

The 'Smacking Debate' in Northern Ireland - Messages from Research

THE 'SMACKING DEBATE' IN NORTHERN IRELAND – MESSAGES FROM RESEARCH

SUMMARY
June 2008

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**
Northern Ireland

NICCY
northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

NSPCC 
NORTHERN IRELAND
Cruelty to children must stop. FULL STOP.

Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| Foreword | 5 |
| Executive Summary | 6 |
| Introduction – Policy and Research Context | 6 |
| Review of the International Literature | 8 |
| Physical Discipline in Northern Ireland | 11 |
| Key Survey Findings | 13 |
| Recomendations – Universal Provision | 13 |
| Targeted Provision | 16 |
| Future Research and Information Needs | 18 |

Foreword

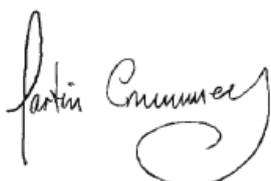
The smacking debate in Northern Ireland has been, and continues to be, a matter of great public interest. It is, understandably, a topic that engenders a frequently emotive response given the inter-personal nature of the act and the traditionally private familial context in which it occurs. People hold differing views on the subject; some support an outright ban on smacking, others do not.

To help inform this debate, NICCY (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People), NSPCC (National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children) (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) undertook an evidence based review of the subject area, the findings of which are presented within this report. We wish to extend our sincere thanks to the authors of this report, for the valid and insightful contributions they offer to our understanding of the debate. Our thanks are also due to all those involved in contributing to, or overseeing, the work.

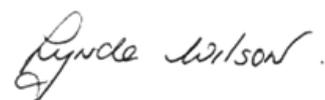
Whilst NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) are all acutely aware of, and sensitive to, the complexities of this issue, all are concerned to ensure that children are afforded adequate protection with regard to their physical integrity, as is their clear right under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We therefore corporately endorse the recommendations contained within this report that set out a framework by which to progress policy, legislation and service development and urge all those in a position of influence to actively work towards ensuring children in Northern Ireland have equal protection from violence under the law as their adult counterparts.



Patricia Lewsley
NICCY - Commissioner



Martin Crummey
NSPCC (NI) - Divisional Director



Lynda Wilson
Barnardo's (NI) - Director

Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION - POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The 'smacking debate', as it has been popularly conceptualised, can be a highly polarised and contentious one with the term itself often meaning different things to different people. A variety of perspectives are evident in this debate with the children's rights perspective and a number of research perspectives encompassing the key arguments:

- The children's rights perspective, based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, seeks to protect children and young people from all forms of physical force or violence including, but not limited to, smacking. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has been very clear that this includes all forms of corporal punishment and that States which permit the continued existence of legal provisions that allow some degree of violence against children are in clear violation of their obligations under the UNCRC - "children's rights to life, survival, development, dignity and physical integrity do not stop at the door of the family home, nor do States' obligations to ensure these rights for children" (Pinheiro, 2006:12). This position is informed by, rather than directly reliant on, research evidence, with its primary consideration being that of ensuring an end to human rights violations.
- The research perspectives encompass the anti, conditional and pro-corporal punishment positions. These positions tend to be based on the weight of research evidence, in particular the anti and conditional stances, as the pro-corporal punishment perspective [the belief that it is beneficial to spank and not to do so is detrimental to child outcomes] has little in the way of evidence to support it and is rarely found in academic journals. Whilst involving a strong moral position, the anti-corporal punishment perspective is based on the belief that any form of violence towards a child, including spanking, is harmful for short and long-term development. By contrast, the conditional corporal punishment position argues that the evidence does not support a wholesale ban on all types of physical discipline and that spanking, for certain age groups, does not contribute to negative outcomes.¹

Over the past three decades there has been an increasing international recognition of children's rights with a total of twenty three countries having outlawed physical discipline in order to comply with the UNCRC. Although all UK jurisdictions have been involved in public consultation on this issue, none has yet implemented a full ban, despite heavy and repeated criticism from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Legislative reform has gone down different routes in different jurisdictions. Currently in Scotland it is illegal to hit children with implements, shake them or hit them on the head. In England, Wales and, more recently, Northern Ireland, the defence of reasonable chastisement has been removed for more serious assaults on children but is retained for the offence of common assault (known as Section 58).

