing up, only one measure, that is the frequency of contact, increases upon transition to parenthood and remains high in the care-intense stage of it. However, among people with three children the frequency of contact with relatives falls below the levels predicted from their age. Also the practical and emotional support generally decline with time among parents.

3.2 Who receives more family support?

Before investigating the buffering effect of family support, we inspect the characteristics of persons receiving high rather than low support from non-residing relatives (Table 3.) Using a cross-sectional logistic model we regress being in frequent rather than rare contact with relatives, and receiving high rather than low support, on a set of time invariant characteristics of individuals.

Table 3: Logistic regression of high support from relatives on characteristics of individuals (odds ratios)

	Frequency of contact		Practical support		Emotional support	
	overall sample	parents	overall sample	parents	overall sample	parents
secondary education	1.49	1.45	1.28	1.24	1.12	1.08
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.001)***	(0.005)*	(0.253)
tertiary eduation	1.64	1.58	1.38	1.24	1.35	1.19
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.003)*	(0.000)***	(0.018)*
household income	1.52	1.89	1.26	1.24	1.14	1.07
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.030)*
gender (woman)	1.67	2.31	1.78	2.22	1.95	2.35
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
born bofore 1950	0.91	0.60	0.47	0.30	0.42	0.28
	(0.014)*	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
born 1950-59	0.81	0.72	0.54	0.39	0.53	0.39
	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
born 1960-69	0.96	0.86	0.80	0.59	0.77	0.57
	(0.423)	(0.100)	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***	(0.000)***
ever a parent	1.93		1.49		1.26	
	(0.000)***		(0.000)***		(0.000)***	
age at 1st birth		1.00		1.01		1.00
		(0.863)		(0.247)		(0.683)
Observations	19842	7035	19842	7035	19842	7035

Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Cross-sectional estimation on a sample of individuals born between 1919 ans 1991. All characteristics are defined as stable for individuals.
'Parents' include also prospective parents.
Reference categories include: for cohort 'born after 1969', for education 'primary and vocational education'.

The odds of receiving high rather than low support are higher among parents than among non-parents, and much higher among women than among men (about 2.3 times among mothers than among fathers). They are also higher at higher levels of education (although the difference between tertiary and secondary education seems negligible), at higher levels of household income, and they are higher among the younger respondents than among the older.

This leads to two main conclusions. First, parents have higher chances of receiving high family support, even though – as we saw in Section 3.1 – entering parenthood and aging of the child do not trigger stronger support from relatives. The model in Table 3 captures differences between individuals, contrary to presented before results of fixed-effects estimations which use the information of within-person overtime changes. This leads to conclusion that family support is one of resources which increase the chances of parenthood, but it is not a resource provided by relatives in response to transition to parenthood.

Second, family support correlates positively with two other dimensions of social privilege: household income and education. This shows that support from relatives cannot be considered coping strategy alternative to relying on own resources. Resorting to family support is not the strategy of otherwise disadvantaged persons, but one of the resources of the privileged social strata.

3.3 Buffering effect of family support

Figures 4-6 show life satisfaction trajectories of parents receiving overall low and overall high social support (defined as a time-invariant characteristic of individuals). Note that this analysis demonstrates the differences between individuals with high vs. low support, and not the effects of the overtime changes of family support.

Figure 4 shows the results for frequency of contact. Overall, rare contact with relatives is associated with more negative trajectory of life satisfaction in the period of parenthood than frequent contact. The only exception is the case of women becoming mothers for the first time: in this case rare contact with relatives correlates with a more positive effect of birth on life satisfaction.

Similar results for practical support are shown in Figure 5, and for emotional support in Figure 6. Statistically significant effect of high support occurs only for women for the first child, and men for the third child. For men, higher support goes with more positive trajectory of life satisfaction. However, the direction of the relationship for women is different than expected: mothers who receive overall more support (be it either practical or emotional) are less (and not more) happy than mothers receiving less support.

Summing up, our results may be interpreted in terms of buffering effect, and they suggest that the frequent contact is a measure closer to the theoretical notion of support than the declared practical and emotional support. Moreover, among men level of support improves life satisfaction mainly at higher parity levels. However, the results for women are opposite to our predictions and suggest a mechanism not accounted for in our reasoning. It is possible that the overall higher family support makes the decision about parenthood easier, therefore in this group also women for whom motherhood is less central become mothers. In that case the lower positive selection to motherhood might result in overall less positive trajectory of life satisfaction. Alternatively, it is also possible that among women receiving particularly high family support during the transition to parenthood signifies some problems with this transition; in that case these problems (rather than the high level of support) would be the main negative correlate of life satisfaction.

