

The National Study of Parents, Children and Discipline in Britain

KEY FINDINGS

This study involved the first methodologically rigorous national survey of parental discipline in Britain. It provided normative data on the incidence of a range of disciplinary tactics used by parents, and examined the influence of a number of contextual factors - including the parents' own childhood experiences .

- ◆ Almost all parents in Britain with children aged up to twelve years old use non-physical methods of discipline with their children
- ◆ Over half report using minor physical punishment (e.g. smacking and slapping) with their child during the past year, and 9% report having used severe physical punishment
- ◆ Parents use physical punishment as an adjunct to non-physical methods, not as an alternative
- ◆ Young parents, and those with unsupportive partners are more likely to use physical punishment.
- ◆ Toddlers, pre-school aged children and those rated by their parent as 'difficult' are much more likely to be physically punished than other children
- ◆ Only one in ten parents find physical punishment 'always' acceptable. Most show only conditional acceptance or reject it outright, and virtually all parents reject more severe practices like hitting with an implement
- ◆ Parents who describe their relationship with their child as more critical or hostile or less warm and involved are more likely to endorse and use harsh punishment
- ◆ In the immediate aftermath of conflict incidents, both parents and children are more likely to feel distressed when physical punishment has been used
- ◆ Both current attitudes, and past childhood experiences and memories of discipline are important in predicting how parents will behave with their own children
- ◆ Though we found evidence to support the theory of intergenerational transmission of disciplinary practices, the cycle is by no means unbreakable. Changing social attitudes and negative attributions about one's own past experiences may help to disrupt continuity of parenting practices through the generations

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Research Findings

Introduction

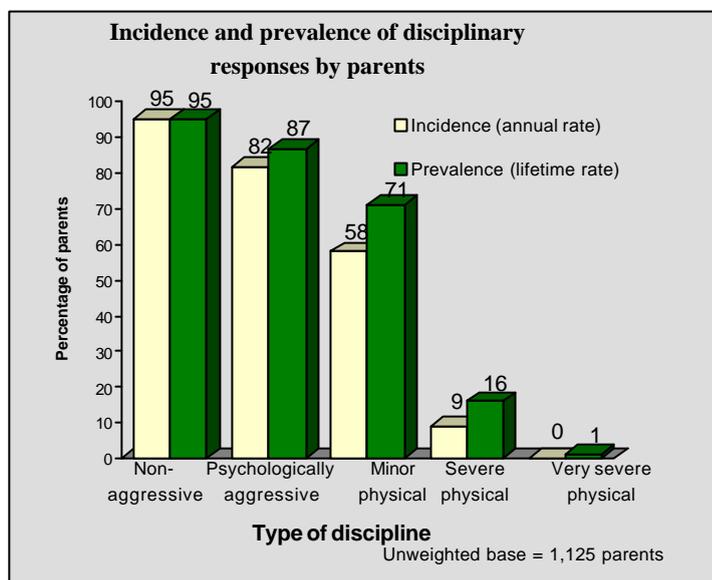
Research has shown that children are most at risk of violence in their own homes, and there has been increasing research and policy interest in exploring child maltreatment against the context of normal parenting practices. There has been a particular focus on the methods parents in the wider population use to discipline their children, and the extent to which discipline involves the use of physical force and physical punishment. Yet to date, we have had little idea of what is, in fact, 'normal' practice in Britain, and only a partial picture of what parents do and think about this sensitive area of family life.

This summary describes a selection of key findings from a major national study of how parents in Britain discipline children, carried out by the Policy Research Bureau, the NSPCC and the National Centre for Social Research. The study provides the first robust picture of the prevalence and incidence of a range of disciplinary tactics used by parents across Britain, including those using physical punishment. The study also explored British parents' attitudes to discipline, and how parents' behaviours and attitudes may be shaped by their own childhood experiences. It investigated the conditions under which conflict in the home takes place, and how the relationship between parents and children can influence what happens.

