

SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 42/2018

PUBLICATION DATE: 11/07/2018

Parental Attitudes towards Managing Young Children's Behaviour 2017: Executive Summary

Executive summary

1. Introduction

1.1 This summary report presents findings from a Welsh Government commissioned survey undertaken with parents of children aged 0 to 6 about their attitudes towards managing children's behaviour.

1.2 The sample frame used for this survey was provided by the National Survey for Wales (2016-2017)¹. The Welsh Government provided details of 843 parents \ guardians of 0 to 5 years olds² (at the time of their National Survey interview) who had agreed to be re-contacted for research purposes.

1.3 Interviews were undertaken via telephone between 5 October and 3 November 2017. All respondents were given the choice of taking part in English or Welsh. A total of 269 interviews were completed and this represented a response rate of 44%.

¹ <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/national-survey/?tab=current&lang=en>

² The sample drawn was parents of children aged 0 to 5 at the time of their 2016-2017 National Survey interview. As fieldwork for the follow up survey into Managing Children's behaviour was conducted later in 2017 (October / November), these parents could include those who now had a child up to 6 years. Therefore, they are referred to as parents of 0 to 6 years old when results of the survey are reported.

1.4 The final sample of interviews was weighted on key demographic factors to be representative of parents of 0 to 5 year old children in Wales. These factors were:

- Gender of parent;
- Age of parent;
- Tenure;
- Household type (single parent \ two parent household); and
- Welsh Multiple Index of Deprivation (WMID) quintile

1.5 The questionnaire included sections on:

- Well-being and parenting;
- Attitudes to smacking;
- Awareness of legislation around smacking;
- Support for changes in legislation;
- Parenting behaviours;
- Parental support services; and
- Awareness and opinion of the Parenting. Give it time campaign.

1.6 The *Parenting. Give it Time* campaign is a positive parenting campaign with a main target audience up until 2017-2018 of parents and guardians of 0-5 year olds in Wales³. The campaign aims to: encourage parents to find out more information about positive parenting; raise awareness of positive parenting messages; and increase the number of parents and guardians who are aware of non-physical strategies to manage children's behaviour and the benefits of these.

1.7 Whilst there were some new questions for the 2017 survey, the survey was largely a repeat of the benchmark survey in 2015, undertaken using the same research method. Therefore comparisons are made with this 2015 study within this report and statistical testing has been used to assess whether differences between the two studies are significant (can be applied to the wider population) or the result of sampling error (occurred by chance).

³ From 2018 the target audience was extended to parents and guardians of 0-7 year olds.

1.8 Where differences are described as statistically significant there is less than a 5% probability that the difference found in the sample is due to chance (sampling error) – i.e. we are 95% confident that the difference can be applied to the general population not just those who have taken part in the survey.

2. Attitudes towards smacking

2.1 A majority of parents (81%) disagreed with the statement *it is sometimes necessary to smack a naughty child* and only 11% agreed with it. Comparing this with findings to the equivalent question in 2015 (71% disagreed, 25% agreed) shows that parents are now less likely to report that it *is* sometimes necessary to smack a naughty child. Statistical testing confirms the difference in pattern of responses to be significant.

2.2 Just under a third (31%) of parents reported that they may smack a child under certain circumstances. Within this, only 5% reported that they are comfortable with the idea and would do it when necessary, with an additional 26% reporting that they don't like the idea but will do it if nothing else works.

2.3 The proportion who reported that they smack under certain circumstances (31%) has declined from 44% who responded in this way in the 2015 survey. This difference is statistically significant and can be generalised to the wider population of parents of 0 to 6 year olds.

2.4 In terms of particular circumstances, around 3 in 10 parents reported it would be appropriate to smack a child to stop them doing something harmful or dangerous to themselves (30%) or to another child (29%). However, far fewer reported that it would be appropriate to smack to manage other behaviour. Only 6% reported that they deem smacking to be appropriate when behaviour is out of control and 7% as a punishment for naughty behaviour.

