



Parenting Styles and Discipline: Parents' perspectives

1. What is the study's background?

This study was funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Dr. Ann Marie Halpenny (Dublin Institute of Technology and Centre for Social and Educational Research), Dr. Elizabeth Nixon (Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin) and Dr. Dorothy Watson (Economic and Social Research Institute, Dublin).* The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2010.

2. What is the study's purpose?

This study was conducted in order to investigate parenting styles and parental use of disciplinary strategies with children in Ireland, with a particular focus on attitudes to and uses of physical punishment with children. The specific objectives were:

- » to identify the parenting styles and discipline strategies which parents adopt;
- » to identify the extent to which parents use physical punishment as a discipline strategy;
- » to investigate parental attitudes to physical punishment;
- » to investigate parental attitudes to the legislative position on physical punishment in Ireland.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings, conclusions and recommendations of the study. The full report is available on www.dcyia.ie

3. How was the study undertaken?

A telephone survey methodology was adopted and data collection was carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). 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%). Sections of the questionnaire were adapted from questionnaires used in similar studies undertaken in the United Kingdom. Topics covered in the questionnaire included:

- » background information on participating households;
- » discipline strategies used by parents in the year prior to interview;
- » attitudes towards physical punishment and contexts in which it occurs;
- » attitudes towards legislation in Ireland on physical punishment;
- » extracts from a number of standardised measures that tapped into child behaviour and child temperament.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Parents' use of discipline strategies

A range of discipline strategies were explored with parents in order to find out what strategies were most frequently used. These discipline strategies ranged from inductive strategies (involving an emphasis on reasoning and communication with children) to more power-assertive strategies, including physical

punishment. These discipline strategies are classified under three broad headings as follows:

- » **Non-aggressive discipline strategies** (e.g. calm discussion, making a child take 'time out', giving a child a chore).
- » **Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies** (e.g. refusing to talk to a child, saying you would not love a child, calling a child stupid/lazy).
- » **Physical punishment** (e.g. slapping a child on hand, arm or leg, or hitting a child with an instrument).

Non-aggressive discipline strategies

Most parents reported using non-aggressive discipline strategies in response to their children's misbehaviour. Almost all parents (99%) reported using *calm discussion of an issue with a child*, while many parents also indicated that they *used time out* (72%) and *grounding* (65%) in response to misbehaviour. Less likely to be used were strategies such as *giving a child a chore to do* (45%) and *distracting a child* (41%). These strategies tended to be used with older children in adolescence and younger children in early childhood, respectively.

- » *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.

Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies

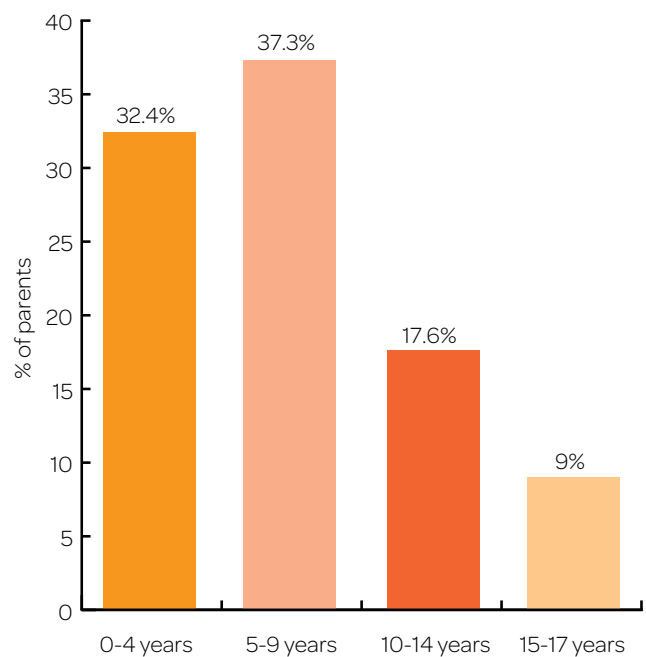
Psychologically aggressive discipline strategies were rarely used according to parents' own reports. While the majority of parents indicated that they never used any of the discipline strategies categorised as psychologically aggressive, just under half of parents (48%) indicated that they had shouted or yelled at a child in the past year.

- » *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.