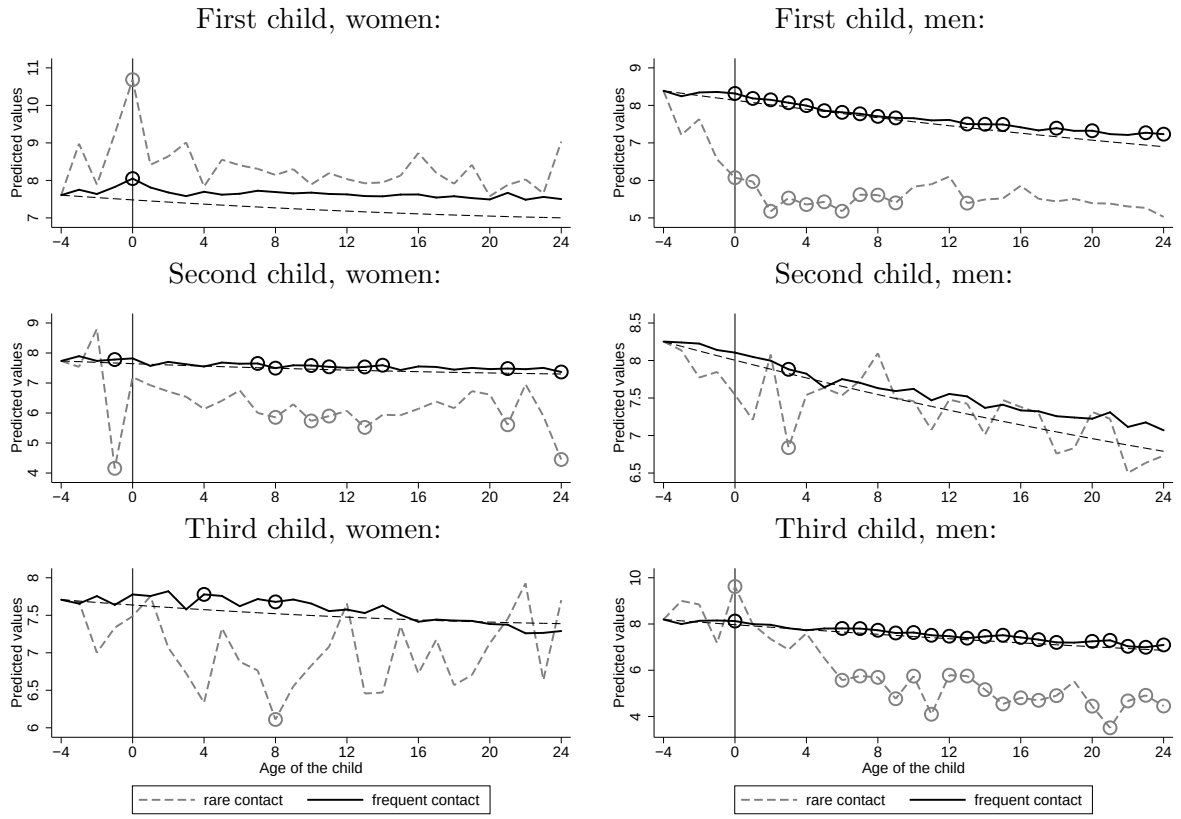

Figure 4: Predicted life satisfaction of (prospective) parents having frequent or rare contact with non-residing relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.

Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.

Note: Estimation as in Equation 2. Predictions account for age of parent (thin line) and of the child (thick line). Reference category is the period 4 years or more before the birth.

Contact frequency is calculated for each individual as an average over the observation period. 'High contact frequency' refers to median or higher frequency of contact; 'low contact frequency' refers to frequency of contact below median.

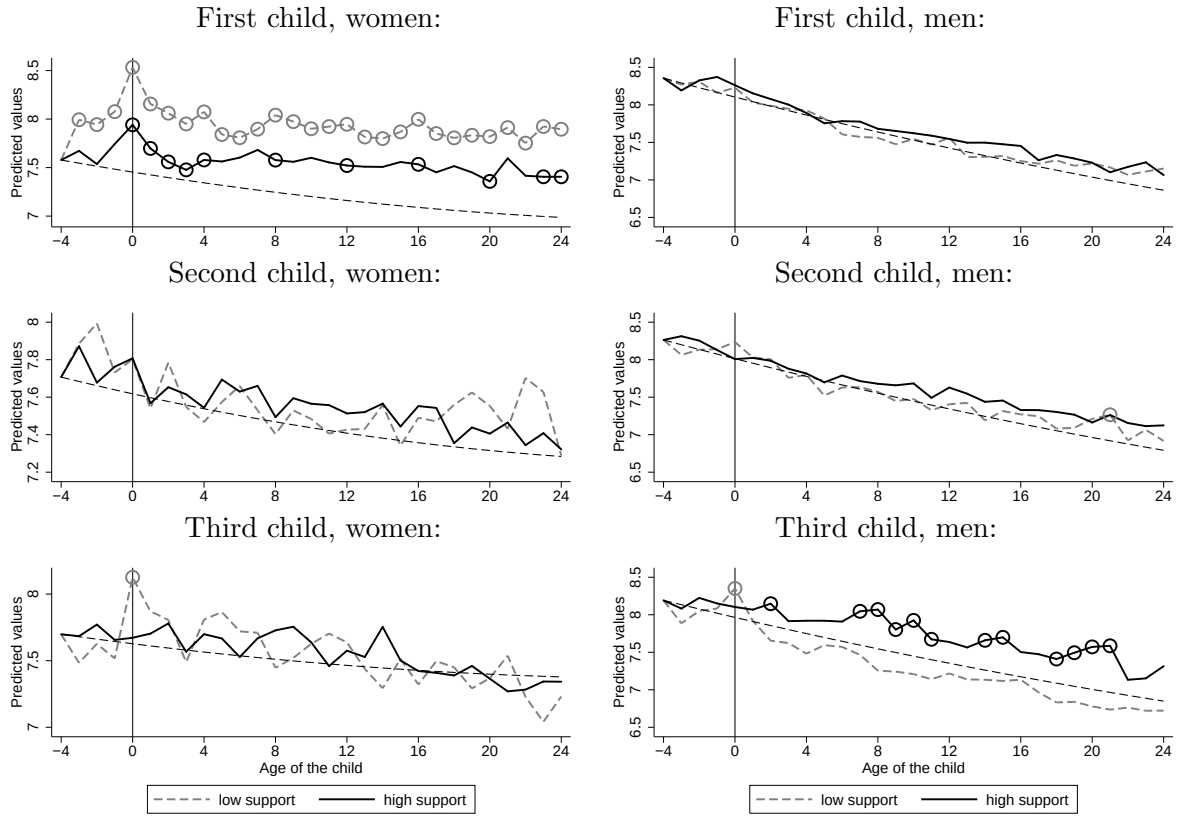

Figure 5: Predicted life satisfaction of (prospective) parents receiving high and low practical support from relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Estimation as in Equation 2. Predictions account for age of parent (thin line) and of the child (thick line). Reference category is the period 4 years or more before the birth.
Support is calculated for each individual as an average over the observation period. 'High support' refers to median or higher support; 'low contact frequency' refers to support below the median.

