



# Parenting Styles and Discipline: Parents' and Children's Perspectives

## SUMMARY REPORT

The National Children's  
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# **Parenting Styles and Discipline: Parents' Perspectives**

## **SUMMARY REPORT**

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OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

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# Parents' Perspectives

This report outlines and discusses key findings arising from the first national survey of parenting styles and discipline in Ireland. A large body of research literature in the UK, USA and Australia has focused on the links between parenting styles, parental discipline responses, child behaviour and children's psychological well-being (Smith *et al*, 2005; Gershoff, 2002; Parke, 2002; Eisenberg *et al*, 2001). Yet, there is little available information in Ireland about the prevalence of different parental discipline responses or of parental beliefs about and attitudes to the use of physical punishment as a form of discipline with children. The present study adopted a telephone survey methodology involving interviews with 1,353 women and men with at least one child under 18 years of age, living in private households.

In this Summary Report, key findings are presented on parenting styles and a range of discipline strategies, including physical punishment, adopted by parents in Ireland. Parents' attitudes to physical punishment and to legislation on physical punishment are also presented.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The increasing pressure that families in Ireland are experiencing in terms of negotiating the parental role has been highlighted in a recent report, focusing on key aspects of change (Daly, 2004). A significant challenge identified by most parents was finding the right balance between control and consultation in their parenting interactions with children. Guiding children was, furthermore, viewed by parents to be increasingly more difficult in a society where rules and values were subject to constant fluctuation and parental authority was no longer so clearly supported by society. It is also worth noting that parenting in Irish society frequently occurs within a family routine that involves both parents working, thus creating additional stressors for parenting. Humphreys *et al* (2000) emphasize that one of the dominant issues facing family life in modern Ireland is the challenge posed by reconciling the growing demands of work with caring responsibilities outside the workplace.

Discipline is the process of teaching children the values and normative behaviours of their society (Wissow, 2002). A distinction has been drawn between *power-assertive* disciplinary methods (i.e. physical punishment, threats or withdrawal of privileges), *love-withdrawal* disciplinary methods (i. e. withholding attention, affection or approval, or expressing disappointment or disapproval) and *inductive* discipline strategies (i.e. reasoning, reminding children of rules and explaining the impact of children's behaviour on others). Inductive discipline has been found to be more effective in terms of promoting children's internalisation of moral and social values (Kerr *et al*, 2004). Holden (2002) further draws a distinction between discipline and punishment, highlighting the important role that discipline plays in emphasizing instruction about what is valuable and the consequences of actions. Durrant (2005, p. 49) defines corporal or physical punishment as '*an action taken by a parent, teacher or caregiver that is intended to cause physical pain or discomfort to a child. It is the application of punishment to the body.*'

Durrant (2006) emphasizes the complexity of estimating the prevalence of physical punishment due to the wide variety of methods which have been used, yielding a wide range of estimates. Recent studies in the UK indicate that 58% of parents in England reported having used physical punishment with their children in the past year (Ghate *et al*, 2003). Similarly, in Scotland, while the most common forms of punishment used by parents tend to be non-physical, about half the parents interviewed (51%) said that they had used some form of physical chastisement with their children in the past year (Anderson *et al*, 2002).

A thorough understanding of the potential effects of physical punishment as a discipline response has not yet been achieved. There is general consensus that physical punishment is effective in gaining immediate compliance (Newsom *et al*, 1983; Larzelere, 2000). However, power-assertive discipline strategies, where there is little effort to use verbal reasoning, do little to help a child internalise appropriate values and attitudes (Eisenberg and Valiente, 2002; Kochanska *et al*, 2001). Much research has also demonstrated links between physical punishment and aggressive and anti-social behaviour in adolescence and into adulthood (Gershoff, 2002; Fergusson and Lynskey, 1997; Cohen and Brook, 1995; Mulvaney and Mebert, 2007). Deater-Deckard and Dodge (1997), however, suggest that the effects of physical discipline on child behaviour, such as aggression, may vary depending on how prevalent and acceptable the behaviour is in an ethnic and cultural context.

In addition to problem acting-out behaviours, links have been drawn between physical punishment and mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Gershoff, 2002). Smith *et al* (2005, p. 14) suggest that the '*establishment of positive reciprocal relationships between parents and children are antithetical to parental treatment which includes physical punishment*', consistent with findings in other research (Coyl *et al*, 2002; Gershoff, 2002; Bugental and Goodnow, 1998). Finally, physical punishment has been associated with greater risk of physical abuse. According to Smith *et al* (2005), two-thirds of physically abusive incidents arise out of parental disciplinary actions. Gershoff's meta-analysis of 92 studies (on corporal punishment and associated child behaviours and experiences) confirmed a strong association in 10 of the studies between parental physical punishment and parental physical abuse of the same children.

To date, corporal punishment of children is prohibited in *all* settings (home, schools, penal systems and alternative care) in 18 out of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the Ukraine (Council of Europe, 2008). Absolute prohibition of physical punishment in the family setting is not provided for in Irish legislation. Common law recognises the right of parents to use moderate and 'reasonable chastisement' on a child. The European Court of Human Rights has challenged the concept of 'reasonable chastisement' by parents on the grounds that it fails to provide children with adequate protection, including 'effective deterrence' (Council of Europe, 2007). Ireland, along with a number of other countries, has provided a commitment to prohibiting corporal punishment in the future (Council of Europe, 2008). In the UK, public consultation exercises, incorporating law reform options, have been undertaken in Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales (Smith *et al*, 2005). The Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 abandoned a proposed prohibition on the use of physical punishment with children under the age of 3 years and instead introduced the concept of 'justifiable assault' of children; Section 51 of this Act specifically prohibits blows to the head, shaking and the use of an implement to hit a child. However, in all other cases the defence of 'reasonable chastisement' remains.

While the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child does not explicitly mention corporal punishment or physical discipline, several of its Articles are pertinent to the issue of physical punishment (UN, 1989). Most notably, Article 19(1) states that children must be protected from '*all forms of physical or mental violence*'. An in-depth, comprehensive global study on violence against children was undertaken in 2004 (Pinheiro, 2006). Arising from the recommendations outlined in this report, the year 2009 has been set as the target date for achieving universal abolition of corporal punishment of children.

## GOALS OF THE RESEARCH

The primary aim of this research is to identify the main parenting styles and forms of discipline used in Ireland by parents with children up to the age of 18, with a particular focus on attitudes to and uses of physical punishment. A further aim of the research is to identify parental attitudes to the legislative position in relation to physical chastisement of children.

Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

- What parenting goals and expectations for their children do parents in Ireland have today?
- What are parents' perspectives on Irish society as a context for parenting and what pressures do parents experience?
- What parenting styles and discipline strategies do parents use? To what extent do parents use physical punishment as a method of discipline?
- Under what circumstances do parents employ certain approaches to discipline?
- What are parents' attitudes towards physical punishment?
- Are parents aware of the current legislative position on physical punishment?
- What are parents' perspectives on potential legislative change?
- How do child-rearing goals, parenting styles and approaches to discipline and attitudes towards physical punishment vary according to the age, gender and social class of parents and children?

## METHOD

### Sample access and recruitment

A telephone survey methodology was adopted and data collection was carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The sample was selected from parents who responded to the ESRI's Monthly Consumer Survey from May 2007 to November 2007. All parents of children aged under 18 years were asked at the end of that survey if they would be willing to participate in an important survey on parenting later in the year. Over three-quarters of the parents were willing to be contacted again about the Parenting Survey.

### Sample composition

A total of 1,353 parents participated in the Parenting Survey. Parents ranged in age from 21 to 69 years (mean: 40.45 years; s.d = 7.98). The majority of families in the study were characterised by parents and children of Irish origin (over 95%), in two-parent households (over 80%), with at least one earner in the household (over 80%). There was a broad mix of socio-economic groupings, with the largest proportions belonging within the professional and managerial classes (31%) and skilled/unskilled manual classes (29%). The education level of parents was also broadly mixed, with just less than one-third leaving school before the end of second level (28%) and slightly less than half going beyond second-level education (45%). As a representative sample of the population of parents in Ireland, there was a relatively even breakdown across types of location, with similar proportions living in cities and isolated locations, and slightly smaller proportions coming from towns and villages.

As with most surveys, the completed sample for the Parenting Survey under-represented certain 'hard to reach' groups, such as young adults, males and those at work. Sample weighting was used to compensate for any biases in the distribution of characteristics in the completed survey sample. The sample weights successfully adjust for the majority of these differences. However, the number of very young and single parents who completed the survey was low (with no respondents under the age of 20).<sup>1</sup> Thus, even with weighting applied, the sample will somewhat under-represent younger (under 30) and single parents. Generalisations to this group therefore need to be treated with caution.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In general, young adults are a difficult group to reach in survey research, so the fact that they are under-represented in this sample is not unusual.

<sup>2</sup> While this could have been adjusted using weighting, the resulting weights would have extreme values which could compromise the quality of the analysis.

## Research method

The study adopted a telephone survey methodology. The survey questionnaire was designed by the research team at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and Trinity College, Dublin (TCD), with input from the ESRI Survey Division. The questionnaire was piloted in September 2007 to test its feasibility in the field. Sections of the questionnaire were adapted from questionnaires used in *The National Study of Parents, Children and Discipline in Britain* (Ghate *et al*, 2003) and *Disciplining Children: Research with Parents in Scotland* (Anderson *et al*, 2002). Topics covered in the questionnaire included background information on participating households, general views on parenting in Ireland, attitudes towards physical punishment and contexts in which it occurs, parenting styles adopted by parents, discipline strategies used by parents in the past year, discipline strategies experienced by parents in their own childhood and attitudes towards legislation in Ireland on physical punishment. The questionnaire also included extracts from a number of standardised measures that tapped into parenting styles, child behaviour and child temperament.

## Ethical issues

Procedures and guidelines of the DIT Research Ethics Committee for Good Research Practice underpin the present research. The questionnaire and procedure of the study were subject to review and approval by the Research Ethics Committee within the DIT. As the study involved a telephone survey questionnaire, consent from respondents was obtained verbally. Prior to obtaining consent, all respondents were provided with details of the study's aims and objectives, details of who funded the study and the organisations involved in carrying out the research. Respondents were also assured that all information exchanged during the interview would be held in strictest confidence. The ESRI, in collaboration with the research team, developed systematic procedures to be adopted in the case of a respondent reporting behaviours that were deemed damaging or injurious to a child's safety.

## Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. In addition to frequency and descriptive analysis, bivariate analysis was used to compare parenting behaviours and attitudes by gender and age of the parent, gender and age of the child, social class categorisation of the household and education level of the parent.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Parental discipline responses

Parents self-reported on the overall incidence of a range of disciplinary responses to their child's misbehaviour in the past year. Discipline responses included both physical and non-physical punishment, ranging from *inductive strategies* such as 'discussed issue calmly with child' to psychologically and physically *coercive strategies* such as 'called child stupid or lazy' and 'kicked or knocked child down'. Twenty-two strategies in total were included and findings are presented below under three headings: non-aggressive discipline strategies, psychologically aggressive discipline strategies and physical punishment.

### Non-aggressive discipline strategies

The majority of parents reported using non-aggressive discipline strategies with their children in the past year. In particular, verbal reasoning through *calm discussion of an issue* with a child was adopted by almost all parents. *Making a child take time out*, *threatening to ground a child* and *actually grounding a child* were also used relatively frequently by parents. Least likely to be used among this category of responses was *giving a child a chore to do* and *distracting a child in some way*, and these methods were used more frequently with children in early adolescence or early childhood respectively. Table 1 illustrates how often parents used non-aggressive discipline strategies with their children in the past year.