Prevalence and incidence

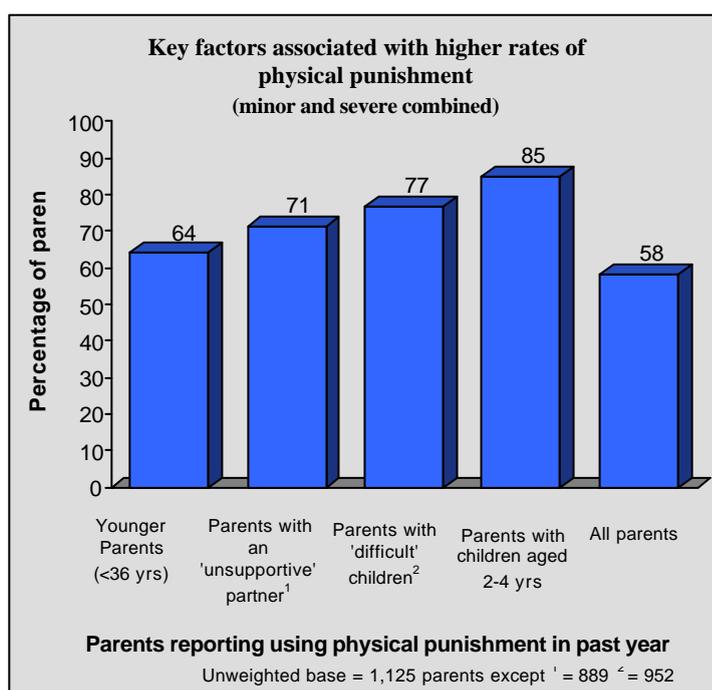
Parents self-reported on the overall incidence of a range of disciplinary responses to conflict within the past twelve months, and on the prevalence of their use during the child's lifetime.

Parents who employed physical punishment did not do so because of a lack of non-physical alternatives. In fact, they used a greater variety of non-physical disciplinary measures than parents who never used physical punishment. Thus, for many parents physical force is used in child discipline as an adjunct to non-physical methods, not as an alternative.



Family and individual characteristics

Though a wide range of family and individual characteristics were separately associated with greater use of physical punishment, once overlap between the factors was controlled for by statistical means, a relatively small group of demographic factors were independently associated with different patterns of child discipline. Young parents and those who reported that their partner was unsupportive were significantly more likely to report using physical punishment than other parents. Having an unsupportive partner was an even stronger 'risk factor' for physical punishment than being a lone parent.



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Attitudes and beliefs

The majority of the parents in the study believed that discipline was about 'positive parenting' strategies such as *praise and encouragement* (77%). A sizeable minority of parents believed it was *never acceptable* to smack a child (40%), and half thought it was only *sometimes* acceptable. Only one in ten parents said it was *always* permissible to smack a child, whatever the circumstances. Almost all (98%) thought it was never acceptable use an implement like a slipper or belt. The most commonly-cited 'acceptable reason' for physical punishment was *to stop a child doing something dangerous* (63%). Attitudes to discipline were closely but not perfectly aligned with behaviours. Parents who thought physical punishment was acceptable were five times more likely than those who did not to report having used it with their own child in the past year (73% compared to 15%). However, this means there was still a substantial minority (one in seven) who had used physical punishment despite the fact they disapproved of it in principle.

Context for discipline: the parent-child relationship

The overall quality of the parent-child relationship influences the discipline that parents use. We found that parents who reported higher than average levels of *criticism and hostility*, or lower levels of *warmth and involvement* in their relationship with their child were dramatically more likely to find all forms of punishment more acceptable than other parents. They were also much more likely to use physical punishment, including harsh punishment, with their child, even after 'difficult' behaviour was taken into account.

Generational trends

To explore whether disciplinary styles have changed between the current generation of parents and the last, we asked parents to tell us what discipline they remembered from their own childhood, and compared it with their reports of how they disciplined their own children. We found that although overall reliance on physical punishment has not changed greatly, there has been a dramatic shift away from the use of severe forms of physical punishment: for example, 23% said they had been 'hit with a hard object' as a child, whereas only 3% of today's parents report doing this.