¹ References for the research cited within this Executive Summary are located in the relevant sections of the main body of the report.

Alongside this legislative change, the Welsh Assembly has developed a 'parent action plan' which states that it believes smacking is wrong and that it will continue to promote positive parenting. It is positive to note that Northern Ireland, like Wales, favours a more preventative approach with the introduction of Section 58 having been strongly linked with the planned development of a positive parenting strategy to support parents in this jurisdiction. Nonetheless, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is unambiguous in its position that until such developments are accompanied by an outright ban on the use of physical discipline within the home, the Northern Ireland Assembly and the other devolved administrations remain in clear violation of their obligations under the UNCRC.

In light of these recent debates and policy developments across the UK and Northern Ireland, NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) decided to examine the issue in greater depth, taking account of the differing perspectives illustrated above. All three organisations consider research evidence to be a key element in further developing policy and practice in this area. Together they carried out a review of the international literature relating to physical discipline use as well as a survey of 1,000 Northern Ireland parents of 0-10 year olds about their use of physical discipline.

NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) all use the broad definition of physical force outlined in the UNCRC and conceptually define smacking as part of a continuum of violence rather than a discreet and distinct practice. As such, the review encompassed a wide range of disciplinary practices rather than concentrating specifically on smacking or spanking. Although all the organisations are of the view that the term 'physical punishment' more accurately reflects the use of physical force with children (the term 'physical discipline' might potentially be construed as normalising this behaviour and giving it a degree of respectability), the term 'physical discipline' was adopted for research purposes as a generic expression to cover a range of common terms such as physical punishment, corporal punishment, corporal discipline, smacking, spanking and hitting. The core rationale for the application of this terminology is directly related to its use within the survey element of the research.

Whilst few studies included in the review provide an explicit definition of physical discipline, many use standardised research measures such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or the updated Conflict Tactics Scale Parent to Child version (CTSPC) to measure the prevalence of a range of disciplinary behaviours in parent populations. The CTS/CTSPC attempts to provide some sort of framework for examining the different degrees of discipline used by parents by categorising certain types of physical discipline use as 'ordinary' or 'minor' and others as 'severe' physical discipline or assault. The use of this terminology throughout the report reflects the ways in which the research community have attempted to address methodological concerns and the lack of consistency with regard to the available research in this field. As such, it should be understood that these categorisations are research defined rather than organisationally defined.

REVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

Review methodology

The review of the international literature aimed to answer three research questions:

- 1] What is the prevalence of different types of physical discipline and what are the associated characteristics and risk factors related to its use?
- 2] What is the impact of physical discipline on outcomes for children?
- 3] What are the views, attitudes and beliefs of parents, professionals and children towards physical discipline?

A broad search strategy was adopted and a range of academic and research databases searched. The review concentrated on journal articles with a focus on physical discipline research using mainly Western and European populations and published between 2000 and 2005. A total of 138 articles were obtained for in-depth review. Those considered relevant were included in the final synthesis. This journal review was supplemented by relevant voluntary sector, government and other research reports.

Where possible, the review took account of a number of research considerations that can impact on how physical discipline research is interpreted such as: how physical discipline and related child outcomes were defined and measured in the individual studies and reviews; whether the study design enabled causal links to be made; and how potentially spurious associations between physical discipline and other variables had been controlled.

Prevalence of physical discipline

The review findings illustrated that physical discipline is commonly used by parents in a number of Western and European countries. Variation in rates between countries was apparent, although direct comparison was made difficult due to the differences in the timings of the studies, as well as

the samples and definitions and methods of measurement used. However, broadly speaking it would appear that within Europe, Italy and Germany tend to have the highest rates of physical discipline use and Sweden the lowest. Lower Swedish rates were often associated with Sweden having the longest established legislative ban on the use of physical discipline, an argument which finds some support from comparative research with Canada. Likewise, although high rates of physical discipline still exist in Germany, survey data from both before and after the legal ban was implemented pointed to an overall reduction in physical discipline use post ban as well as a reduction in more serious forms of physical discipline. While these figures provided useful pointers to changing trends in parenting practices, given the complexity of factors which influence parental physical discipline use, simplistic cause and effect comparisons should be treated with caution.