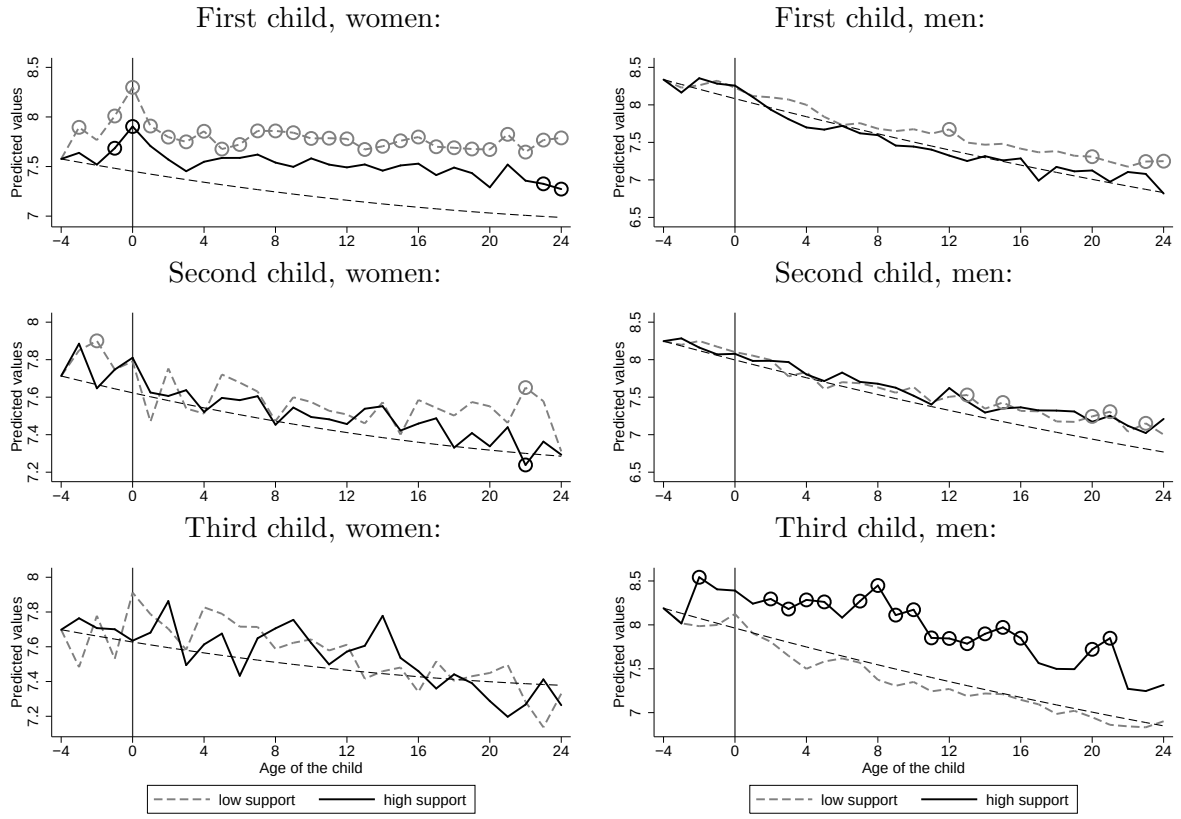

Figure 6: Predicted life satisfaction of (prospective) parents receiving high and low emotional support from relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Estimation as in Equation 2. Predictions account for age of parent (thin line) and of the child (thick line). Reference category is the period 4 years or more before the birth.
Support is calculated for each individual as an average over the observation period. 'High support' refers to median or higher support; 'low contact frequency' refers to support below the median.

3.4 Buffering effect of changes of support

To finalize our reasoning, we investigate how changes of support from relatives correlates with changes of life satisfaction at each stage of parenthood (Figures 7-9).

Overall, at young ages of a child, the increase of frequency of contact with relatives (Figure 7) is associated with either non-significant or negative change of life satisfaction. Only men whose first child is 3 or 4 years old experience particularly strong increase of life satisfaction if their frequency of contact with relatives increased. The positive correlation between the change of contact frequency and the change of parental life satisfaction occurs typically when a child is about 8-10 years old.