Physical punishment as a discipline strategy

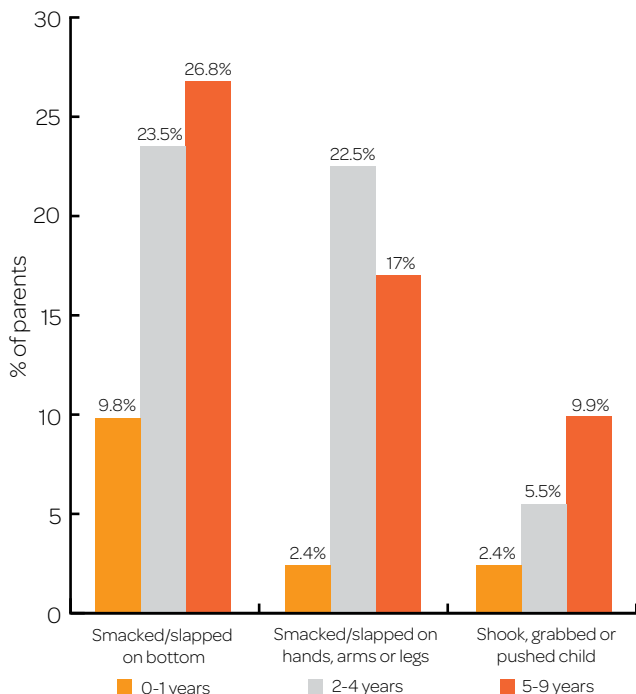
Discipline strategies involving physical punishment ranged from less severe forms, such as *slapping on the hand, arm or leg*, to severe physical punishment, such as *knocking a child down or hitting with an instrument*. Overall, looking across the different types of physical punishment outlined, one-quarter of the parents surveyed in the present study (25%) reported using any physical punishment with their children in the past year. The use of physical punishment was clearly associated with the age of the child, with younger children (specifically within the early childhood and middle childhood developmental categories) being more likely to be slapped than children in the older age groups. Parental use of physical punishment in the past year is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Parental use of any physical punishment in past year, by age of child



Focusing on the types of physical punishment used with young children, most frequently reported was *smacking a child on the bottom or smacking a child on the hand, arm or legs*. A very small minority of these parents reported that they *shook, grab or pushed a child*. Types of physical punishment used by parents of children in infancy, early and middle childhood are illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Types of physical punishment used by parents of children in infancy, early childhood and middle childhood



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 were more likely to have used physical punishment in the past year.
- » Parents who had been smacked during their own childhood 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.

4.2 Parents' attitudes to using physical punishment with children

As well as exploring parental use of physical punishment, the study also investigated parental attitudes towards smacking. Contexts more likely to trigger physical punishment and rationales for and against physical punishment are explored below.

Contexts in which physical punishment more likely to occur

Most parents stated that *problematic child behaviour* was most likely to trigger physical punishment as a discipline response. Three types of child behaviour for children across all age groups were emphasized – dangerous behaviour, aggressive behaviour and non-compliant behaviour. *Situational factors* also influenced parents' use of physical punishment, with parents stating they were 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.

Rationales for using physical punishment

Rationales, such as stopping children from doing something dangerous, stopping bad behaviour and underlining the seriousness of child misbehaviour, were supported to a greater extent by parents. In contrast, using physical punishment in order to vent parental anger on a child or as a last resort was clearly rejected by the vast majority of parents in the present study.

Parental opposition to physical punishment

The majority of parents (65%) believed that *smacking was not necessary to bring up a well-behaved child*, while approximately 40% of parents emphasized the potential negative effects of physical punishment on children, such as *damaging the parental relationship with the child* and the risk of *causing a child to become more aggressive* as a consequence of physical punishment. Despite the relatively low incidence of physical punishment in the present study, less than one-third of parents (28%) clearly felt that physical punishment was wrong and should never be used.

Parental endorsement of physical punishment

The majority of parents (67%) believed *an odd smack does a child no harm*, while 60% of parents felt that *parents have the right to smack their child*. Similarly, just under half of parents believed that *smacking was necessary as a last resort*, while over one-third of parents felt that *smacking was the only way to get the message across*.

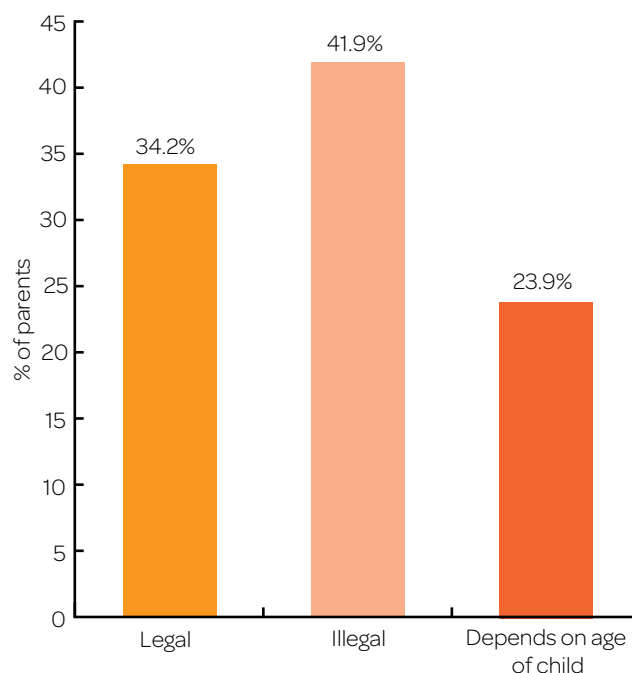
- » Parental attitudes to physical punishment were, to some extent, related to social class. More parents in the professional/managerial group (39.2%) and in the other non-manual category (37.9%) disagreed that *smacking is necessary as a last resort* in comparison with the skilled/unskilled manual group (18.2%).
- » Parental attitudes to physical punishment were also related to parental education level. 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* and more likely to agree that *smacking is necessary as a last resort*.
- » 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 statements endorsing physical punishment, such as '*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*'.