As expected, rates of 'severe' physical discipline tended to be much lower than those for 'minor' or 'ordinary' physical discipline. Nevertheless, one American survey produced very high rates, with a quarter of parents having used one or more severe forms of physical discipline including hitting with an implement, pinching and slapping on the face, head or ears. Differences in 'minor' and 'severe' physical discipline/assault rates were mirrored within the UK. Results from a national British survey indicated that 71% of parents of 0–12 year olds had used 'minor' physical discipline, 16% 'severe' physical discipline/assault and 1% very 'severe' physical discipline/assault. These findings are similar to the high overall rates of physical discipline found in Italy and Germany, although the figures for 'severe' physical discipline/assault in Germany appear to be lower than those measured in America but higher than those in Italy.

Research with Scottish parents of children aged 0–15 showed somewhat lower rates than the

national British research, a discrepancy which may be accounted for by differences in the parent groups who participated in the research, as well as potential regional variation. Both surveys evidenced that, rather than being used in isolation, physical discipline tends to be used within a range of disciplinary tactics. This highlights the need to view physical discipline within the context of broader parental disciplinary strategies. Although physical discipline tended to be less commonly used than other forms of discipline, the findings from both pieces of research indicate that a majority of parents in the UK have used physical discipline, with high rates of 'severe' physical discipline/assault emerging as a concern.

Factors which influence physical discipline use

The research findings highlight that there is no one factor which is solely responsible for influencing parental physical discipline use: instead a complex picture of inter-related parent, child, family, community and cultural factors emerges. However, the presence of these factors should not be taken as an indelible blueprint for families that will use physical discipline. They merely highlight issues which have been shown to increase the risk of 'minor' physical discipline and 'severe' physical discipline/assault and provide a framework for understanding physical discipline use and for targeting prevention strategies.

Key parent factors included parental age and gender, maternal physical health, maternal alcohol/drug abuse, mental health difficulties and personal experience of physical discipline or physical abuse in childhood. Unsurprisingly, the findings also showed that physical discipline use was linked with parental levels of emotional arousal and attitudes toward physical discipline use. No association was found between knowledge of alternative discipline tactics, suggesting that simply raising awareness of disciplinary alternatives will not be enough to prevent physical discipline use. Equally, while somewhat contradictory in nature,

the findings from studies which explored the relationship between physical discipline use and use of disciplinary tactics, suggested that inconsistency of discipline use may be a relevant factor.

Child factors which were found to predict the use of physical discipline included: age, gender, poor child health/developmental delay, disability, genetic factors and behavioural problems. A number of studies also highlighted that the type of misbehaviour children engaged in, repetition of the misbehaviour and parental perceptions of the behaviour as intentional all influenced the likelihood of physical discipline use. Family factors which appeared to have a significant influence included the number of children living in the household, socio-economic status and poverty, marital conflict and domestic violence. The influence of violence also extended to community/neighbourhood characteristics with the limited research in this area showing a link between violent and high crime neighbourhoods and increased 'minor' physical discipline and severe parent-to-child physical aggression. Cultural/societal factors in the form of ethnic and/or religious practices which support physical discipline use and the legal acceptability of physical discipline in a number of Western and European countries also appeared to have an important role to play.

While authors may reach differing conclusions, the research clearly highlights that 'severe' physical discipline/physical abuse rarely occurs in families which do not use physical discipline. As such, it is to be expected that both groups would share some but not all characteristics as not all who use 'minor' physical discipline also used 'severe' physical discipline or physically abused their children. Evidently, there are circumstances in which 'minor' physical discipline use can spill over into 'severe' or abusive physical discipline and there is a need for further investigation to better understand how physical discipline is transformed into abuse.