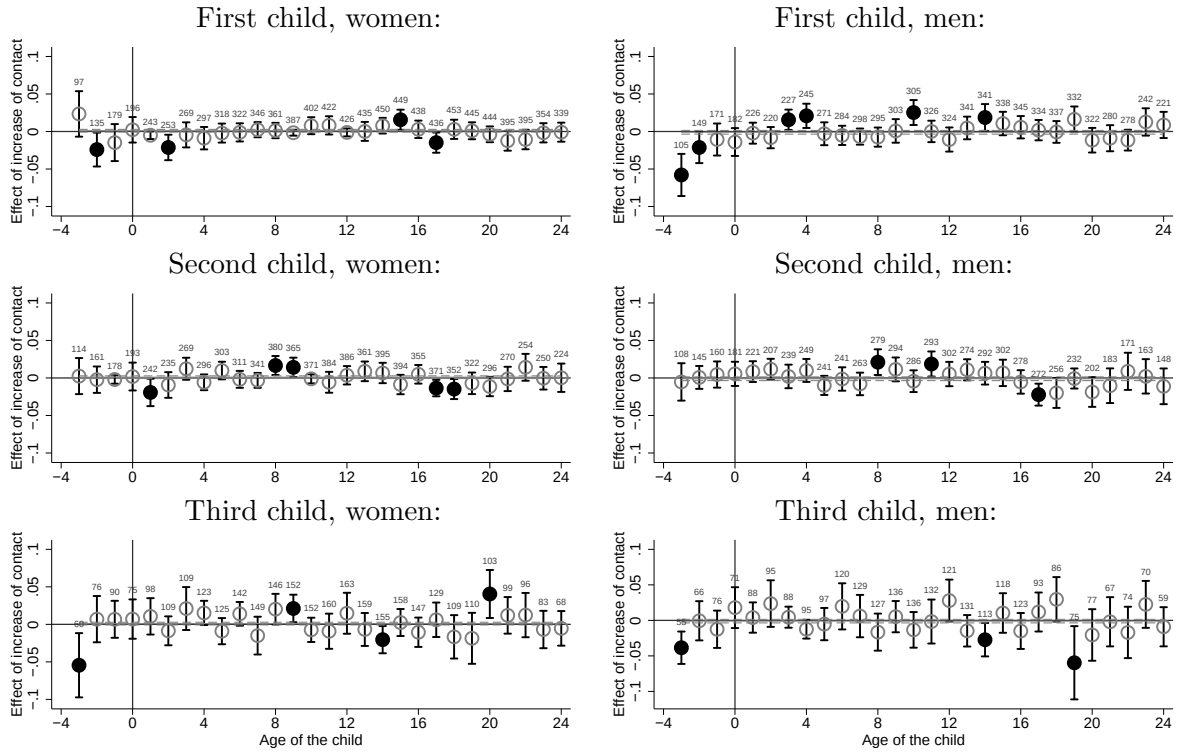

Figure 7: Predicted change life satisfaction of (prospective) parents associated with change of frequency of contact with relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Separate models were estimated for each age of the child.

The results for practical (Figure 8) and emotional support (Figure 9) show a similar pattern. First, among women who enter parenthood (i.e. in the year of the first birth) as well as for men when the practical support is considered, the change of family support negatively correlates with changes of life satisfaction. This result contradicts our expectations, but is consistent with the interpretation that an increase of family support during the period of entering parenthood signifies some unobserved difficulties, which in turn negatively affect life satisfaction.

At older ages of the first child, and for the second child, changes of family support positively correlate with changes of life satisfaction. This suggests that relatives may be efficient in delivering support rather at later stages of parenthood. It is plausible that the earlier appearing effect for the second child indicates support provided to the first, older child.

Finally, among fathers experiencing the third birth the changes of emotional support strongly

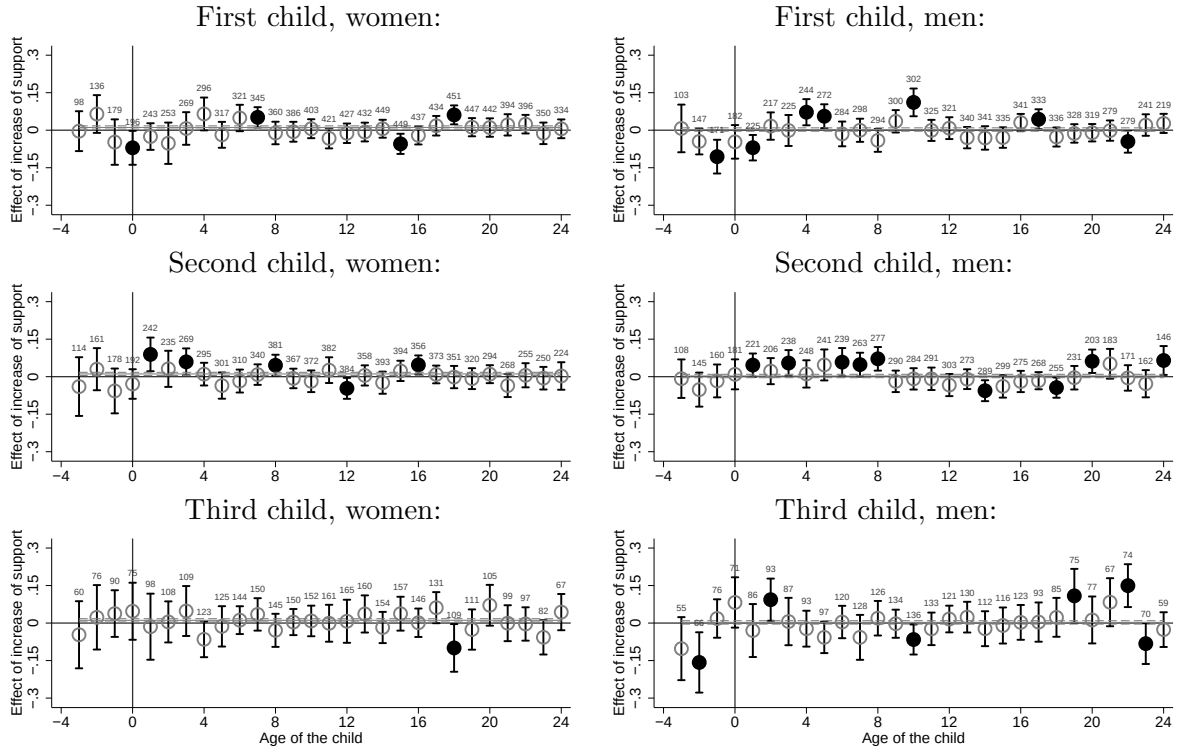

Figure 8: Predicted change life satisfaction of (prospective) parents associated with change of received practical support from relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Separate models were estimated for each age of the child.

positively correlate with changes of life satisfaction. This is consistent with the results of Section 3.3, which demonstrated particular importance of family support for men having their third child.

To sum up, we observe no positive correlation between changes of contact frequency and changes of life satisfaction at the care-intense stages of parenthood. Moreover, with the exception of men having their third child, we see no positive correlation between changes of family support and changes of life satisfaction. In other words, we find no support for the hypothesis that family support is a particularly strong correlate of life satisfaction in the care-intense stages of parenthood.

4 Discussion

The goal of this analysis was to investigate the effect of family support during parenthood on the case of Switzerland. We defined parenthood, in particular its care-intense stage when the child is in preschool age, as a difficult life event. According to the buffering hypothesis, we expected that (1) family support in this period increases, and (2) it is positively related to life satisfaction: persons with high family support experience a more positive trajectory of life satisfaction in the period of parenthood than persons with lower family support.