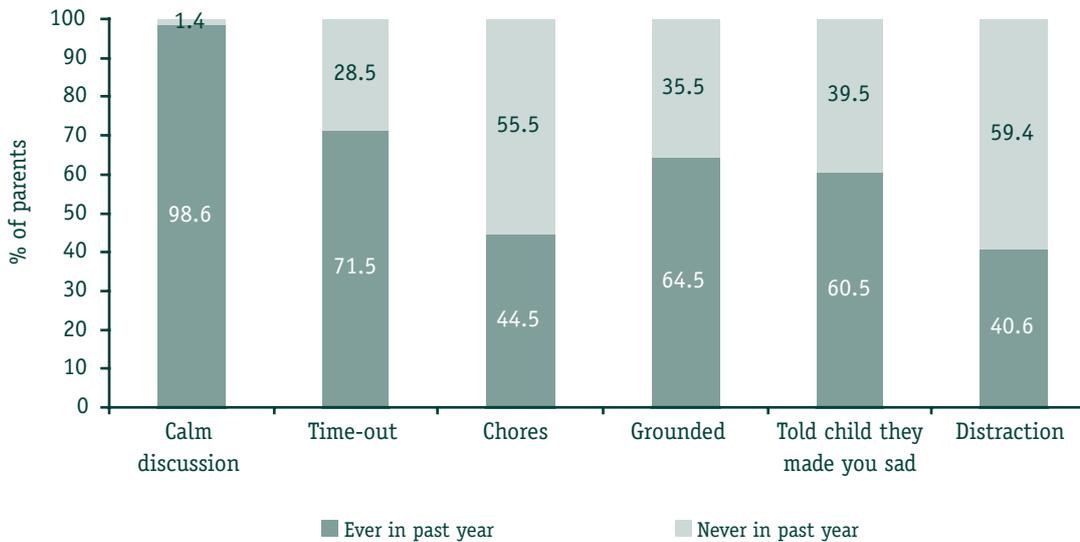
**Table 1: Frequency of use of non-aggressive discipline strategies in the past year (% of parents)**

Non-aggressive discipline strategies	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Discussed issue calmly	79.7	16.3	2.5	1.4
Made child take time-out	26.4	30.3	14.7	28.5
Gave child chore	12.1	17.9	14.5	55.5
Threatened to ground child	28.4	39.5	12.2	19.9
Actually grounded child	20.8	27.1	16.5	35.5
Threatened to tell someone else	14.9	20.1	11.4	53.6
Told child he/she made you sad	13.7	31.0	15.8	39.5
Distracted child in some way	14.1	18.4	8.1	59.4

- *Time-out* was more likely to be used with children in middle childhood (aged 5-9 years).
- *Grounding* was more likely to be used with children in early adolescence (aged 10-14 years).
- Parents in the oldest age category (45 years and over) were less likely to make a child take *time-out*.
- Parents aged between 35 and 44 were more likely to use *grounding* as a discipline response.
- Fathers were less likely than mothers to *threaten to tell someone else* as a discipline response.

Figure 1 shows a selection of the non-aggressive discipline strategies adopted by parents in the past year, re-coded into two categories of 'ever in the past year' and 'never in the past year'.

**Figure 1: Non-aggressive discipline strategies adopted by parents in the past year (% of parents)**



### Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies

Very few parents reported using psychologically aggressive discipline strategies in response to parent-child conflict, with the majority of parents indicating that they never used any of the discipline strategies categorised as psychologically aggressive. However, just under half of parents (48%) indicated that they had *shouted or yelled at a child* in the past year. Table 2 summarises how often parents used psychologically aggressive discipline strategies with their children.

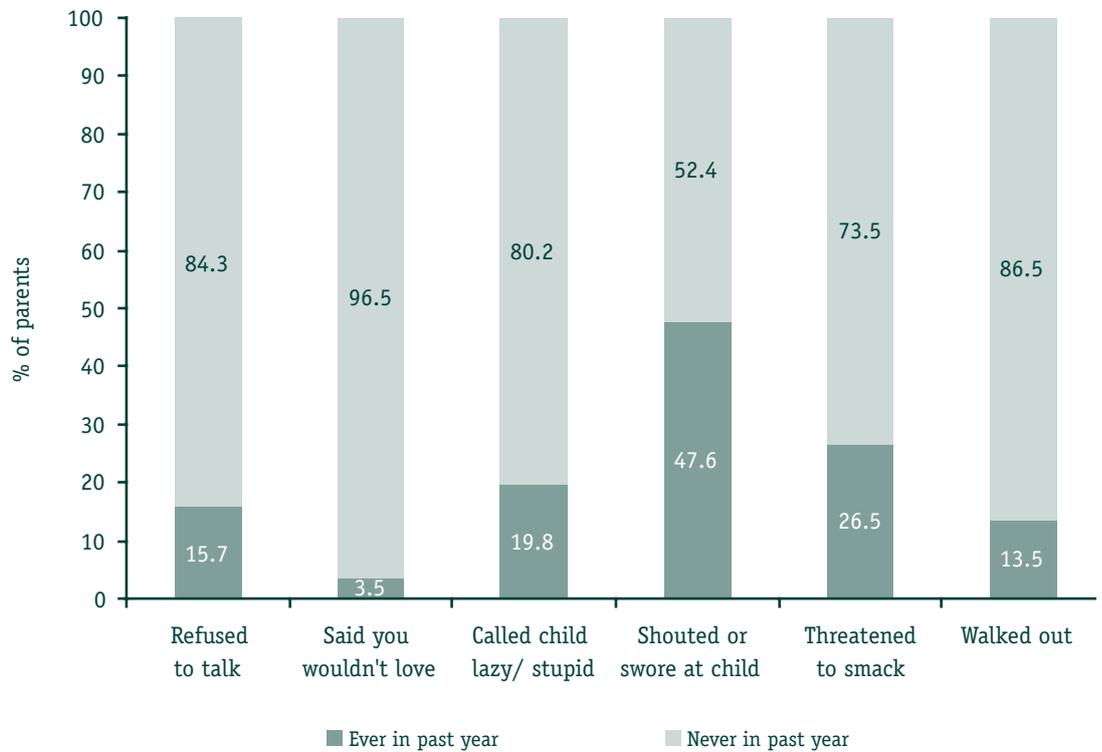
**Table 2: Frequency of use of psychologically aggressive discipline strategies in the past year (% of parents)**

Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Refused to talk to child	2.3	4.8	8.6	84.3
Said you would not love child	0.2	1.4	2.0	96.5
Called child stupid or lazy	2.4	7.3	10.2	80.2
Shouted, yelled or swore at child	4.7	19.9	23.0	52.4
Threatened to smack or hit child, but did not	3.8	14.5	8.2	73.5
Walked out on child or left the room or house	0.9	7.2	5.4	86.5

- *Threatening to smack a child* was more likely to be used with children in middle childhood (aged 5-9 years).
- *Calling a child stupid or lazy* was more likely to be used with older adolescents (aged 15-17 years).
- Parents in the oldest age category (45 years and over) were less likely to *threaten to smack a child*.
- Fathers were less likely than mothers to *walk out* (of the room or house) on a child as a response to a disciplinary incident.

Figure 2 illustrates the psychologically aggressive discipline strategies ‘ever’ or ‘never’ used by parents in the past year.

**Figure 2: Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies adopted by parents in the past year (% of parents)**



### Physical punishment discipline strategies

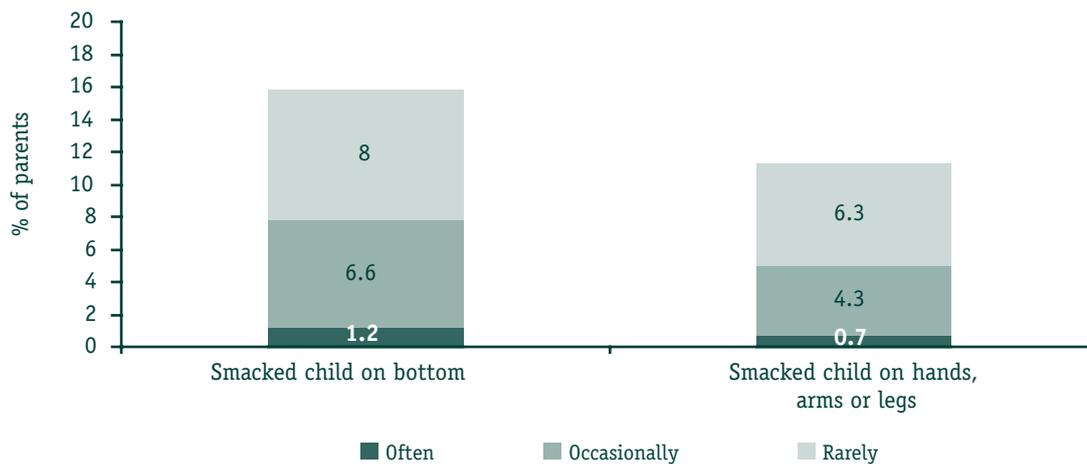
The use of physical punishment with children was low according to the self-report data collected from parents, with 25% reporting having used it with their child in the past year. The majority of these parents reported using less severe forms of physical punishment, such as smacking a child on the bottom, hand or leg. More severe physical punishment strategies were reported by a very small minority of parents, with almost 3% of parents indicating that they *shook, grabbed or pushed a child* in the past year either 'often' (1.4%) or 'occasionally' (1.3%). Table 3 summarises findings on how often parents used different types of physical punishment with their children in the past year.

**Table 3: Frequency of use of physical punishment in the past year (% of parents)**

Physical punishment discipline strategies	Often	Occasionally	Rarely	Never
Slapped child on bottom	1.2	6.6	8.0	84.1
Slapped child on hand, arm or leg	0.7	4.3	6.3	88.7
Slapped child on head, face or ear	–	0.1	0.1	99.8
Shook, grabbed or pushed child	1.4	1.3	4.6	92.7
Hit child with slipper, belt or other instrument	–	–	0.6	99.4
Threw something at child that could hurt	–	–	0.1	99.9
Kicked or knocked down child	0.2	0.3	0.1	99.4
Washed child's mouth out	–	–	0.1	99.9

As can be seen in Table 3, the type of physical punishment most frequently used was *slapping a child on bottom* (often: 1.2%; occasionally: 6.6%; rarely: 8%) and *slapping a child on hand, arm or leg* (often: 0.7%; occasionally: 4.3%; rarely: 6.3%). The frequency of use of these less severe forms of physical punishment is illustrated in Figure 3.

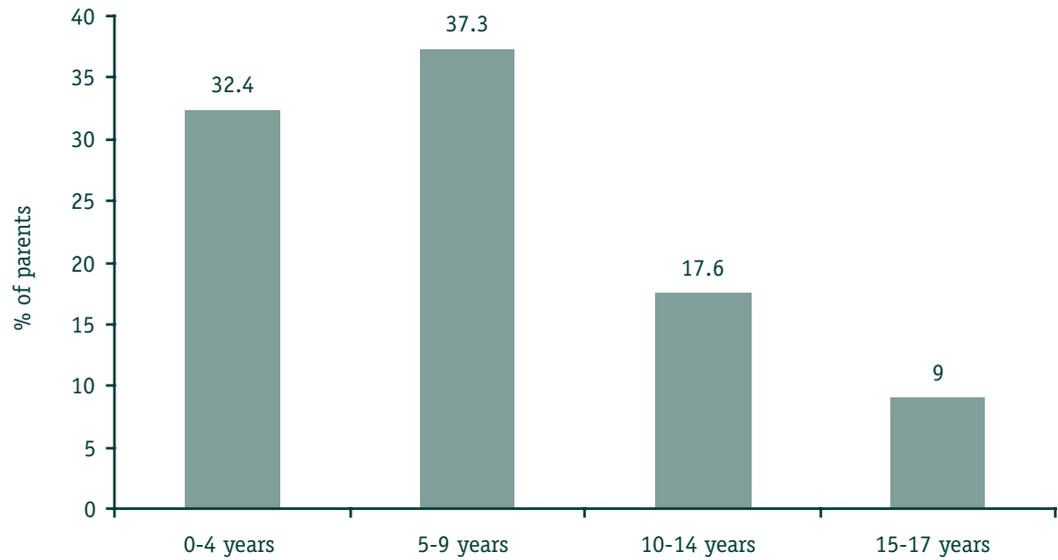
**Figure 3: Frequency of use of smacking among parents who smacked child on bottom or on hands, arms or legs in the past year (% of parents)**



A clear effect of age of child emerged, with younger children experiencing significantly higher levels of physical punishment than children in the older age groups. In particular, children aged between 2 and 9 years were more likely to be physically punished than children in the other age groups.<sup>3</sup> Younger parents under 35 years were also more likely to use physical punishment with their children. The breakdown of parental use of physical punishment in the past year by age group of the child is shown in Figure 4.

<sup>3</sup> Younger parents are more likely to have younger children and the pattern of effects may, therefore, be influenced more by child age than parent age.