2.5 When asked whether they had smacked their children in the last 6 months (as a way of managing their behaviour), 11% reported that they had.

Whilst one could argue that there may be a degree of social desirability⁴ in the answers given during a telephone survey, it is interesting that compared to the 2015 survey (conducted in the same manner), this figure has halved from 22%.

3. Understanding smacking behaviour

3.1 In order to provide insight into some of the factors which are associated with smacking, parents' responses were divided into two groups based on their answer to a survey question.

- Those defined as 'sometimes smack' were parents who had reported *I don't like the idea of smacking a child but I will do it if nothing else works or I'm comfortable with the idea of smacking a child and will do it when I think it's necessary.*
- Those defined as 'never smack' had reported *I think it is always wrong to smack a child, and I won't do it.*

3.2 Parents who thought it was appropriate to smack in the following circumstances were more likely to have reported smacking behaviour than those who did not think it was appropriate in these circumstances:

- To stop them doing something which is dangerous or harmful to them;
- To stop them doing something which is dangerous or harmful to another child;
- When behaviour is out of control; and
- As punishment for naughty behaviour.

3.3 Beyond these circumstantial factors, the survey provides evidence that parents who report smacking were:

- More likely to be dissatisfied with the area in which they live;
- More likely to report shouting at their children; and
- Less likely to report setting aside time every day for play activities.

⁴ social desirability bias is a type of response bias that is the tendency of survey respondents to answer questions in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others.

3.4 However, the survey does not provide sufficient evidence to suggest that the following variables are associated with reported smacking behaviour:

- a range of demographic factors such as gender of parent, age of parent, household type (single / multi parent household), educational attainment or tenure;
- the deprivation level of the area in which they live;
- parents' perceptions of their satisfaction with their health, relationship, or overall life; and
- parents' perceptions of the child's behaviour.

4. Advice and support for managing children's behaviour

4.1 A total of 40% of parents reported that they had sought advice or information about managing their children's behaviour.

4.2 When asked where they got this information and advice, the internet was reported as the most popular source of advice and information for managing children's behaviour - 52% of those who had ever looked for information and advice. This was followed by health professional (35%), school (20%) and friend\relative (14%).

4.3 A similar question was asked in the 2015 survey, although it referred to accessing information and advice on parenting skills rather than specifically about managing children's behaviour and therefore results are not directly comparable. However, a general trend appears to be increased popularity of online support – only 12% of those accessing support for parenting skills had done so online in 2015.

4.4 The vast majority of those who have accessed advice or information about managing children's behaviour report that it has had a positive influence on their parenting skills or confidence – 49% reported that it had helped a lot and 46% that it had helped a little.

4.5 Parents reported using a wide variety of alternative techniques to manage their children's behaviour. Praising good behaviour, developing routines,

saying no and telling them off were reported to be used by the highest proportions of parents.

4.6 Those who 'sometimes smack' were generally as likely to report using alternative techniques as those who 'never smack'. However, there were two areas where statistically significant differences were found. Those who sometimes smacked were more likely to report shouting at their children (88% vs. 60% of those who never smack) and also less likely to set aside time every day for play activities (79% vs. 90%).

5. Legislation on managing children's behaviour change

5.1 The current legal situation regarding smacking in Wales is that parents and adults acting in loco parentis are able to rely on the defence of reasonable punishment against a charge of common assault. Parents who cause physical injury to their children cannot use the reasonable punishment defence for charges of cruelty, wounding or assaults occasioning actual or grievous bodily harm. The Crown Prosecution Service guidance clarifies that "although any injury that is more than 'transient or trifling' can be classified as actual bodily harm, the appropriate charge will be one of Common Assault where no injury or injuries which are not serious occur".

5.2 Around half (53%) of parents surveyed thought that the law did not "allow parents to smack their children". Around a third (33%) thought the law did allow parents to smack and the remaining 14% reported being unsure.