Our results showed that the increase of family support is limited to only one measure: frequency of contact with relatives. Soon after the birth the frequency of contact with non-residing relatives is significantly higher than in the preceding period. In contrast to that, neither the number of relatives with whom one is on good terms, nor the practical and emotional

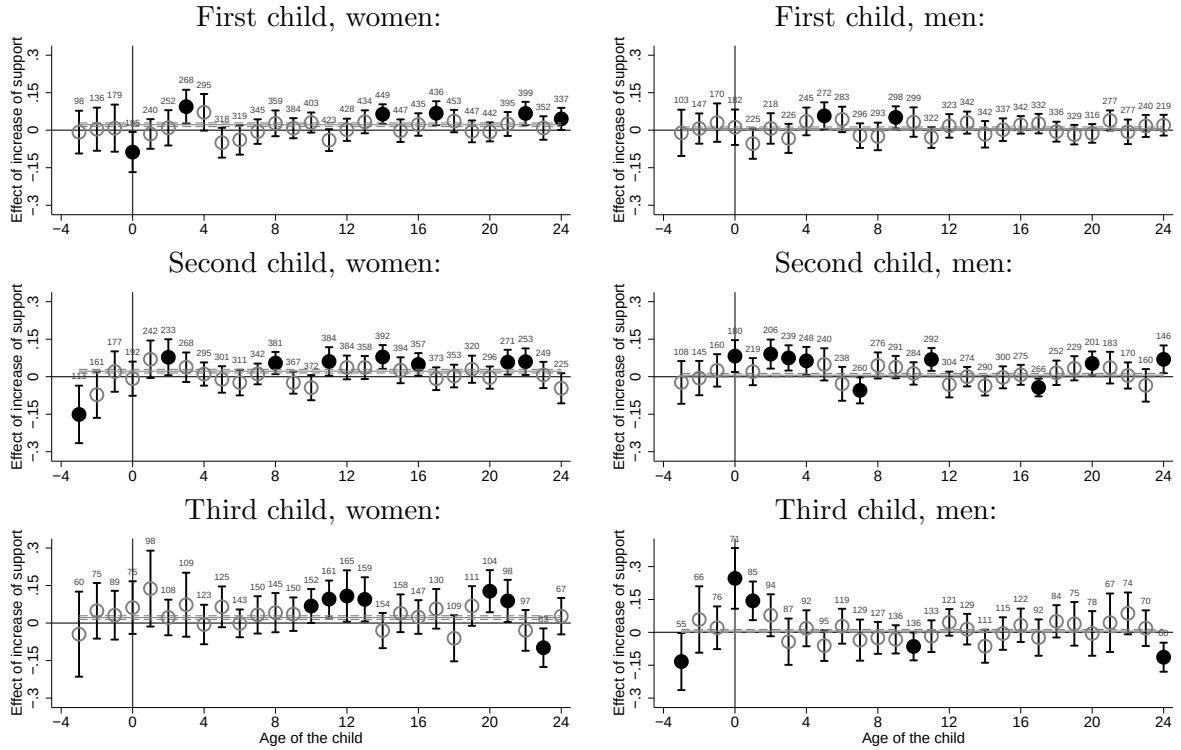

Figure 9: Predicted change life satisfaction of (prospective) parents associated with change of received emotional support from relatives. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Separate models were estimated for each age of the child.

support received from them do not increase upon entering parenthood or as the child ages. On the contrary, emotional and practical support from non-residing relatives declines rather than increase among parents of older children. This results suggests that, as most nuclear families with children function well and they provided sufficient support to their members within the households. What follows, the need for support, as well as willingness to support may be higher among childless couples and single persons.

Interestingly, high family support characterizes persons who are overall more wealthy, better educated, and younger. That is to say, high family support shows as one of the aspects of occupying a privileged social position, rather than a compensating strategy of the marginalized groups. Also parents have higher chances of belonging to the high-support group. This result suggests that family support may be a resource which increases probability of parenthood. It is plausible that persons with high family support are positively selected to parenthood, even if we find little evidence that support increases in response to parenthood.

The results on relationship between life satisfaction of parents and family support provide little support for the hypothesis that higher support positively correlates with parental life satisfaction. Only among men having their third child we found such a positive relationship (both in the between-person approach in Section 3.3 and in the first difference approach in Section 3.4). The occurrence of the effect for a higher order birth may be explained by the stronger burden of parenthood in families in many children. However, this does not allow to explain why this effect occurs only for man and not for women.

Among women entering parenthood the relationship was opposite to expected. Mothers with

higher family support experienced more negative trajectory of life satisfaction, and changes of family support negatively correlated with changes of life satisfaction. Similarly, both for men and for women who enter parenthood we observe that increase of family support correlates with decline of life satisfaction. These results suggest that entering parenthood is a very special moment, for which young parents tend to be prepared. The overall late age of having a child in Switzerland is consistent with this hypothesis. In such conditions the necessity to resolve to family support may indicate unexpected difficulties and problems. It is also possible that entering parenthood and raising a child is by couples predominantly perceived as a "personal project" of a couple. They decide for parenthood when they are ready for it, and take the responsibility for it.

However, the relationship between changes of family support and changes of parental life satisfaction systematically occurs at later ages of children. This result suggests that relatives are an important resource for raising children, but they enter the scene at later stage. The initial care intense period seems to be, at least in Switzerland, the domain of parents themselves.