The outcomes of physical discipline use

There is a substantial body of research linking physical discipline with a variety of negative outcomes for children, the most common of which include increased aggression and anti-social behaviour, increased mental and emotional problems and increased risk of physical abuse in childhood. However, much of this research has been criticised for methodological flaws, with the main concerns focusing on a reliance on retrospective and predominantly correlational research which is unable to establish causal links and fails to discriminate between 'ordinary' physical discipline and overly 'severe' and abusive discipline. Despite this, the consistency of the vast body of research findings associated with negative or detrimental outcomes for children should not be underestimated. Along with other environmental, cultural and familial factors, physical discipline has been shown to contribute to a range of behavioural and cognitive problems for children. Where harsh or excessive physical discipline is used, or where it is administered along with a degree of parental anger, or within a hostile or punitive style of parenting, the evidence for detrimental outcomes for children is even clearer.

Nevertheless, there remains some disagreement as to whether all forms of physical discipline towards children should be discouraged in favour of alternative tactics or whether, under certain conditions, spanking can be an effective discipline strategy. The conditional perspective supports the use of spanking under very specific circumstances, arguing that negative outcomes vary across different ethnic and religious groups and are mediated by factors such as child age and the type and frequency of discipline used. Evidence is also presented which indicates that conditional spanking compares well with a range of disciplinary alternatives. However, it is important to note that it is only associated with better outcomes in relation to non-compliance and anti-social behaviour and is limited in its capacity to promote positive outcomes

such as conscience development and positive behaviours and feelings.

It is also worth noting that there are many similarities between the anti-physical discipline and conditional physical discipline perspectives. Both are in agreement that not all children exposed to physical discipline will develop negative outcomes (the same is true for positive outcomes) and that harsh and frequent use of physical discipline is damaging to children. However, while the anti-physical discipline perspective advocates that parents remove potential risk to children by refraining from physical discipline use, the conditional perspective advocates the controlled use of spanking (defined as an open-handed smack, administered to the bottom, arms or legs, to be used with children aged 2–6, infrequently, in a controlled and flexible manner and as a back-up to other, milder disciplinary techniques).

While the debate about the effectiveness of physical discipline and its relationship to child outcomes, both positive and negative, is likely to continue, the current evidence base clearly shows that physical discipline can pose a potential risk to children across a range of outcomes. A major drawback of the conditional perspective is its highly prescriptive nature. It seems both unlikely and impractical that parents would benefit from guidance based on this narrow definition of non-harmful physical discipline and the risk of escalation to harsher and more damaging forms of physical discipline would remain. Indeed, the conditional perspective itself also recognises that parental discipline use does not generally take place under these optimal circumstances, highlighting the importance of parent training in a wide range of disciplinary tactics as an effective means of reducing both the need for physical discipline and the frequency with which it is used.

Views and attitudes toward physical discipline

Although physical discipline is common practice,

parents across a range of countries tend to hold negative attitudes towards its use. Only a minority of parents in England, Scotland or Wales believe it to be always acceptable or an effective way to teach children right from wrong. Parents also appear to be much less accepting of the use of more 'severe' physical discipline/assault and although attitudes are not necessarily equated with actions, the literature shows that they can be an important predictor in its use. However, that said, parents who disapprove of physical discipline or consider it to be ineffective may still use it, a finding which suggests that some parents may use it as an action of last resort in situations of stress or pressure. Indeed some research has shown that high levels of parenting stress in parents who approve of the use of physical discipline can be associated with increased risk of physical child abuse potential. Low socio-economic status and financial pressures, as well as lack of social support, have also been linked with increased approval of physical discipline.

Parents themselves have indicated that they would like more support, highlighting the need for structured parent education programmes and information on child development and disciplinary alternatives. There is also some evidence to suggest that a legal ban on physical discipline can have a positive impact on public attitudes, although the relationship between the two is unlikely to be a simple case of cause and effect, with the ensuing debate surrounding public consultations and various legislative changes likely to contribute to attitudinal change prior to full legal reform, as well as impact on pressure for legislative change.