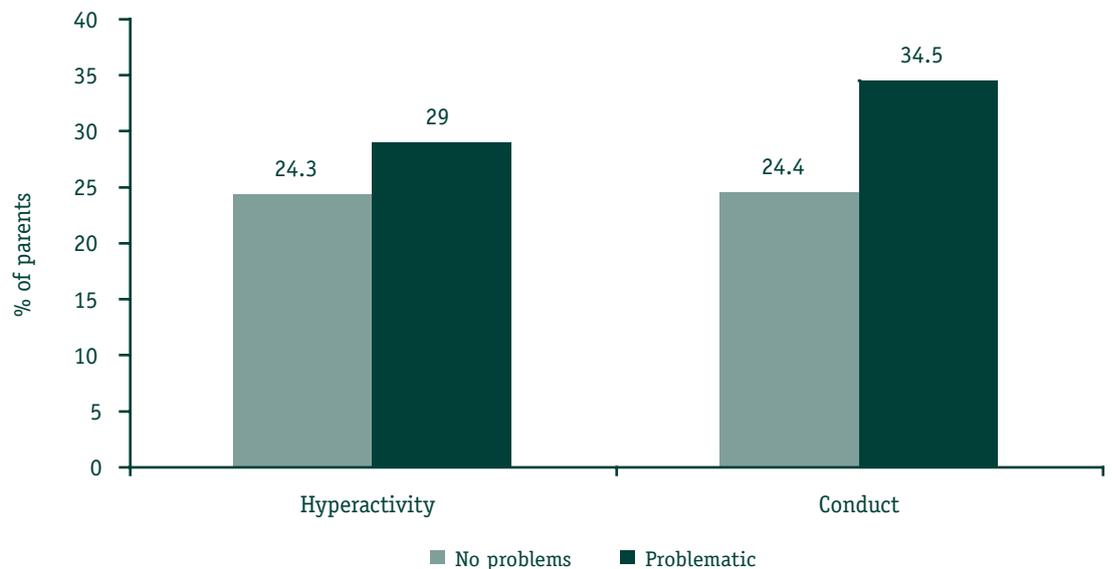
**Figure 4: Parental use of any physical punishment in the past year, by age of child (% of parents)**



***Child behaviour and parental use of physical punishment***

Parental discipline strategies were investigated in relation to child behaviour. Behaviour problems were measured using the emotion, conduct and hyperactivity sub-scales of the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)* (Goodman, 1997). Parents of children classified as problematic on both the hyperactivity and conduct sub-scales of the SDQ were more likely to have used physical punishment in the past year (see Figure 5). This pattern, however, did not emerge for children classified as problematic in the emotional domain.

**Figure 5: Use of physical punishment according to presence of hyperactivity and conduct problems (unweighted proportions) (% of parents)**

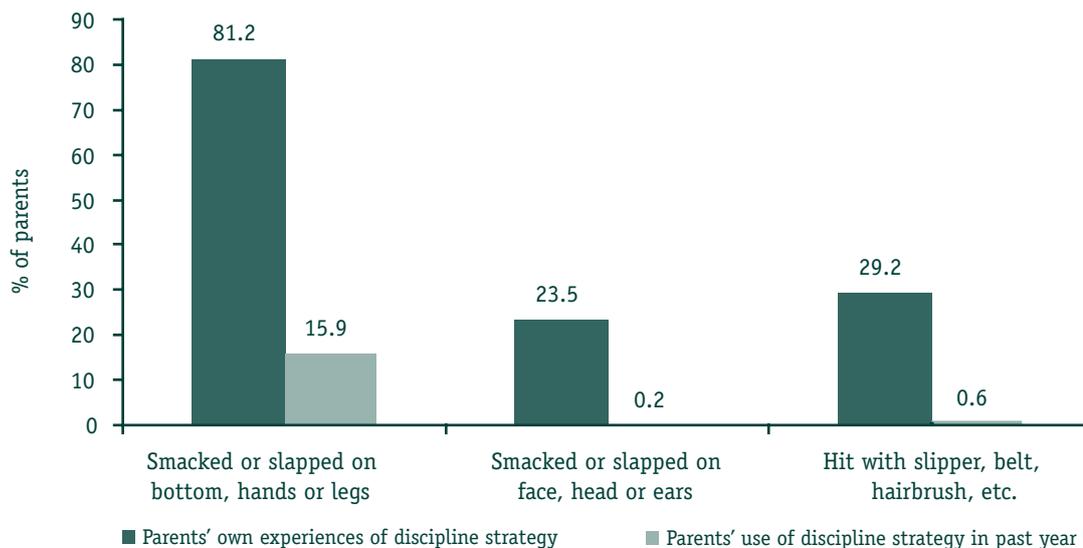


## Physical punishment experienced by parents in childhood

In this section, we present an overview of findings related to physical punishment experienced by parents in their own childhood. These findings highlight a decrease over time in the use of all types of physical punishment strategies examined. Specifically, the great majority of parents (81.2%) reported having experienced being slapped on the bottom, hands or legs in their own childhood. This compares to 15.9% of parents currently reporting slapping their child on the bottom in the past year and 11.3% reporting slapping their child on the hands, arms or legs in the past year. Thus, drawing on the self-report data of these parents, slapping or smacking a child appears to occur much less frequently in current parenting practices when compared to parenting practices in the past.

In terms of more severe forms of punishment, practices such as being hit with a slipper or being smacked or slapped on the face, head or ears have also decreased in present times according to parental reports, with less than 1% of parents interviewed (0.6% and 0.2% respectively) reporting having used such physical punishment with their child in the past year. In contrast, reflecting upon their own childhoods, almost one-third of parents (29.2%) reported being hit with a slipper or similar instrument, while almost one-quarter (23.5%) had experienced being smacked or slapped on the face, head or ears. Finally, almost 5% of parents reported having been beaten up by their parents in childhood. Figure 6 illustrates these past and present trends in physical punishment.

**Figure 6: Physical punishment experienced by parents in childhood and currently adopted with their own children (% of parents)**



In summary, parental behaviour related to discipline and punishment has changed over time as reflected in the parents' self-reports. Evidence in the present study suggests a notable decrease in the use of physical punishment in the course of the last generation or so. Childhood experiences, as recalled by parents, indicate that many children in the past experienced some kind of physically punitive behaviour from their parents. More common forms of physical punishment, such as smacking or slapping a child, are still currently adopted by a minority of parents. However, there was substantial evidence to suggest that more severe physical punishment has decreased across these time phases. Notable also was a decrease in psychologically aggressive discipline strategies over time and higher levels of inductive strategies being reported currently by parents.

Links between the current use of any physical punishment and experiences in childhood were explored. One association that emerged was that parents who had, in their own childhood, been smacked on the bottom, hands, arms or legs and who had been hit with an instrument (such as a slipper or hairbrush) were significantly more likely to have used physical punishment with their own children in the past year. It should be highlighted, however, that the majority of

parents who reported having experienced physical punishment in their childhood did not use physical punishment with their own children and this lends support to the notion that cycles of intergenerational transmission of parenting behaviours and discipline strategies can be altered and patterns of behaviours are not solely determined by past experience.

### Key factors associated with higher incidence of physical punishment

A number of key factors were associated with the use of physical punishment in the present study:

- Parents with children aged 2-9 years were more likely to slap children in response to child misbehaviour.
- Parents in the youngest age category (under 35) were more likely to slap a child on the bottom, hands, arms or legs than parents in other age groups.
- Parents whose children had hyperactivity and/or conduct difficulties (as measured by the SDQ) were more likely to have used physical punishment in the past year.
- Parents who had, during their own childhood, been smacked on the bottom, hands, arms or legs and parents who had been hit with an instrument (such as a slipper or hairbrush) were more likely to have used physical punishment with their children in the past year.

### Parental views on smacking

In general, there was a strong consensus among the majority of parents that *smacking is not necessary to bring up a well-behaved child* (64.6%), while the majority of parents also expressed the view that *an odd smack does not do a child any harm* (67.1%). Over half the parents (59.6%) interviewed believed that parents should have the right to smack their children if they so wish. However, there was no clear consensus in terms of the other attitudes to smacking explored (see Table 4).

**Table 4: Parents' attitudes towards smacking (%)**

Attitudes towards smacking	% of parents who agree*	% of parents who disagree
Odd smack does not do a child any harm	67.1	24.1
Not necessary to bring up a well-behaved child	64.6	23.3
Parents have the right to use smacking if they wish	59.6	26.3
Necessary as a last resort	49.1	40.4
Can damage relationship with child	42.8	46.5
Children are likely to be more aggressive	39.7	49.4
Only way to get the message across	38.3	51.6
Wrong and should never be used	28.4	57.9

\* Percentage totals may not equal 100 as some parents responded 'Neither agree nor disagree' to each item.

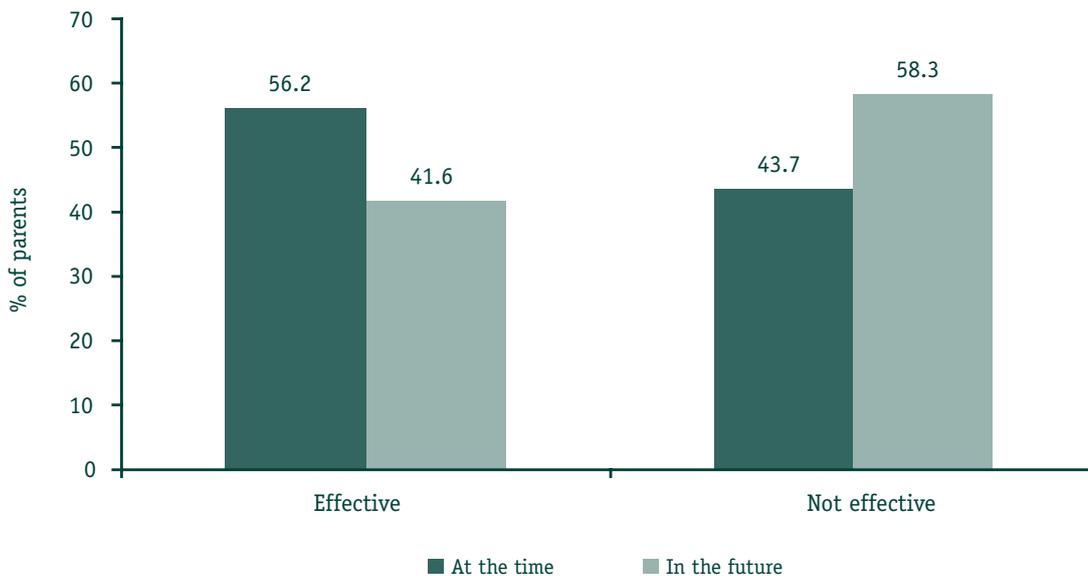
- Parents in the professional/managerial group and in the other non-manual category were more likely to disagree that *smacking is necessary as a last resort* in comparison with those in the skilled/unskilled manual group.
- Parents who left school before completing their Leaving Certificate were more likely to strongly agree that *parents should have the right to use smacking if they wish*, more likely to agree that *smacking is necessary as a last resort* and less likely to agree that *you don't need smacking to bring up a well-behaved child*.
- Parents who attained an education beyond their Leaving Certificate were more likely to strongly agree that *you don't need smacking to bring up a well-behaved child*, more likely to agree that *parents who smack can damage their relationship with their child*, less likely to agree that *smacking is necessary as a last resort* and that *parents should have the right to use smacking if they wish*.

- Parents over the age of 45 were more likely to disagree with the view that *parents have the right to use smacking if they wish*.
- Parents who had used physical punishment in the past year were more likely to agree with all the following statements: *an odd smack does not do a child any harm*, *smacking is necessary as a last resort*, *parents have the right to use smacking if they wish* and *sometimes a smack is the only way to get the message across*.

### Is physical punishment effective?

Parents were asked whether physical punishment was an effective discipline strategy in (1) stopping misbehaviour at the time it is occurring and (2) preventing misbehaviour in future contexts. No clear consensus emerged among parents. However, while the majority of parents (56%) believed that smacking may be effective in achieving *immediate* compliance, most parents (58%) did not believe it was effective in achieving long-term goals associated with discipline (see Figure 7). Specifically, just over half of parents indicated that smacking was either 'very effective' (17%) or 'quite effective' (40%) in stopping undesirable behaviours at the time they are occurring. In contrast, just less than half of parents were of the view that smacking was 'not very effective' (30%) or 'not at all effective' (14%) in stopping misbehaviour at the time. With regard to preventing misbehaviour in the future, almost 60% of parents stated that smacking was either 'not very effective' (35%) or 'not at all effective' (24%), while just over 40% believed that smacking was 'very effective' (12%) or 'quite effective' (29%) in preventing misbehaviour in a later context.

**Figure 7: Perceived effectiveness of smacking in stopping misbehaviour at the time and in a future context (% of parents)**



### Why use physical punishment?

Parents' views on a number of possible reasons for using physical punishment were examined. These reasons, and the extent to which they are endorsed by parents, are presented in Table 5. The majority of parents did not support any of these reasons, with the exception of *stopping a child from doing something dangerous*, with 52% of parents thinking this is 'a good reason' for using physical punishment. Reasons such as *underlining the seriousness of child's behaviour*, *stopping bad behaviour quickly* and *teaching a child not to behave badly in future* were endorsed by parents to a lesser extent (38%, 38% and 25% respectively).