Our paper is the first one to explicitly investigate the buffering effect of family support during parenthood. We take a multidimensional approach and examine the dynamics of family support, differences in access to support, as well as life satisfaction correlates of received support. Overall, our results question the generality of the buffering mechanism. They also question the pivotal role of support from relatives in the period of parenthood in contemporary Switzerland. We find no evidence that the invisible net of family support is activated in the care intense stages of parenthood. Frequency of contact with relatives increases in this period, which however does not bring increased support nor clear positive consequences for parental life satisfaction. However, our results do not necessarily question the theoretical validity of buffering effect itself. It is likely that in contemporary Switzerland parenthood is not a critical situation. This is plausible, taking into account the overall high age and economic stability of couples entering parenthood, even if the state support for parenthood is rather limited in Switzerland.

Appendix 1. The dynamics of average frequencies of selected measures of family ties and support among parents and prospective parents.

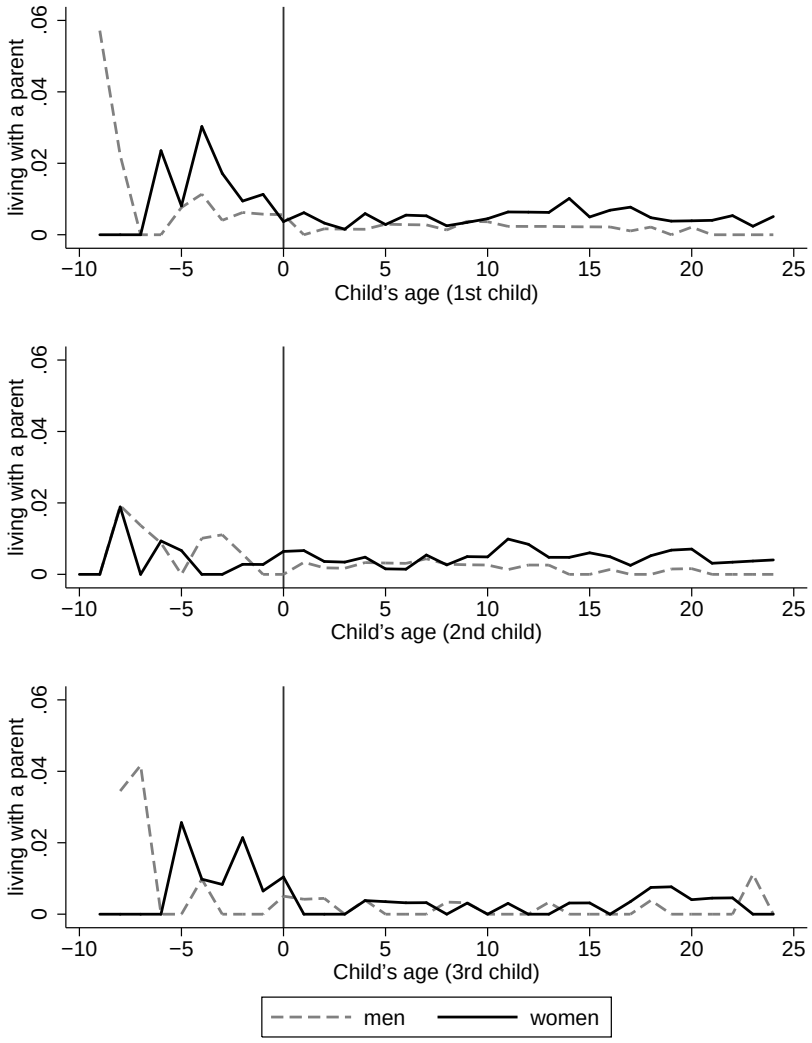

Figure 10: Percentage of (prospective) parents co-residing with own parents. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

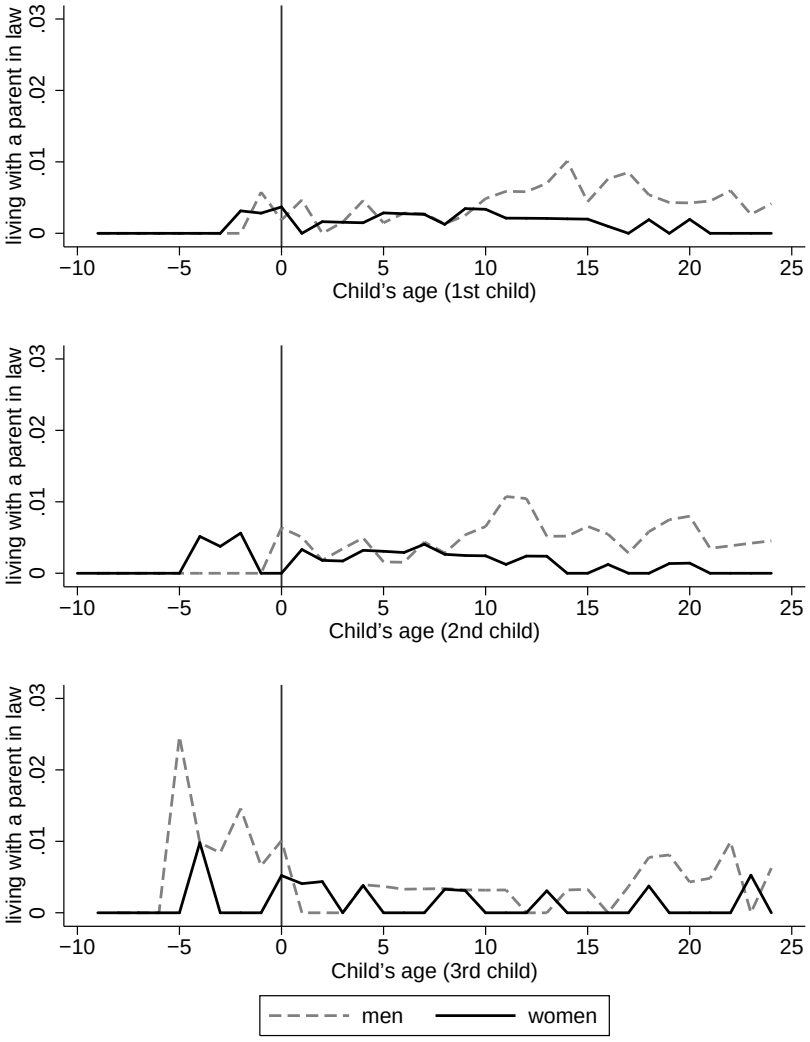

Figure 11: Percentage of (prospective) parents co-residing with parents in law. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