5.3 When informed that the law does currently allow parents to smack or physically discipline their children, 72% thought it would allow parents to smack but leave no mark on their child. Far fewer thought that temporary reddening would be allowed (27%) and very few (1%) thought that bruising would be permissible.

5.4 Parents were also asked about their opinion of legislative change. Two differently worded questions were used: one which asks whether the law should

allow parents to smack their children; and the other whether there should be a complete ban on parents hitting their children, even a smack as a punishment.

5.5 Whilst there is an element of mixed views on the subject, when asked if the law should allow parents to smack their children, the balance of opinion lies with those who think smacking should not be allowed: 50% disagree that it should be allowed, 24% agree that it should.

5.6 When asked whether there should be a complete ban, the balance of opinion is again with those who think smacking should not be allowed, but here the gap is narrower – 48% agree with the ban, 39% disagree. There has been a small change in support for the ban since 2015 (when 46% agreed and 43% disagreed) but is not statistically significant.

6. *Parenting. Give it time* Campaign

6.1 On the basis of a verbal description of the campaign and some campaign slogans, reported awareness on the *Parenting. Give it time* campaign was at 8%.

6.2 Among those parents identified as 'sometimes smack' and 'never smack' campaign awareness was very similar (7% and 8% respectively).

6.3 Recall of the campaign among the small group who were aware of it centred on 'positive parenting' and 'taking time \ spending time with children'.

7. Conclusions

7.1 Comparing some of the key measures from the 2017 and 2015 surveys indicates that there has been some change in attitudes towards smacking among parents of 0 to 6 year olds over this period. Fewer parents now report that they may smack a child under certain circumstances (31%) than they did in the 2015 survey (44%). Furthermore, the proportion of parents of 0 to 6 year olds who reported having smacked their child in the last 6 months has also declined from 22% in 2015 to 11% in 2017.

7.2 The 2017 survey reinforces the finding of the 2015 edition in that circumstantial factors, such as to prevent harm to themselves or other children, were a better predictor of reported smacking behaviour than demographic variables such as age, gender, deprivation, educational attainment or single/multi parent households, where no significant associations were found.

7.3 Beyond circumstantial factors, the survey found that satisfaction with the area in which they live has a significant association with reported smacking behaviour although this does not seem to extend into other well-being factors such as satisfaction with: life overall, health or home.

7.4 Parents appear to be increasingly looking online for advice and support in managing children's behaviour and therefore signposting them to a credible source will be important. A further consideration is ensuring that those who are most in need of the advice are motivated or directed to find advice in the first place. The survey found that those who report smacking behaviour were slightly less likely to have looked for advice than those who reported not smacking although the difference was not significant.

7.5 On the basis of evidence from this survey, the Welsh Government's *Parenting. Give it time* campaign has so far had a limited role as a source of advice for parents interviewed. Eight per cent of parents were aware of the campaign, although a limitation of the telephone survey is that awareness can only be judged on the basis of parents recognising the name and description of

the campaign given by the interviewer because it was not possible to show them campaign materials.

7.6 Whilst there has been a reduction in the proportion of parents who report smacking behaviour, there has been no statistically significant change in those who agree that there should be a complete ban on parents hitting their children, even a smack as a punishment and mixed views on this subject remain. However, the balance of opinion is with supporting the ban as 48% agree there should be ban and 39% disagree.

Report Authors:

Chris Timmins, Beaufort Research
Owen Knight, Beaufort Research

Full Research Report: Parental Attitudes towards Managing Young Children's Behaviour 2017; Cardiff: Welsh Government, GSR report number 42/2018. Available at: <https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/attitudes-parents-towards-managing-young-childrens-behaviour/?lang=en>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

For further information please contact:

Hayley Collicott:
Children Young People and Families Division
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ
Email: Hayley.Collicott@gov.wales

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.