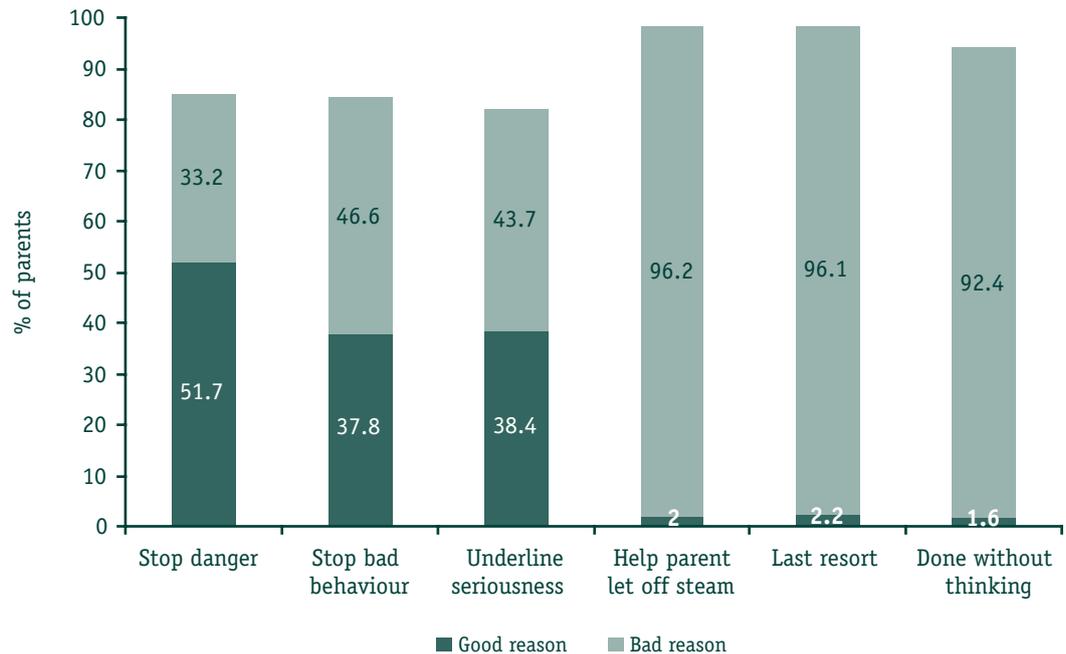
**Table 5: Parents’ attitudes towards rationales for using physical punishment (%)**

Reasons for using physical punishment	% of parents who think it is a ‘good reason’*	% of parents who think it is a ‘bad reason’
Stop child doing something dangerous	51.7	33.2
Underline seriousness of what child has done	38.4	43.7
Stop bad behaviour quickly	37.8	46.6
Teach child not to behave badly in the future	25.0	58.0
Get child’s attention	11.1	81.7
Show the child who is boss	9.2	84.8
Make child pay for what he/she has done	3.5	88.9
Done without thinking	1.6	92.4
Can’t think of anything else to do	2.2	96.1
Help the parent let off steam	2.0	96.2

\* Percentage totals may not equal 100 as some parents responded ‘Neither good nor bad reason’ to each item.

It is clear from Table 5 that the most widely endorsed rationale for using physical punishment is in contexts of danger, although approximately one-third of parents (33%) did not support this view. It is also clear that many of the parents did not endorse *any* of the rationales for using physical punishment. Figure 8 illustrates the broad pattern of findings that emerged.

**Figure 8: Support or rejection for different rationales for using physical punishment (% of parents)**



- Parents who had used physical punishment in the past year were more likely to support the following reasons for its use: *to underline the seriousness of behaviour, to stop bad behaviour quickly, to teach the child not to behave badly, to stop the child doing something dangerous or as a last resort.*
- Parents who had left school before completing their Leaving Certificate were more likely to support the rationale of using physical punishment *to show the child who is boss.*
- Parents of older children (aged 15-17 years) were more likely to support the rationale of *making the child pay for what he/she had done.*
- Mothers were less likely than fathers to endorse the use of physical punishment as a means of *getting the child’s attention* and of *showing the child who is boss.*

## When is physical punishment more likely to be used?

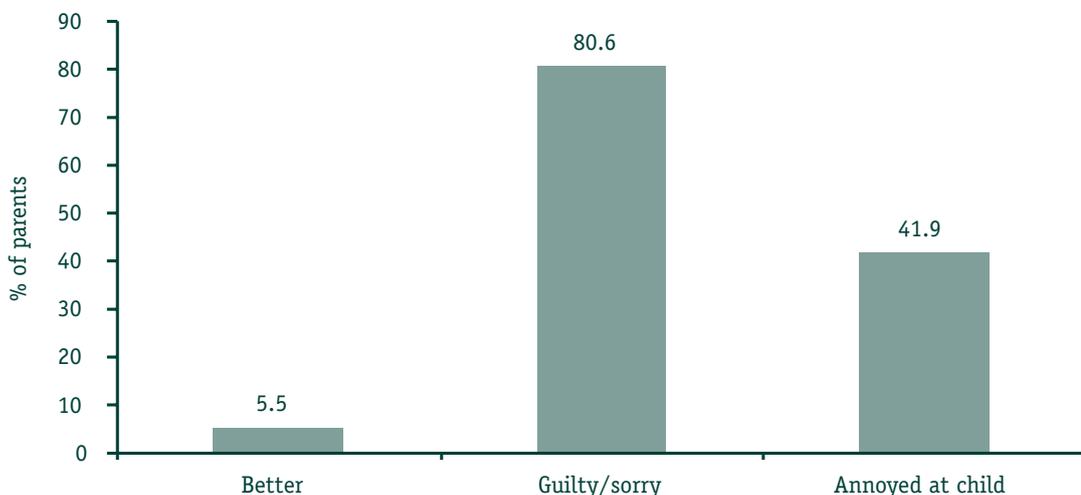
Parents were asked about a range of factors that might influence the likelihood of their using physical punishment. Some factors pertained to parental characteristics, such as being tired or worried about the child, while others related to children's behaviour, such as child aggression or continuous defiance. Key findings were:

- According to most parents, problematic child behaviour was most likely to elicit physical punishment as a discipline response. Three types of child behaviour in particular were cited for children across all age groups – dangerous behaviour, aggressive behaviour and non-compliant behaviour.
- In contrast, certain behaviours in young children (under 5 years of age) – such as crying or whingeing, refusing to eat, wetting or soiling himself/herself, being noisy, making a mess or demanding parental attention – did not tend to elicit physical punishment responses. Less than 5% of parents reported that these behaviours would elicit a physical punishment response.
- Similarly certain behaviours in older children (aged 5 and over) – such as being noisy, making a mess, being careless with things, demanding parental attention, not doing his/her best or not trying hard enough – were not likely to elicit physical punishment responses from parents. Overall, less than 5% of parents reported that these behaviours would definitely elicit a physical punishment response. Less than 10% of parents reported that behaviours such as answering back and getting into trouble with people outside would definitely elicit a physical punishment response.
- Situational factors appear to have some role to play in parents' use of physical punishment. Between one-quarter and half of the parents in this study reported that they would be either 'much' or 'a bit' more likely to use physical punishment when they themselves were feeling a loss of control over the child or if they were tired, worried, busy or stressed.

## Parents' emotional responses following the use of physical punishment with their children

Parents were asked to reflect on the last time they had smacked their child and how they had felt after doing so. The majority of parents (81%) reported that they felt sorry or guilty for slapping their child (see Figure 9). Furthermore, 42% of parents felt annoyed at their child for driving them to use physical punishment. Only a small minority of parents (5.5%) reported that they felt better after smacking their child.

**Figure 9: Parents' feelings following the use of physical punishment with their children (% of parents)**



## Parental perspectives on Irish legislation related to physical punishment

### Awareness of current legislation

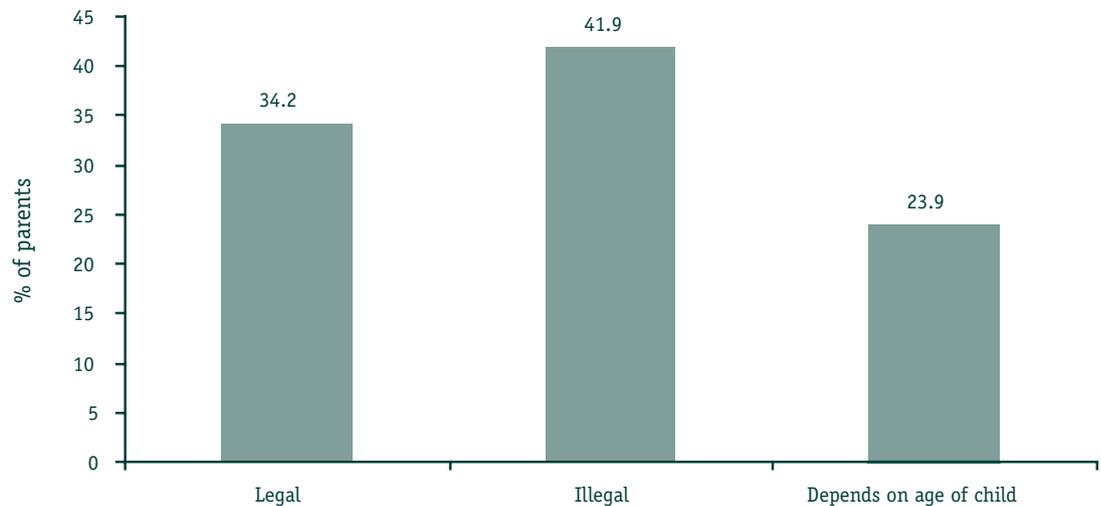
In general, parents lacked clear understanding about Irish law in relation to physical punishment of children, with over 75% of parents admitting that they did not know ‘very much’ or ‘anything at all’ about this legislation. Specifically, one-third of parents (32.8%) believed (correctly) that it was legal to smack a child of any age, while over one-quarter of parents (28%) believed that it was illegal to smack a child of any age. A further 10% believed that it was illegal to smack a child *under* a particular age. Finally, almost one-third of parents (29%) stated that they did not know whether it was legal or illegal to smack a child. Other key findings were:

- Younger parents (aged under 35) were more likely to state that they did not know the current status of Irish legislation on physical punishment.
- Older parents (45 years and over) were more likely to state that it is illegal to smack a child.
- Professionals/managers and those who had completed education beyond the Leaving Certificate were more likely to believe (correctly) that it is not illegal to smack a child of any age.

### Views on whether smacking should be legal or illegal

Parents’ views on whether smacking a child should be legal or illegal were examined. Clear support for an outright ban on physical punishment did not emerge. Just over one-third of parents (34%) felt that smacking should remain legal (*see Figure 10*). Almost one-quarter (24%) stated that whether smacking is made illegal should depend on the age of the child; the majority of these parents indicated that smacking children younger than 5 and older than 10 should be prohibited. Finally, 42% of parents said that smacking should be made illegal.

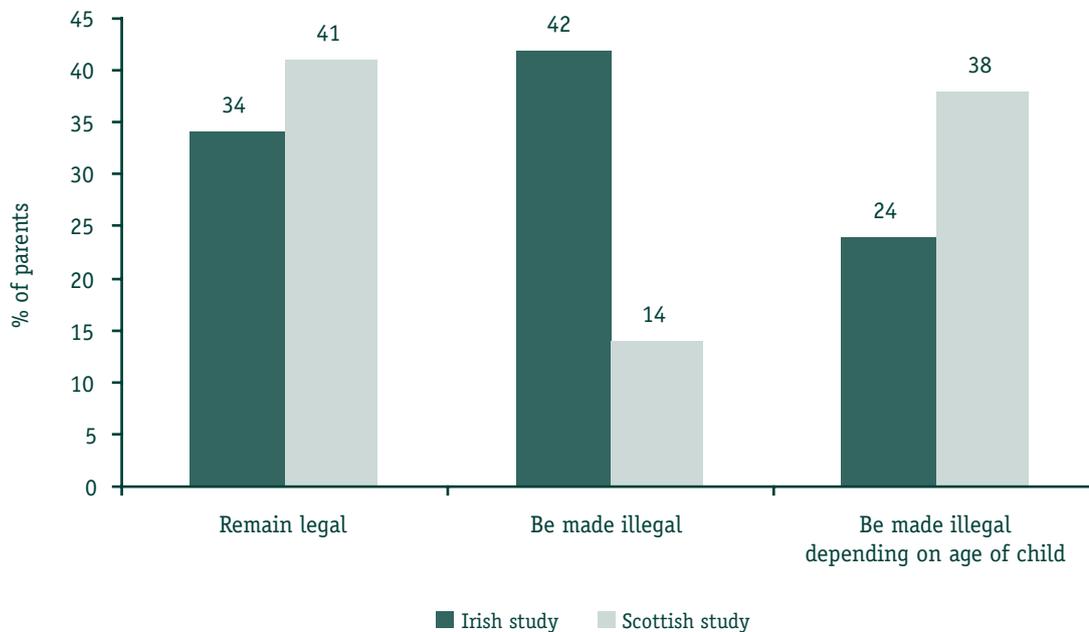
**Figure 10: Responses to whether smacking should be made illegal or remain legal (% of parents)**



- Fathers were more likely than mothers to state that smacking should remain legal.
- Parents who had used physical punishment in the past year were more likely to state that smacking should remain legal.
- Parents who had been slapped themselves in childhood were less likely to state that physical punishment should be made illegal.