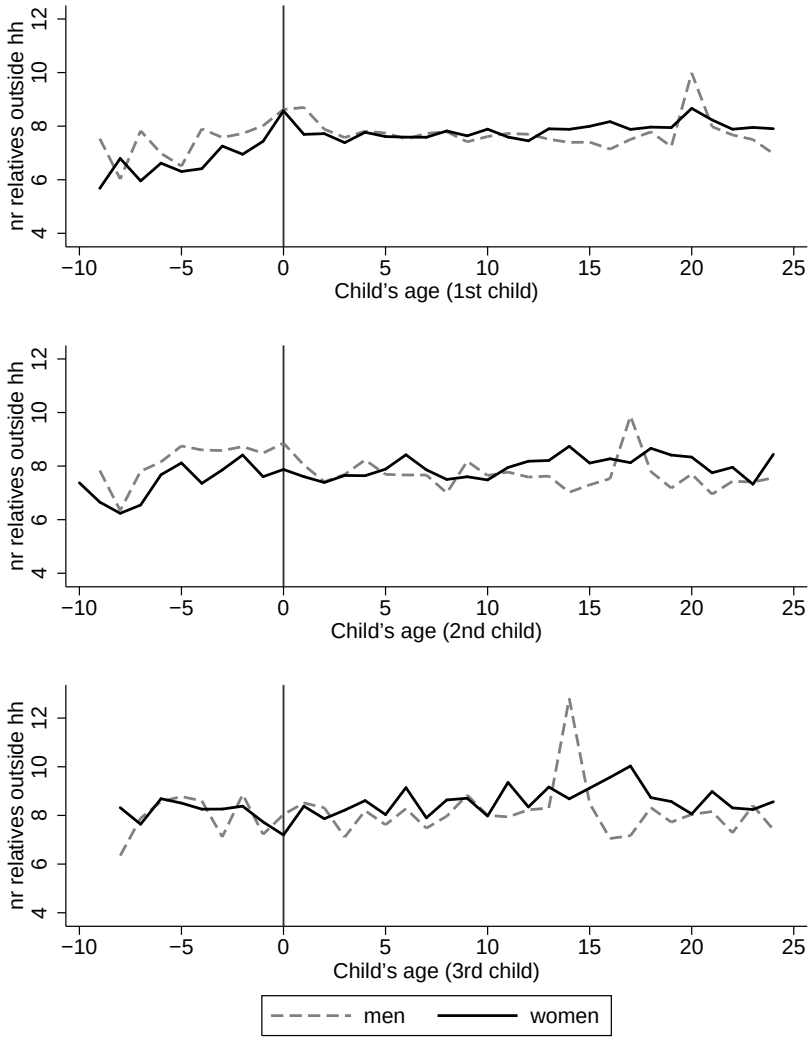

Figure 12: Average number of non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

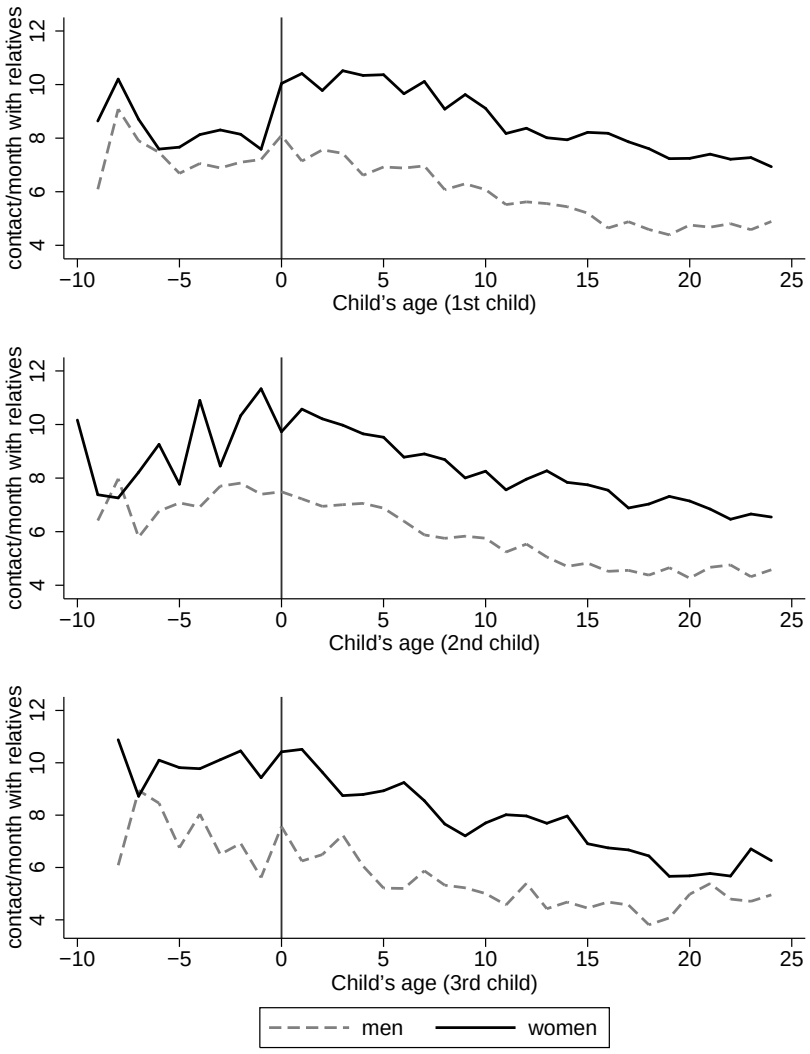

Figure 13: Average frequency of contact with non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