We found evidence of both continuity and discontinuity in the intergenerational transmission of physically punitive behaviour. There was continuity in that parents were very much more likely to use the types of discipline that they remembered having received themselves, both minor and severe. However, there was discontinuity in that only a minority of those who were severely physically punished as children went on to repeat this behaviour with their own child, probably because of the negative attributions held by this group, who were more likely to recall their experiences as bad and did not want to repeat them with their own children.

What triggers conflict

To explore the factors that might spark individual episodes of conflict between parents and children we focussed on the most recent incident involving discipline within the last six months (n = 884). There were some common features of conflict situations that applied irrespective of whether the parent was a 'smacker' (parents who used physical punishment) or a 'non-smacker' (parents who never used physical punishment). Both groups reported that most conflict episodes took place on weekdays (62%), and at home (87%). The most common time for conflict to erupt was after school or in the early evening (36% of incidents in the home), and were preceded by disobedient or demanding behaviour by the child. The most usual reason for disciplining the child for both groups was best summed up as '*crisis management*' – wanting to get the child's attention very quickly, or to stop the child putting themselves in danger (55%).

However there were some significant differences between incidents reported by the two groups. Smackers were twice as likely to attribute negative intentions to their child, more likely to be in a *bad mood* beforehand, and more likely to describe their responses as *automatic* and 'spur of the moment'. They were also much more likely to report a negative aftermath for both themselves and their child. They were twice as likely to feel distressed themselves, and to report their child was upset. Children who were physically punished were also more likely react with an 'escalation' response, becoming aggressive or behaving even worse.

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Conclusions and implications for policy and practice

- The extent to which parental use of physical discipline with children is desirable continues to be a matter of vigorous public and political debate. This general population study of parents in Britain, the first of its kind, showed that whilst in practice a majority of parents use minor forms of physical punishment and a notable minority use severe forms, as a matter of principle, most parents report only conditional acceptance of physical punishment and do not 'feel good' about hitting their children. Almost no parents support the use of implements to hit children.
- Physical discipline is used as an adjunct, not an alternative, to non-physical methods. Parent education needs to recognise this and work with parents to strengthen the effectiveness of the 'positive' strategies that most already use.
- Some children are exposed to physical punishment by parents far more than others, especially pre-school children and children judged emotionally or behaviourally challenging by parents (who are more often boys than girls). Providing support, advice and education about discipline with these particular groups of children could be especially beneficial if we wanted to reduce reliance on physical methods of discipline.
- Family support to strengthen positive relationships between parents and children could also help to reduce some parents' reliance on physical disciplinary methods
- Focussing prevention and family support on the one in ten children who are severely or harshly physically punished could be an especially cost-effective investment in social terms, because the use of severe physical disciplinary practices in one generation is strongly predictive of their use in the next.
- Lastly, because parents' attitudes and beliefs about discipline are a strong determinant of their behaviour in respect of their own children, the study suggests that reliance on physical methods of discipline can be reduced and 'positive parenting' practices strengthened if policy makers and practitioners actively seek to influence public opinion in this regard.

About the study

The research consisted of three main stages:

1. A nationally representative survey of 1,250 mothers and fathers of children aged 0 to 12, across Britain.
2. A qualitative follow-up study of parents who had participated in the survey, and their children (interviewed separately; N = 20 pairs).
3. Qualitative group discussions with children aged 8 to 12 years (8 groups)

Only Stage 1 is reported on here. Further results can be found in Ghate D, Hazel N, Creighton S and Finch S (forthcoming book) *Parents, children and discipline: a national study of families in Britain*

The survey used Computer Assisted Personal (and Self) Interviewing (CAPI/CASI) to ensure the fullest and frankest answers. Disciplinary acts were measured using the Misbehaviour Response Scale (MRS), an adaptation by the authors for the UK context of the widely used American Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus et al 1998). Child behaviours were measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman 1997).

References

- Straus M.A., Hamby S.L., Finkelhor D., Moore D.W. and Runyan D. (1998) Identification of child maltreatment with the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale: Development and psychometric data for a national sample of American parents *Child Abuse and Neglect* 22(4) 249-270
- Goodman R. (1997) The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: a research note *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 38 (5) 581-586

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