Finally, it is possible to compare findings from this study based on parents in Ireland with those of a similar report on parents in Scotland by Anderson *et al* (2002). It is clear that a smaller proportion of parents in Ireland (34%) oppose an outright legal ban on physical punishment compared to Scotland (41%), while a much higher proportion of parents in Ireland (42%) would support the legal prohibition of physical punishment compared to Scotland (14%) (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Comparison of responses to whether smacking should be made illegal or remain legal between Irish and Scottish studies (% of parents)**



## DISCUSSION

Parenting styles, behaviours and discipline practices have elicited attention, debate and investigation across sociological, socio-legal and psychological disciplines. To date, however, there is little available information in Ireland on parenting practices, discipline and punishment approaches that parents adopt. The present study aims to address this gap by identifying the main parenting styles and forms of discipline used by parents in Ireland today.

The present study involved a national survey of attitudes and practices related to parenting styles and parental discipline, using parental self-report data. Parents' own recollections of discipline experienced in childhood were also explored. Finally, parental attitudes to and rationales for the use of physical punishment were examined, concluding with an investigation into awareness of and attitudes to current and proposed legislation on physical punishment.

Overall, findings in the present study clearly point to the dominance of inductive discipline strategies among parents in Ireland. Consistent with recent theoretical developments in parenting, the significance of child characteristics in influencing parenting behaviours is also evident. Three discrete categories of parental discipline responses were reported by parents: non-aggressive discipline strategies, psychologically aggressive discipline strategies and physical punishment.

In keeping with findings in recent UK studies (Ghate *et al*, 2003; Anderson *et al*, 2002), *non-aggressive, inductive discipline strategies* were used most frequently by the majority of parents in Ireland. Such findings are worth noting in light of the positive associations highlighted between such inductive discipline strategies and children's ability to internalise moral and social values (Holden, 2002). The relatively infrequent use of *psychologically aggressive discipline strategies* reported in the present study also compares favourably with reported incidence in similar UK

studies. However, it is worth emphasizing that while the incidence of psychologically aggressive strategies was relatively low, these strategies may be as harmful to children as physically aggressive strategies. Little emphasis has been placed on the potential negative effects of these psychologically coercive strategies and further attention to this issue is warranted.

Parents' use of physical punishment, according to self-reports of these parents, was low (25%) when compared with similar reports in Scotland (51%) and England (58%). A key factor associated with higher rates of physical punishment in the present study was the age of the child, with younger children (specifically aged 2-9 years) being most likely to be punished physically. These findings are broadly in keeping with previous research findings, which suggest that parents tend to view physical punishment as most appropriate for young children, particularly children of toddler and pre-school age (Day *et al*, 1998; Flynn, 1998). Younger parents were also found to adopt physical punishment as a strategy more frequently and this is consistent with other studies in the UK (Ghate *et al*, 2003; Anderson *et al*, 2002). Child gender was not associated with the use of physical punishment in the present study and this is in keeping with some previous studies (Woodward and Fergusson, 2002; Holden *et al*, 1997). In contrast to other studies, however, there was no effect of social class or level of education among parents in Ireland on their use of physical punishment.

Another significant finding in the present study is that trends in parental use of discipline strategies over time and across generations indicate a shift away from coercive, power-assertive discipline responses to more non-aggressive, inductive discipline strategies. In keeping with previous research (Deater-Deckard *et al*, 2003), it was found that while experiencing physical punishment as a child can have a significant impact on the use of discipline strategies as an adult, the cycle of transmission across generations can be changed.

Findings in the present study also support the notion that discipline strategies co-occur alongside other forms of discipline response. This was particularly the case with regard to the use of physical punishment by parents, which was used in conjunction with other discipline responses, such as threats, time-out or withdrawal of privileges, and in many cases alongside more inductive, reasoning strategies, such as discussing an issue calmly with a child. The failure to recognise that physical punishment is often used as an adjunct, rather than as an alternative, to other discipline strategies is a significant shortcoming in much research on the effects of physical punishment. Researchers have drawn attention to the fact that much of the literature exploring the relationship between physical punishment and child outcomes relies on physical punishment as a single disciplinary technique to be examined (Smith *et al*, 2005; Ritchie, 2002). Given that almost all parents in the present study reported using some forms of inductive strategies in response to conflict with children, it is important to highlight the potential to build on parents' existing skills and strengthen the effectiveness of the non-aggressive strategies that they actually use.

An important message to emphasize from the present study is that some children are more vulnerable to physical punishment than others – children who are younger and children who display difficult behaviours. Similarly, parenting in stressful contexts may also increase the likelihood that more coercive discipline strategies will be used in response to child misbehaviour. These parents may, therefore, require extra support to reduce their reliance on physical punishment and to enable them to develop alternative discipline strategies.

No clear consensus emerged with regard to attitudes to physical punishment among parents in Ireland. In line with previous reviews, a social class and education level dimension were apparent in these attitudes, with the general pattern of findings being that those from lower socio-economic groups and those who had achieved lower education levels were associated with stronger endorsement of physical punishment. However, it is worth noting that while these effects were evident with regard to parental *attitude* to physical punishment, no such effects were evident with regard to parental *use* of physical punishment in the present study. Attitudes to physical punishment appeared to be closely aligned with its actual use in many cases. However, given

the low incidence of physical punishment reported by parents in this study, a surprisingly high proportion of parents did *not* oppose physical punishment in their reported attitudes, particularly in the contexts of danger, non-compliance and aggressive behaviour.

Parents' views on proposed changes to the legislation on physical punishment were mixed. Overall, there was no widespread support for a ban on physical punishment. While 42% of parents in Ireland felt that smacking should be made illegal, the majority of parents believed that parents should have the right to use smacking if they wish. However, the present study indicates that parents in Ireland are clearly more supportive of a ban on physical punishment than parents in Scotland reported in a similar study in 2002 (Anderson *et al*, 2002). There may, therefore, be a need to challenge the acceptability of physical punishment among parents in Ireland. Even though the incidence of physical punishment was relatively low, many parents did not see the harm in physical punishment or they believed that parents have the right to use physical punishment. These ambivalent attitudes need to be investigated further and highlight the challenges that a legislative ban on physical punishment would bring to the Irish context. Parents may resist the idea that their behaviour would be subject to external regulation.

Finally, further research is needed to investigate the use of discipline strategies among ethnic minority parents and parents rearing their children in different family and social contexts in Ireland. Given that parents rarely use one discipline strategy in isolation, future research that considers the effectiveness of different combinations of parental discipline strategies, including inductive and more coercive strategies, would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these issues. More research on the links between parenting styles and discipline and child outcomes is needed in an Irish context. The National Longitudinal Study of Children, entitled *Growing Up in Ireland*, will collect data on 18,000 children over a 7-year period (2006-2012) on parenting styles and discipline, and will therefore be able to investigate potential links between parenting styles and outcomes for children over time. This area of inquiry would also benefit from qualitative research to explore a range of issues in-depth, such as how the rights of parents and children are balanced in families, the meaning that discipline has for parenting and the parent-child relationship, and the ambivalent attitudes that parents have towards physical punishment.

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# **Parenting Styles and Discipline: Children's Perspectives**

**A Developmental Approach**

**SUMMARY REPORT**

November 2009

OFFICE OF THE MINISTER FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

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# Children's Perspectives

This report provides a summary of key findings arising from the study of children and young people's perspectives on parenting styles and discipline. The study was carried out against the backdrop of changing trends in Irish society, most notably, changes in family routines and relationships. To date, little is known in the Irish context about children's views of different parenting styles and, in particular, about the views of children in respect of physical punishment by their parents.

In line with the ethos of the National Children's Strategy, the research involved consulting directly with children. A series of focus groups was carried out with 132 children and young people, aged between 6 and 17 years. The focus groups explored children's views on parenting roles, with a particular focus on the strategies that parents use to discipline their children.

In this Summary Report, key findings are presented on children's descriptions of parenting roles, their understanding of parental rules and regulations, their perspectives on discipline strategies adopted by parents and their views on parental use of physical punishment.

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The influences of family and parents on many aspects of children's development and well-being have been widely documented in research. One aspect of parenting that appears to be very important is parental control and discipline, and much research has been concerned with the efficacy of different discipline strategies. Discipline is defined as the process of teaching children about appropriate behaviours and societal norms and values. Through discipline encounters, parents seek to induce children to behave in accordance with parental standards of appropriate behaviour (Baumrind and Thompson, 2002). Underpinning effective discipline is the child's ability to internalise the parent's message underlying the discipline encounter: children who internalise their parents' disciplinary messages develop societal standards of conduct and an understanding of right and wrong – i.e. a conscience (Kochanska, 1993).

Specifically, three types of discipline techniques have been identified:

- **Power assertion** refers to the threat or actual use of force, physical punishment or withdrawal of privileges.
- **Love withdrawal** includes withholding attention, affection or approval, or expressing disappointment or disapproval after a child misbehaves.
- **Induction** involves the use of reason and explanation to explain the nature of the misdeed and how it affects the rights and feelings of others.

It has been suggested that inductive strategies are more likely to lead to internalisation than love withdrawal or power assertion because inductions direct children's attention to the consequences of their behaviour for others and capitalise on children's ability to feel empathy for others (Hoffman, 2000).

One aspect of parental discipline that has received particular attention in the literature is the use of physical punishment. Punishment involves the presentation of a negative stimulus following a specific behaviour in order to reduce the likelihood of that behaviour being repeated in the future. Physical punishment encompasses a range of behaviours, all of which involve the use of physical force directed by a parent towards the child.

Article 19(1) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which Ireland ratified in 1992, states that children must be protected from '*all forms of physical or mental violence*' while in the care of parents and others (UN, 1989). Furthermore, Ireland's Children Act

(2001) makes it an offence for those who have custody, charge or care of a child to assault, ill-treat, neglect or abandon the child in a manner likely to cause suffering or injury to a child's health or well-being (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2001). Notwithstanding this, an absolute prohibition of physical punishment in the family setting is not provided for in Irish legislation. Common law recognises the right of parents to use moderate and 'reasonable chastisement' on a child. This means that parents can be protected from prosecution if the Court considers their use of physical punishment 'reasonable'. Teachers, however, are no longer provided with immunity from criminal prosecution with regard to the physical punishment of a pupil. The concept of 'reasonable chastisement' has recently been challenged within the European Court of Human Rights (Council of Europe, 2007), which found that domestic laws allowing 'reasonable chastisement' failed to provide children with adequate protection. Internationally, the year 2009 has been set as the target date for achieving the global abolition of the corporal punishment of children. To date, corporal punishment of children is prohibited in *all* settings in 18 out of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden and the Ukraine. Ireland, along with a number of other countries, has provided a commitment to prohibiting corporal punishment in the future (Council of Europe, 2008).

Several studies have documented the negative long-term consequences of using physical punishment as a method of family discipline (Smith *et al*, 2005; Holden, 2002; Straus and Stewart, 1999). One analysis of 92 studies on corporal punishment concluded that physical punishment was only associated with immediate compliance with parents' wishes (Gershoff, 2002). However, given that most parents seek long-term as well as immediate compliance, this research indicates that physical punishment is less effective for achieving the goal of ongoing compliance and that there are other unforeseen long-term consequences of physical punishment. Other researchers, however, highlight the importance of distinguishing between parents who use physical punishment abusively and those whose use of it is normative in frequency and intensity (Baumrind, 1991). While a convincing body of evidence indicates the harm and trauma of physical abuse for children, the impact of what is termed 'non-abusive physical punishment' or customary physical punishment is less well understood (Baumrind *et al*, 2002; Larzelere, 2000).