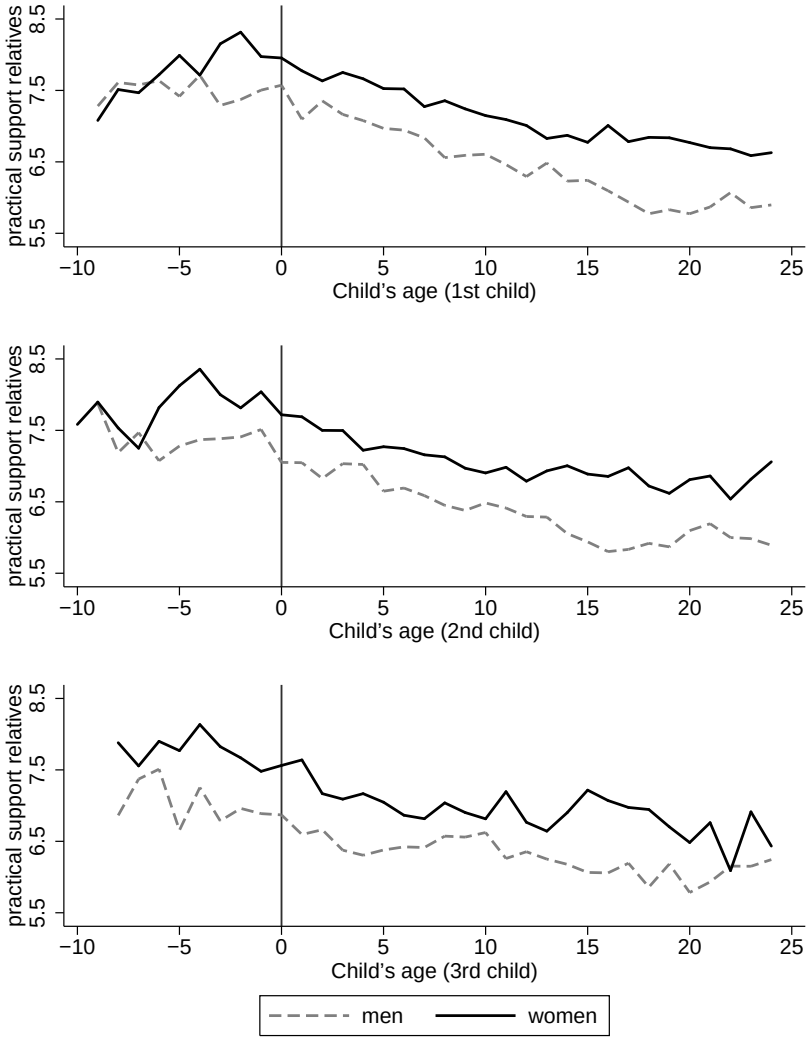

Figure 14: Average practical support from non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

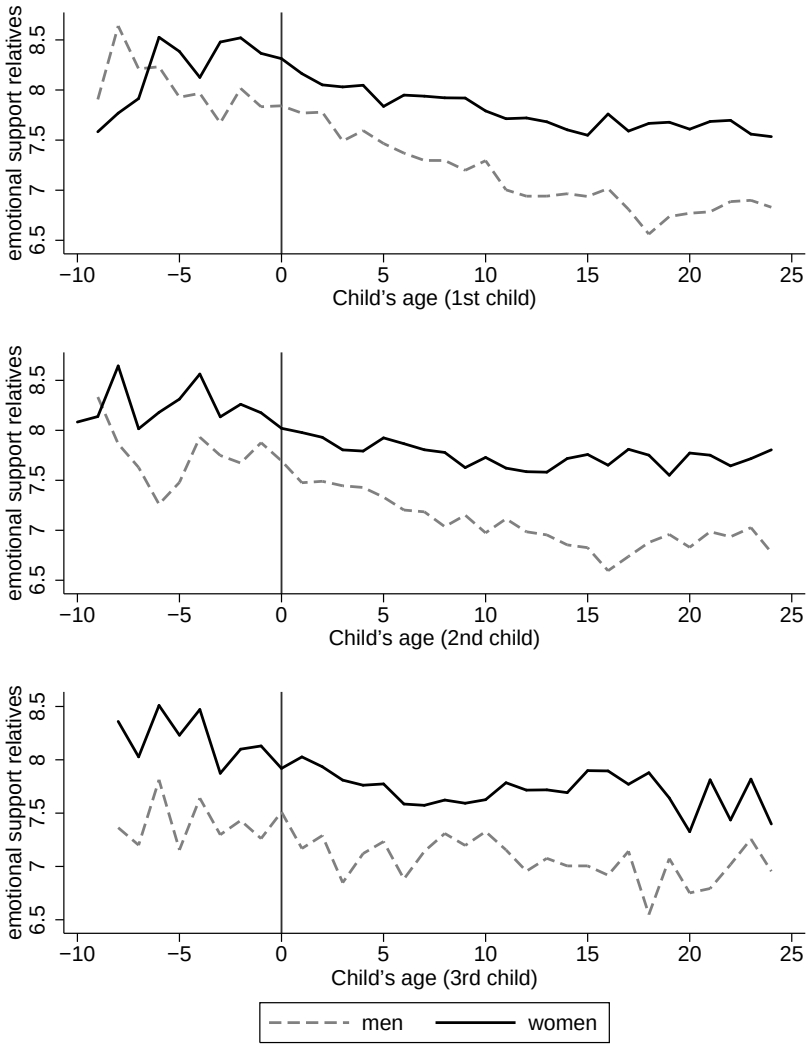

Figure 15: Average emotional support from non-residing relatives with whom (prospective) parents are in good terms. Separately for the first, second, and third child.
Source: SHP data, waves 1-12.
Note: Graphs only for subgroups with $n >= 20$.

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