4.3 Parents' attitudes to legislation on the use of physical punishment

There was no clear consensus in terms of parents' views on banning physical punishment. Just over one-third of parents (34%) felt that smacking should remain legal, 42% of parents felt that legislation should be changed in order to make physical punishment illegal, while a further 24% of parents felt that whether smacking should be made illegal depended on the age of the child (see Figure 3).

- » 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.
- » No education or social class dimensions to these attitudes emerged.

Figure 3: Parental attitudes to legislation on physical punishment



5. What are the conclusions?

The following general conclusions were drawn from the study:

1. **Parents predominantly choose inductive, reasoning types of discipline strategies with their children**, reporting a relatively low incidence of physical punishment in the year prior to interviews.
2. **Parental attitudes to discipline strategies are not clearly aligned to the practices they report**, with many parents expressing some ambivalence, most specifically with regard to their beliefs about physical punishment. A surprisingly high proportion of parents do not oppose physical punishment in their reported attitudes, despite the low incidence of smacking reported.
3. **Physical punishment by parents is 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.

4. Some children are more vulnerable to physical punishment than others. Parents clearly identify particular contexts in which they feel they are more likely to respond to their children's misbehaviour by using physical punishment as a discipline strategy:

- » Younger children and children with behaviour problems are more likely to experience physical punishment as a discipline response. Specifically, parents highlight that they are more likely to slap a child in contexts of danger, repeated non-compliance and child aggression.
- » Many parents also indicate that they are more likely to use physical punishment when they are stressed, worried about their child's safety or feel that they lack control.

5. Parents' views on introducing a legal ban on physical punishment are mixed. Overall, there is no widespread support for a ban on physical punishment. While 42% of parents in Ireland feel that smacking should be made illegal, just over one-third of parents (34%) indicate that smacking should remain legal. A further 24% feel that whether smacking should be made illegal or not depends on the age of the child.

6. What are the recommendations?

This section presents the recommendations emerging from the study.

1. Supporting parents towards positive parenting

- » Parents in Ireland report a low incidence of physical punishment as a discipline strategy and, where used, it is alongside more inductive strategies. It is important to maximise the potential of these findings through building on existing parenting skills and competencies in order to further reinforce the effectiveness of non-aggressive strategies which parents actually use.
- » Many parents demonstrated their awareness that coercive discipline strategies, such as smacking a child, are not effective in terms of achieving long-term positive changes in child behaviour. The importance of increasing parents' understanding of the positive outcomes for children associated with clear communication and non-coercive strategies is evidenced in the study's findings.
- » Parental attitudes to physical punishment in the Irish context need to be further investigated since findings reveal that many parents did not see the harm in its use and the majority of parents felt they had the right to use it. Given that beliefs influence parental choice of discipline strategies, it is important to challenge the acceptability of physical punishment among parents and raise awareness of the potential negative effects of both physical and psychologically aggressive discipline strategies.

2. Supporting parents under stress

- » Provision of family support services to parents in stressful circumstances is necessary to help to reduce the likelihood of parents resorting to physical punishment in situations where they are worried, anxious, tired and feeling a loss of control with regard to child behaviour.
- » Some children are more vulnerable to physical punishment. Specifically, younger children and children with behavioural problems may need further protection. Parenting interventions, which aim to improve the skills and strategies of parents, can work to support parents in dealing with child behaviour difficulties, without resorting to coercive measures.



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Check out www.dcyia.ie for full report of study

3. Legislative reform

Absolute prohibition of physical punishment in the family setting is not provided for in Irish legislation since 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'. While no clear consensus on a potential legal ban on physical punishment emerged in the present study, a substantial proportion of parents were in favour of such a change in the legislation, with some parents feeling this depended on the age of the child. Further interrogation of such a change in Irish legislation is desirable given the positive implications such a prohibition would represent in clearly communicating that physical punishment of children is unacceptable.

7. What are the benefits of the study?

This is the first national survey of parenting practices and beliefs in the Irish context. The study contributes to our knowledge of the different discipline strategies that parents use when responding to child problematic behaviour. The complexity of these responses is further highlighted through a focus on parents' attitudes and beliefs about using more coercive discipline strategies, such as physical punishment. To date, physical punishment of children is prohibited in all settings in 18 out of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe. Absolute prohibition of physical punishment in the family setting is not provided for in Irish legislation since common law recognises the right of parents to use moderate and 'reasonable chastisement' on a child. In light of this, it is essential to gain insight into parents' views on and practices of discipline strategies in order to promote and increase positive and effective parenting practices. Similarly, the study draws attention to specific contexts where children are more vulnerable to experiencing physical punishment and may need further protection through targeted family support services.