A small number of studies have specifically examined children's views on parents' use of physical punishment as a form of parental control and discipline. Willow and Hyder (1998) reported that children aged 4-7 responded negatively to being smacked and believed that smacking was wrong. In a survey of over 300 children and young people in Scotland (aged 6-17), adjectives such as 'terrified', 'humiliated' and 'unloved' were used to describe their responses to physical punishment (Save the Children Scotland, 2000). Overall, this research indicates that children view the use of physical discipline as wrong, ineffective and physically and emotionally harmful. Furthermore, confusing messages about the use of violence are conveyed to children. A small qualitative study on children's views on physical discipline carried out in New Zealand suggested that children reported negative emotional responses to such punishment, which affected their relationship with the person implementing the punishment (Maxwell, 1995). In addition, the children expressed some levels of confusion in assimilating their own beliefs that physical punishment was wrong with the fact that their parents carried out such punishment. This small body of research indicates that an exploration of physical discipline through the eyes of children rather than adults is necessary and important (Holden, 2002).

## GOALS OF THE RESEARCH

To date, there is a limited body of research that explores children's views on parents' use of different disciplinary strategies. At present, a significant gap exists in our understanding of how children in Ireland reflect on and experience parental discipline strategies. Given the paucity of previous research into children's perspectives on this issue, the present study sought to consult directly with children themselves and to invite them to reflect on and express their views about parenting in contemporary Irish society.

The study was a qualitative exploratory investigation among children and young people of their understanding and perceptions of parental roles and behaviour. We sought to examine the experiences of children in four age groups, ranging from early childhood to late adolescence (6-17 year-olds), thus enabling an exploration of developmental patterns in children's views on parenting roles and discipline. A key outcome of the research is to provide policy-oriented knowledge in relation to children's perspectives on parenting styles and discipline, and physical punishment in particular.

Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

- What are children's perspectives on the nature of parenting roles?
- What are children's perceptions of the effects of different parenting styles and disciplinary strategies, including physical punishment, on their lives?
- Do children's understanding and perspectives change over time (i.e. as they become older)?
- What are children's perspectives on legislation and policy relating to physical punishment in the home?

## METHOD

### Sample access and recruitment

The sample was accessed through three primary schools and four secondary schools in Dublin, Westmeath and Monaghan. Following agreement with the school Principals, information packs were distributed to parents of the children/adolescents in selected classes in each of the schools. In one school, a Transition Year teacher explained about the study to her class and information packs were distributed to those students who expressed an interest in the study. Each pack contained an information leaflet about the study, a letter requesting parental consent to allow the researchers to invite their child to participate in the research and a consent form to be signed. A total of 348 invitations to participate were distributed and 132 signed parental consent forms were returned. This represents a positive response rate of 37.9%. All children who returned parental consent forms and who were in school on the day of the fieldwork agreed to participate.

### Sample composition

A total of 132 children and young people participated in the study, consisting of 67 boys and 65 girls. Participants were drawn from 1st class and 4th class in primary school and 1st year and Transition Year in secondary school. Table 1 shows the distribution of boys and girls across the four class groups and their mean age within each of the class groups.

**Table 1: Class group, gender and mean age of participants (N = 132)**

Class group	Boys	Girls	Total	Mean age in years (s.d.)
1st class	15	21	36	6.89 (0.46)
4th class	14	14	28	9.68 (0.54)
1st year	29	15	44	12.81 (0.50)
Transition Year	9	15	24	15.83 (0.56)

Almost all children (85%) lived with both of their parents (n = 112). An additional 3 children (2%) lived in a two-parent family, where one parent was a step-parent. 17 children lived in a single-parent family: for 10 children (8%), their parents had separated or divorced, while 7 children (5%) lived with their single, never-married mother. In almost all households (97%), at least one

parent was employed ( $n = 128$ ). Only 4 households did not have a wage-earner. Over one-third of the sample was classified in the higher professional and managerial/technical social classes. Just over one-fifth of the sample was categorised in the semi-skilled and unskilled social classes. The majority of the sample (93%) were Irish ( $n = 123$ ), while 5 children were of Eastern European origin and 3 children were of African origin.

### Research method

The research method for the study comprised focus group discussions. According to Hennessy and Heary (2005, p. 236), 'a focus group is a discussion involving a small number of participants, led by a moderator, which seeks to gain an insight into the participants' experiences, attitudes and/or perceptions'.

Focus group interviews with children and young people present both advantages and disadvantages. The support offered to individuals in a group setting may facilitate greater openness and exploration of issues than would be possible through individual interviews. Furthermore, individuals are not under pressure to respond to every question (Basch, 1987). Of particular relevance to conducting research with children, the adult-child power dynamic typical of the one-to-one interview becomes more balanced in a group setting (Hennessy and Heary, 2005). Focus groups are not without disadvantages, however. There is a possibility that responses are influenced by peer pressure (Lewis, 1992) or individuals may be unwilling to share sensitive personal information within a group setting (Kitzinger, 1994). However, in the present study, given the interest in children's perspectives and understanding rather than their personal experiences per se, this latter disadvantage may be less relevant.

### Data collection

Two researchers visited each school to conduct the fieldwork. Children and adolescents who had returned signed parental consent forms were gathered together in the school, the purpose of the study and nature of participation were explained to them and they were invited to take part in a focus group discussion with their classmates. It was emphasised that they were free to return to class and not participate in the study. All children signed consent forms to indicate their willingness to participate.

A total of 30 focus group interviews were conducted: 9 focus groups were conducted with children in 1st class (primary); 5 focus groups with children in 4th class (primary); 10 focus groups with young people in 1st year (secondary); and 6 focus groups with students in Transition Year (secondary). The focus groups ranged in length from 20 to 45 minutes and were recorded using a digital recorder.

The following broad topics were covered in the focus groups:

1. Roles in the family, particularly mother and father roles and distinctions between them.
2. Care and support in the family, including how parents respond to and are sensitive to children's needs.
3. Control in the family, including how parents monitor and discipline their children.
4. Parental strategies of punishment, including 'acceptable' forms of punishment and methods of verbal and physical punishment.
5. Perceptions of the effectiveness and impact of different parenting strategies and the factors associated with their use.

### Ethical issues

The study was subject to review and approval by the Ethics Committee within the School of Psychology, Trinity College, Dublin. Informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, and ensuring children's safety and well-being were salient issues throughout the research process. Parental consent was sought prior to inviting children to participate in the study. Children were given

sufficient opportunity to opt in or out of the study, and it was emphasised to them at the outset that they were free not to participate and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was also emphasised to the children that they would not be asked specifically about their own family experiences during the focus group discussions.

In the context of a focus group, confidentiality could not be absolutely guaranteed since disclosure of perspectives and experiences by participants is shared with all group members. However, children were requested at the beginning of every group session to respect the privacy of the discussion and not to discuss what had been said with others outside the group. Further limits to confidentiality emerge in instances where children and young people disclose information that indicates that they or others may be at risk of child abuse. Also, other issues may arise during discussions that generate worry or concern for the researchers about the safety and well-being of a child. Thus, in the present study, it was explained to the children that in the event of such a disclosure, appropriate measures would have to be taken (such as informing a teacher or a parent/guardian); however, children were reassured that no action would be taken without first consulting with them. Finally, participants were informed that publications or presentations based on the research would not contain any identifying information and their names would be changed to preserve anonymity.

## Data analysis

The discussions in all focus groups were transcribed verbatim and prepared for coding and analysis. Initially, analysis involved thorough and repeated readings of the data in order to gain an overall sense of the key findings. Transcripts were broken down into smaller meaningful chunks of data by a process of open coding, and themes relating to behaviour, attitudes, feelings, etc. were identified and collated (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes were refined by the method of constant comparison as analysis progressed and new concepts and the characteristics that comprised them emerged. The coding and analysis was conducted as a joint activity by the two researchers to facilitate the transparency of the interpretive work inherent in qualitative analysis.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Parenting roles

Children's descriptions of what parents do in a family revealed 8 dominant roles: basic care-giving, protection, breadwinning, guidance, authority, emotional support, shared activities and facilitating autonomy. What emerged clearly is that there is no standardised pattern for how parenting roles are played out within families in Ireland. Instead, the roles that parents perform are associated with structural features of the family, such as household composition and work circumstances, and in some instances are clearly linked to the age and gender of the child.

**Basic care-giving:** In addition to general descriptions such as *'taking care of the family'* and *'look after us'*, children provided numerous examples of basic care-giving acts carried out by parents. By far the most common description was the provision of food and nourishment to children, and children in all groups referred to the parents' role to cook for and feed their children: *'Parents have to take really good care of their children ... give them healthy food'* [4th class, boy]. Children also referred to a range of housekeeping tasks that they expect parents to perform, such as cleaning the house and doing the laundry.

**Protection:** Children described the parents' role in keeping their children safe and ensuring that they are not in danger. Younger children, in particular, provided examples of how their parents might keep them safe, such as holding their hand when crossing the road or keeping a watchful eye over them when in public. Older children, on the other hand, described parents as sources of safety and protection in less concrete terms: the focus for them was on *feeling safe*.

**Breadwinning:** The theme of breadwinning referred to the financial support provided by parents as they worked to earn money to buy whatever was necessary to feed and look after the children: *'Go out working and get money to feed the child'* [1st year, boy]. Related to this theme was the idea of *'working all your life to support your kids'* and that it was a parent's responsibility to *'provide for you until you're 18'*. Thus, the parent's role as breadwinner was an ongoing role, which was likely to continue into early adulthood.

**Guidance:** Among the younger group, children described how parents help them learn (e.g. by assisting with homework) and teach them different skills (e.g. cooking, driving and cycling): *'They help you when you're starting to go on, with no retainers on your bike; they kind of give you a head start'* [1st class, girl]. Among the older children, there was less emphasis on practical help and assisted performance of skills. Instead, adolescents described how parents acted as moral guides for their children, teaching them *'right from wrong'* by setting a good example and talking to their children about the parameters of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour: *'Well, parents kind of have to set examples, for like the children'* [1st year, boy].

**Authority:** The role of parents as figures of authority and control in the family was highlighted in all of the focus groups. Within this theme, distinct categories of parental behaviour were described, including monitoring and checking behaviour, setting boundaries and strategies for disciplining children. Adolescents described parents as the *'head of the family'* and *'authority figures'* within the family. Dominant within their discussions around this theme was the importance of parental control, disciplining children when they behave unacceptably and setting boundaries: *'They can't just let you away with murder ... They have to know when they have to tell you to stop'* [Transition Year, boy]. Thus, parental control was seen as necessary and good within families in order to prevent children from engaging in risk behaviour and to keep them safe.

**Emotional support:** Children in all groups described the affectional bond that exists between parents and their children. The youngest children highlighted how parents show their affection and love their children unconditionally: *'They love you even if you are being bold, but if you're good they love you even more'* [1st class, girl]. Among the older groups, participants described parents' roles in ensuring that children are not experiencing problems at school or with friends: *'They check on you if everything is OK, like if you are sad or something'* [4th class, girl]. The significance of open communication and listening to each other (e.g. *'parents that listen instead of shouting'*) also emerged as key features of emotional support: *'... to be able to talk to your children and that they would be able to come back to you if they had a problem'* [Transition Year, girl].

**Shared activities:** The role of parents as companions for their children emerged within a number of the focus groups, particularly within the two youngest age categories: *'They bring them to loads of nice places'* [1st class, boy]. Within this theme, children described how parents spent time with their children and brought them to nice places, such as for walks or to the shops. More commonly, however, adolescents described their parents' role in transporting them to and from activities (e.g. football practice) rather than sharing activities with them.

**Facilitating autonomy:** A final theme, which emerged exclusively within the two older age groups, pertained to the parents' role in facilitating children's autonomy and independence. Adolescents described the importance of parents giving their children space, freedom and privacy: *'Don't be too overprotective because if you're too overprotective, then they won't get to do anything and then they might feel left out in school'* [Transition Year, girl]. However, because control is also considered to be an important aspect of a parent's role, children recognised that the extent to which parents granted freedom was inevitably constrained by certain limits: *'Someone who had their limits for their child, but they give their child a certain level of freedom as well'* [1st year, boy].

## Nature of parental rules and regulations

All children readily identified parental rules and regulations, and the domains to which these rules were linked. Five types of rules or regulations were described:

1. **Social conventional rules:** These referred to rules prohibiting children from *'doing bold things'*, such as breaking and damaging toys, kicking a football in the house, shouting at parents, answering back, using bad language, being bad mannered and being untidy at home.
2. **Safety-related rules:** Within the younger age groups, children described rules alerting them to the dangers of wandering too far from home, talking to strangers, crossing the road without looking and riding bicycles without helmets. For older children, parental rules related to risk behaviours, such as staying away from alcohol and drugs, and not staying out after dark. Most children acknowledged the need for parents to establish rules in order to ensure that they would be safe.
3. **Moral rules:** Children made reference to parental rules designed to guide and control children's moral behaviour. Many of the children talked of rules that emphasised the importance of not hurting others, as well as the importance of sharing with others, of not fighting with or bullying siblings, and of not stealing. In addition, children in the older age groups specified the importance of not getting into trouble with authorities (e.g. teachers, police) and of not annoying or disturbing elderly people.
4. **Regulations related to school:** As children's age increased, greater emphasis was placed on parental rules and regulations governing their performance at school (this emerged in the secondary school groups). Reference was made to such parental rules as the need to work hard in school, to be in school on time and to complete homework on time.
5. **Regulations related to peer and media influence:** Older children emphasised parental rules linked to psychological well-being and protection from negative peer pressure and inappropriate media influences. Some children talked of rules forbidding them to *'hang around with certain people'*.

## Parental monitoring and checking strategies

Allied to the theme of parental rules and regulations, participants in the focus groups went on to explore how parents monitor and check their children's behaviour and whereabouts. Children identified a range of approaches adopted by parents to keep track of where they were and what they were doing.

For children in the youngest age group, **physical proximity** to parents was viewed as the best means that parents had to monitor and check the whereabouts and behaviour of their children. These children described parents seeing them through windows if they were in the garden, using cameras to see what they were doing and, in general, described in a very limited way parents' ability to know what their children were up to: *'When you are out the back and they are looking through the window'* [1st class, girl].

**Verbal communication** was cited most frequently by children as the way in which parents monitored their behaviour. Verbal communication included asking children questions, using mobile phones or relying on the accounts of others (e.g. teachers, neighbours) for information regarding children's activities. Most children referred to parents talking to them and asking them questions in order to ascertain where they were and what they were up to. A smaller number of children reported that their parents consulted with other adults or siblings in order to provide a check on their behaviour.

Some children described their **parents as 'all-knowing'** and having 'secret powers' with regard to monitoring and checking their behaviours: *'I don't know ... They just know everything ... It's sort of a weird thing with parents ... They just sort of know'* [1st year, boy]. A number of children across all age groups underscored the ability of parents to accurately read their behaviours to inform themselves of their children's whereabouts and activities. Being attentive to patterns of familiar

behaviour made it possible for parents to detect any unexpected changes in children's routines. According to the participants, where there has been a history of a close parent-child relationship, an understanding of where children might be and when they might be in trouble or at risk of danger is inherently available to parents.

Across most age groups but most notably within the older age groups, children identified the history of the relationship between parent and child as significant in terms of facilitating parental monitoring behaviours. Specifically, **trust between children and their parents** was perceived to be very significant with regard to facilitating more appropriate and effective monitoring of older children's behaviours. Children also emphasised the necessity of being able to demonstrate to parents through the history of their behaviours that they could be trusted to act sensibly when not in their company: *'As you get older they might trust you more, whereas when you were younger they wouldn't trust you as much ... because you haven't proven to them that you can be trusted'* [1st year, boy]. For older children, the establishment of trust was a prerequisite to effective monitoring and developing children's sense of responsibility.

The general pattern that emerged in the findings was that as children's age increased, so too did the significance that they placed on the quality of the child-parent relationship in facilitating effective parental monitoring.

### Parental discipline strategies

Children's views on the kinds of discipline responses and strategies that parents adopt in response to child misbehaviour were explored in the focus groups. Discipline strategies cited by children can be categorised broadly under the headings identified in the literature review – power assertion, induction and love withdrawal.

#### Power-assertive discipline strategies

Power-assertive discipline strategies were mentioned predominantly in children's interviews with regard to the discipline responses they experienced. Among the strategies mentioned were the removal of privileges (e.g. toys, treats, pocket money, television time), time-out or grounding, being allocated household chores and physical punishment. Many children described parents removing privileges such as, for example, not being allowed to watch television or not being given pocket money: *'With pocket money, you'd really want it. You'd be looking forward to it. So if you wanted it, you wouldn't get up to stuff, especially if you wanted it for a game or something'* [1st year, girl]. Younger children described having favourite toys confiscated in response to bad behaviour. For older children, parents tended to confiscate mobile phones, computers or computer games: *'Like if it's your mobile – you know how young ones can't live without their mobile with their friends contacting them'* [1st year, boy].

A majority of children also reported parents using time-out as a method of punishing misbehaviour. Time-out across all age groups involved being sent to one's room and not being allowed to leave for an agreed period of time. For some younger children, time-out also involved having to sit on a 'bold step' or 'bold chair' for a period of time: *'Putting them [children] on the stairs for 7 or 6 minutes ... because my mam puts me on the step how old I am, for how many minutes'* [1st class, boy].

Children within the older age groups highlighted grounding as a discipline strategy frequently employed by parents. In most cases, being grounded involved being prohibited from going out to socialise and spend time with friends: *'You can't go anywhere whenever you are grounded, so you can't really do anything'* [4th class, boy]. In a small number of cases, children mentioned being prohibited from visiting extended family members, such as grandparents or aunts. Being allocated extra household chores was also mentioned by children, most notably in the older age groups. Such strategies involved children having to clean the house, tidy their rooms and generally having to take on added responsibility around the home.

The final category of power-assertive discipline strategies was the use of physical punishment by parents (*see detailed discussion below*).

### Inductive discipline strategies

Inductive discipline strategies were mentioned by children to a lesser extent in focus groups. Among these strategies, children highlighted communication and talking things through and the reinforcement of positive behaviours. These strategies were also associated with children's greater ability to internalise standards and expectations and to self-monitor.

The importance of reasoning and explaining the consequences of behaviour was also underscored in the children's narratives. Generally, inductive discipline strategies were mentioned to a much greater extent among the older age group, who emphasised the benefits and greater effectiveness of communicating with children in order to challenge or change inappropriate behaviours: *'When you get older, things just become bigger and bigger and they can just talk to you more as an adult ... so they don't have to sort of treat you like a kid. They can treat you like an adult and say like, "I don't want you being like that ... that's bad", instead of just freaking out ... and they just talk to you more like an adult. They communicate more'* [Transition Year, boy].

### Love-withdrawal discipline strategies

A third category of discipline responses mentioned by only a small minority of children was love withdrawal. Children described parents becoming upset and expressing their disappointment in response to misbehaviour. For most children, this had the effect of making them feel very guilty about their behaviour: *'I think it's worse though if they're disappointed in you ... That kills me. And if they're giving out to you and they're talking in a real low voice and you're kind of like "OK, what's going on now? Why aren't they shouting at me?" Keeping it very polite and formal and then they're like "Right, I'll talk to you later on", and they turn around and in the back of my head is "Roar at me, please!"'* [Transition Year, girl].

## Physical punishment

Children's perspectives on the use of physical punishment by parents were explored, including their responses to and feelings about its use as a discipline strategy and their understanding of why parents may use it. Their perspectives on the rationales for and against physical punishment were also sought, together with their views on banning this form of discipline.

### How does slapping make children feel?

Physical punishment was described as slapping or smacking children in response to their misbehaviour. Most children drew a clear distinction between giving a child a smack or a light tap, and giving them a slap causing an injury or leaving a mark. The latter form of punishment was deemed unacceptable by children. Overall, children were of the view that slapping and using physical punishment had the effect of making children feel bad in some way. Younger children listed a range of responses to such punishment (*sadness, unloved, mad and upset*), all conveying negative effects. Other children mentioned that they would feel *sore, scared, upset or embarrassed*. Children in the older age group also described negative responses (*hurt, sad, mad*) and one child described it as a form of *'physical abuse'*.

### Why do parents use physical punishment?

In response to questions about why parents might slap or smack a child, children's views centred on child behaviours that involved *repeatedly disobeying or disregarding* the wishes of a parent and *parental anger, loss of control or frustration*. Some children described situations where a parent used physical punishment in order to *'get the attention'* of a child: *'If the child was like constantly*

*in the wrong, after the parents keep constantly telling them not to do something, they go ahead and do it anyway'* [1st year, girl]. A number of children across different age groups were of the view that physical punishment was *a last resort* to parents and more likely to be used as a result of their frustration and anger: *'It's not a good way, I think. Like there's other ways of doing it without hitting them. I think they're just hitting them out of rage ... They don't know what to do, so they just hit them'* [Transition Year, girl].

### **Rationales FOR physical punishment**

A key argument expressed by children in favour of physical punishment was its potential effectiveness with regard to controlling behaviour. More specifically, some children emphasised that by slapping a child as punishment, parents were better able to correct more serious behaviours and set boundaries so that children would not repeat misbehaviours: *'Just to set some boundaries, like, at a young age ... so that you don't do anything worse when you're older'* [1st year, boy]. For children in the youngest age group, slapping was viewed as an effective way of *'teaching you to be good'*. Other children highlighted the threat of being slapped as a deterrent for younger children from repeating misbehaviour. One child in the older age group described the effectiveness of physical punishment in quite extreme terms: *'You can beat it [misbehaviour] out of their system ... you can scare it out of them'* [Transition Year, boy].

The context of the misbehaviour and punishment was central to whether children expressed rationales for or against parents' use of physical punishment. Age-related patterns were also evident in determining the kind of contexts that children described. For younger children, these contexts involved behaviours such as being cheeky to parents or breaking things. With increasing age, there was more detailed qualification about the precise situations in which parents should be allowed to use slapping or smacking as a form of discipline. Thus, children in the older age groups endorsed parental use of physical punishment specifically in contexts where children's safety and health were at risk: *'It depends what it is. If it's something silly, like you didn't make your bed or something, and they slapped you anyway. But say if you were caught smoking or something, maybe for that'* [1st year, boy].

### **Rationales AGAINST physical punishment**

Despite discussion of rationales for the use of physical punishment, children across all age groups expressed their widespread disapproval of the use of physical punishment by parents. A small number of children in the youngest age group indicated their belief that physical punishment was not effective as a discipline strategy since it did not deter children from repeating misbehaviour. One key argument against physical punishment for these younger children was the notion that physical punishment did not involve communication between parent and child, and therefore, for some children, the message was less likely to 'get through': *'It's easier for people to talk it out because you learn more than just if they hit you. The pain would go away. But if they ground you, they can ground you for a week'* [1st year, girl].

A second predominant rationale, expressed by children of all ages, against the use of physical punishment was the potential for causing physical pain and injury to a child: *'[It's] a bad idea ... because they might hurt you really hard'* [1st class, boy]. Related to this concern was the view, expressed by a number of children, that physical punishment also had the potential to cause emotional distress and in some cases was likely to damage the relationship between children and their parents: *'I think it ruins the relationship between the son and the parent if the parent hits him'* [1st year, boy].

Yet another argument against physical punishment was that slapping or smacking children had the potential to reinforce bad behaviour or could generate more aggressive responses in children. Children were also aware of the possibility that being exposed to physical punishment by their parents might, in turn, encourage them to adopt similar practices with their own children in the

future: *'It's a bit stupid because if they're using physical punishment on you, when you have kids you're going to learn from them, so then maybe you'll hit your kids'* [1st year, girl]. Children in the older age groups objected to the imbalance in power they felt was inherent in parental use of physical punishment: *'If they get hit ... it shouldn't be happening because they can't stand up for themselves'* [1st year, boy].

Overall, children displayed great insight into the reasons why parents might adopt physical punishment as a discipline strategy. Many children felt that a light tap or slap at times was an appropriate and effective response to a child's misbehaviour, especially when the child was in danger. However, a number of children also expressed the view that the risk of a parent slapping a child harder than intended was not worth the potential overall effectiveness of physical punishment as a discipline strategy.

### Should physical punishment be banned?

Of those children who were asked whether they would agree with the idea of banning physical punishment in the home, the majority expressed the view that they would not agree with this. There was a substantial degree of ambivalence in children's and young people's responses to this question. One of the strongest arguments against banning physical punishment was the complexity involved in terms of monitoring and assessing the severity of the physical punishment and the reluctance of children to report their parents to authorities in cases where the physical punishment was severe: *'They probably wouldn't [want to have their parents arrested] because they wouldn't want to see their moms and dads getting hurt'* [1st year, boy].

Children also elaborated on their views that physical punishment should not be banned by indicating that, in some cases, physical punishment was necessary in order to correct and challenge certain misbehaviours: *'If you deserve it, like, you know you're going to get it for what you're after doing. If it's illegal, then you're just going to try to do it again'* [1st year, boy].

A key issue emphasised by many children when reflecting on the possibility of banning physical punishment was the clear distinction they themselves made between banning it in the home and banning it in schools. A number of children expressed the view that parents had *'a right'* to punish their children physically because they had responsibility for the child. Inherent in these arguments was the sense that children trusted their parents not to abuse the power they had over them in terms of administering physical punishment. This same trust, however, was not afforded to teachers: *'Because, em, 'cos like your mam and dad own you, so they can hit you once or twice and a teacher doesn't own you. They just teach you'* [4th class, boy].

Children who argued in favour of banning physical punishment in the home tended to focus on the risks to the child, such as the pain inflicted, the potential for serious injury and the potential for causing emotional distress to the child. Some children qualified their arguments in favour of banning physical punishment in the home by excluding instances of a light slap or tap, as opposed to smacking in order to hurt the child: *'I would vote ... for no physical punishment ... not for hitting on the hand, but not too hard'* [1st year, boy].

Central to children's arguments for banning physical punishment was the risk that some parents might abuse their right to physically punish their child, as described by this boy in the older age group: *'It's probably some parents abuse it ... they just abuse it completely and say "Aw well, they're my kids ... I can do this". I don't think that should be allowed'* [Transition Year, boy].

### Summary of findings on physical punishment

In conclusion, children's views on physical punishment were complex and displayed considerable ambivalence. Severe physical punishment that caused injury to a child was indisputably unacceptable. However, many children acknowledged that physical punishment, specifically a light tap or slap, was often effective in correcting or challenging misbehaviour. Most children,

particularly older children, qualified this by adding that the misdeed must be serious and warrant a severe parental response. Children also acknowledged that parents tended to slap their children more in contexts where no alternative strategy was available to them and where children were engaged in dangerous or health-risk behaviours. In contrast to this, many children expressed disapproval of physical punishment, emphasising the potentially negative and harmful effects, such as pain inflicted, emotional distress and damaging consequences for child–parent relationships.

### Effective discipline: What works? What doesn't work?

Based on the perspectives of children and young people, four key features of effective discipline practices emerged: loss of privilege, instructional value, consistency and fairness. While the perceived effectiveness of different discipline strategies was often dependent on the context, there was some consensus among the children that removing privileges and grounding children were the most effective strategies adopted by parents.

#### Loss of privilege

Effective discipline involved losing or being deprived of something that was of value to the child. Grounding children, restricting their activities (e.g. not being allowed to watch television) and depriving them of privileges (e.g. pocket money) were effective ways of deterring children from repeating misbehaviour. Many children felt that for a discipline strategy to be truly effective in preventing or changing inappropriate behaviour, it was necessary for such strategies to have a substantial effect on the child's sense of deprivation or loss of privilege. A number of children mentioned that having something confiscated – something they valued and depended upon on a daily basis, such as a mobile phone – was effective in deterring them from repeating misbehaviours: *'If you spend a lot of time playing it and it's taken away from you, you'd get very annoyed about it. Like teenagers, taking their mobile phones from them. They use it nearly every day, so they wouldn't want it taken off them again'* [Transition Year, girl].

While most children felt that being grounded, sent to their room or being confined in some way was useful as a discipline strategy, some children pointed out that they had ways of overcoming these strategies, for example, by watching television in their room or playing with games they still had access to despite being confined: *'Well, there isn't much point in grounding someone if they're still allowed to do everything ... like play with Playstation, watch TV ...'* [1st year, boy]. Being sent to one's room was only considered effective when games and other distractions had been removed and there was *'an empty room so they [children] couldn't do anything'*. Under these circumstances, children were more likely to learn not to repeat their misdeeds.

Physical punishment was considered less effective as a form of discipline because the consequences of being slapped were relatively short-term compared with the consequences of being grounded or having privileges removed: *'I think, it's grounding [is most effective] because, say, when they smack you, you get it over very quickly and then you ask "Can I go out?" and she might say "Yes". And then you might do it again and then it will keep on happening. But if you get grounded, you're not able to go out and you'll not do anything'* [1st class, girl].

#### Instructional value

Inherent in effective discipline for children was a clear message from their parents about what was acceptable versus unacceptable behaviour, and a clear rationale for why they were being disciplined. Discipline strategies that afforded children an opportunity to learn about the potential deleterious consequences of their behaviour were considered most effective. Across all age groups, some children emphasised the importance of learning as a result of their experience of being disciplined. Younger children expressed this idea simply as: *'Learn them [meaning 'teach them'] ... Tell them what to do and what not to do'* [1st class, boy].

Some children expressed the view that having to do chores around the house was a constructive way of parents enforcing discipline that involved some kind of an instructional component. Older children placed more emphasis on the importance of *'getting through to children'* in terms of the discipline strategies used by parents: *'Like it [slapping] doesn't really get through ... By getting hit, you're obviously going to do it again ... both the parents and the child'* [1st year, girl].

### Consistency

Many children across all age groups expressed the view that in order for a discipline strategy to be effective, it had to be implemented consistently and followed through with appropriate action. Parents were considered to be ineffective disciplinarians when they succumbed to pressure from their children to abandon a disciplinary strategy. Children drew attention to parents threatening punishment in response to misbehaviour, but then not following through on the threats. This resulted in children being able to justify their misbehaviour or believing that, in fact, they had done no wrong: *'Sometimes they go through with it, like, but if they say they're going to do it and they don't then, you don't believe that you've done anything wrong'* [Transition Year, girl].

Among the older children, and linked to their greater ability with increasing age to deceive and manipulate their parents, accounts were given of *'getting around parents'* to restore privileges or property before the time limit imposed as part of the disciplinary procedure: *'When I'm bored and I have nothing to do, like, say she took my Playstation away, I'd be hanging around the kitchen and that's where she is and then she'd be aggravated by me and then she'd just give it back to me'* [1st year, boy]. 'Giving in' in this way and not seeing a strategy through was seen by children as detracting from its effectiveness.

Younger children also pointed out the need for parents to be consistent over time in their responses to certain behaviours and to repeatedly refuse to allow certain behaviours in order for children to learn what was or what was not acceptable: *'If you wanted to call for your friend, you just say "No" and then next day "No" and the next day "No", until you learn not to be bold'* [1st class, boy].

### Fairness

Effective discipline involved fairness and a sense of justice. Being blamed and punished for something that was the fault of another was considered unjust and ineffective discipline. Also, the magnitude of the punishment should reflect the magnitude of the misdeed: being punished harshly for a relatively minor offence was perceived as ineffective. Children were clearly of the opinion that if they were punished unfairly, they did not learn from such a strategy. One example of perceived unfairness in discipline strategies was where a child was blamed in the wrong for the misdeed of a younger sibling: *'Say your brother knocked over a plant and then he blamed it on you, your mom might slap you and that wouldn't be fair ... If you had a young brother or sister, you'd normally get the blame'* [1st year, girl].

Children also protested that where they believed that they had not actually done something very bold or wrong, being punished harshly resulted in feelings of greater anger and resentment, rather than actually preventing them from engaging in such behaviour in the future.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The principal aim of this study was to explore children's perspectives on parenting roles and parental approaches to control and discipline. The study adopted a qualitative child-centred approach, involving focus group interviews with 132 school-aged children (aged 6-17 years).

This report does not make any claims regarding the prevalence of different parenting styles or parental approaches to discipline within families in Ireland. Rather, the study seeks to explore children's perspectives on a range of issues related to parenting and parents' use of discipline in the home. Caution should be exercised in extrapolating the findings of the study to all families in Ireland. The sample size is relatively small and there may be some bias in the type of parent who is willing to allow a researcher to invite their child to participate in a focus group about parenting.

An initial exploration of children's perspectives on parents' roles underscored the wide-ranging and extensive roles that parents were expected to perform in relation to their children. Predominant for the younger age groups were parental activities of providing sustenance, protection and basic care to their children, as well as sharing activities with them. Practical assistance with school work and support in learning new skills were also important. In contrast, of greater significance for the older age groups were parental roles relating to guidance, emotional support and authority. An important facet of the parent's role during adolescence was the facilitation of the adolescent's autonomy and increasing levels of independence. Children highlighted the need for parents to allow greater flexibility and scope for negotiation in terms of the rules they apply to older children and to provide them with opportunities for developing greater autonomy through experimenting with the world. Findings from the present study are consistent with previous research documenting similar changes in the nature of the parent-adolescent relationship and the nature of the parent's role during the period of adolescence (Steinberg and Silk, 2002; Laursen and Bukowski, 1997).

Children and young people in the present study were competent in conveying feelings about and interpretations of parental discipline responses. Striking in children's accounts was their conviction that parental use of discipline is both justified and motivated by concern for their children's safety and well-being. Children clearly position themselves as subordinate to their parents and affirm parents' rights to control and monitor their behaviour in the interests of their safety and well-being.

Parents relied on a range of discipline strategies, including inductive responses, power-assertive strategies and love withdrawal. These correspond to the three primary categories of discipline strategy outlined in the literature (Grusec and Goodnow, 1994; Hoffman, 2000). Children's responses to each of these categories of discipline strategy were individual and varied according to contextual considerations, notably the age of the child and the nature and seriousness of the misdeed.

Younger children described more exclusively power-assertive strategies, such as time-out and physical punishment, while older children placed more emphasis on inductive strategies, such as reasoning and communication and, to a lesser extent, love-withdrawal strategies. These findings reflect trends from previous studies that found that inductive strategies are more likely to be used with older children and power-assertive strategies are more likely to be used with younger children (Wissow, 2002; Maxwell, 1995). Many children in the present study were of the view that physical punishment was more effective when used with younger children rather than older children because young children lack the capacity to self-regulate their behaviour and to rationalise and internalise standards. Older children highlighted the benefits of constructive, instructional discipline strategies, which acknowledged their ability to assume responsibility for their behaviour and internalise rules and standards.

While children in the younger age groups were less discriminating in evaluating key features of effective parental responses, children across all age groups demonstrated clearly an ability to assess, judge and respond to the strategies that parents enforced. Four principles underpinned effective discipline: loss of privilege, instructional value, consistency and fairness. Grounding children,

restricting their activities and depriving them of privileges were identified as effective means of disciplining children, while physical punishment was considered to be less effective. Children emphasised the significance of loss of privilege with reference to 'time-out'. Situations where they had access to other privileges to compensate for their loss while being grounded significantly diminished the usefulness of such a strategy, and this view was expressed across all age groups. Children also drew attention to the need for parents to be consistent in their responses and to see a strategy through to completion once it had been enforced. The instructional value of discipline strategies was a primary component of effective discipline responses for most children, but strikingly prevalent in narratives of adolescent age groups. Allied to these views, children assigned increasing significance to the role played by the quality of child-parent interactions in facilitating the internalisation of parental expectations rather than relying on external corrections. Previous researchers have also provided clear evidence for the importance of child-parent relationships in determining the utilisation of discipline strategies and the subsequent effectiveness of punishments (Parke, 2002; Holden 2002).

There was no clear consensus regarding children's perspectives on parental use of physical punishment. While children generally accepted the use of physical punishment as a parental right, their endorsement of it was clearly dependent on the context of the discipline encounter. Children acknowledged that parents are more likely to use physical punishment as a result of feeling frustration, anger or lack of control. Across all age groups, mild physical punishment (e.g. a tap or a slap) was considered acceptable and appropriate only for more serious transgressions, such as when a child is in danger or at risk. Children were unanimously against frequent or severe physical punishment. Children's rationales against parental use of physical punishment centred on the potential for causing emotional distress and physical pain to a child, on the damage it might do to the parent-child relationship and on the lack of instructional value inherent in the approach. While many children expressed a reluctance to prohibit physical punishment by law, a number of children argued that such a ban could protect children whose parents used physical punishment excessively.

In conclusion, children's ability to articulate their views on parenting suggests that family policy development could benefit from a child-centred ethos, which takes account of the developmental needs and rights of individual children within their families. Messages arising from this research could usefully inform the development of a public information campaign on safe and effective discipline of children. Children's views on these issues could also be incorporated into existing parenting programmes that seek to provide support for parents. Raising parents' awareness of their children's perspectives on discipline and punishment may help to curb those discipline practices that children deem to be inappropriate, harmful and ineffective. On the other hand, the prevalence of inductive disciplinary practices highlighted in the study suggests that there is scope for building on existing parenting practices in order to promote effective, constructive and positive discipline of children.

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