Attitudes towards physical discipline vary among children, young people and young adults, with more supportive attitudes apparent in older age groups. Research studies have found a positive association between being exposed to physical discipline as a child and subsequent approval of its use as a discipline strategy in later life. Thus, it would appear that attitudes towards the appropriateness of

physical discipline are promoted and instilled from early childhood. The normalising of physical discipline, particularly severe instances, among some young adults creates concern about the risk of perpetrating potentially injurious acts of discipline in a parenting context. Boys have been found to be more likely to be accepting of physical discipline, while fathers are perceived as being more punitive than mothers by children of both genders. UK research with younger groups of children has also provided a unique insight into how this group perceive physical discipline, indicating that for them, smacking is equated with being hit hard or very hard and in a way that hurts them.

Although limited, the research literature relating to professional attitudes suggest a general lack of consensus among professionals about how to address this issue, with a number advocating this type of discipline or overlooking its use. In turn, parents receive conflicting messages about physical discipline when seeking information about discipline strategies. Several studies have also suggested that professional beliefs about physical discipline can potentially have a negative impact upon perceptions of child maltreatment and reporting intentions. Again, a range of other factors such as ethnicity and immigrant status were also found to have a substantial effect on reporting intentions.

PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland literature

Previous research in Northern Ireland has highlighted that approximately half of parents have hit or smacked their children. While information on the characteristics of families who use physical discipline is relatively sparse, the limited analysis available suggests that similar parent and child factors such as age, gender and religion, are likely to apply in Northern Ireland.

In terms of attitudes, although the various results highlight discrepancies regarding parents' views on the acceptability of physical discipline, taken together they indicate that between one third and half of all parents in Northern Ireland think it is acceptable to smack a child. Parents are more likely than non parents to view physical discipline as acceptable and, in keeping with the international literature, it is considered less acceptable for use with very young and older children. However, more parents approve of physical discipline than actually use it, a finding which points to the complex nature of reactions to this issue, suggesting that some may view this as a parental 'right' rather than a form of discipline they themselves wish to use.

Almost three in ten people in Northern Ireland would support a ban on the smacking of children of any age, as long as this would not result in the trivial prosecution of parents, while a majority would not. The results also reveal significant differences between religious groups, with Catholics being more likely to support a ban than Protestants. However, significantly, the findings also highlight much wider support for a ban on the smacking of children with implements. Three quarters of respondents (76%) indicated support for some form of legislative change.

Children themselves think that smacking should stop and perceive physical discipline as something painful that happens when parents are angry and stressed. Equally, most professionals did not consider physical discipline to be appropriate or acceptable and thought that it might potentially be harmful to children. Both children and parents highlighted the need for increased support services for parents, with parents identifying one-to-one work, family support and structured education programmes as useful in helping them with discipline issues. However, provision of parent education is patchy in Northern Ireland, with health visiting tending to be the main source of advice and information. Training for professionals who work

with children has also been found to be useful in increasing knowledge of disciplinary alternatives and changing attitudes towards child discipline.

Northern Ireland survey methodology

While the previous research provides basic information on physical discipline in Northern Ireland, there are however, still a number of important gaps in our current knowledge which need to be addressed. The literature demonstrates that parents make use of a wide range of disciplinary practices and the frequency of physical discipline use is an important component of practice. However, to date, Northern Ireland surveys have tended to focus on 'physical discipline' generally, rather than the full range of disciplinary tactics and have not considered specific time frames or the frequency with which parents use physical discipline. The literature also highlights that attitudes towards physical discipline can be an important predictor in its use and that parental perceptions of the outcomes of physical discipline are strongly associated with its use. However, exploration of attitudes toward physical discipline in Northern Ireland has been limited to general questions asking if parents view this as an effective or acceptable form of discipline.

As such, NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) set out to carry out a more comprehensive survey with the primary aim of examining the prevalence and incidence of a range of parental disciplinary practices and attitudes towards physical discipline use. A secondary aim was to explore parents' perceptions of their own emotional state and that of their children when the parents administered physical discipline. This entailed designing and commissioning a telephone survey of 1,000 parents of 0–10 year olds across Northern Ireland. Given the sensitive nature of the questions contained within the survey and the need to encourage honest responses, it was felt that the term 'physical discipline' provided a broad catch-all which did not have the same negative connotations of the term

'physical punishment' or the association with educational settings of the term 'corporal punishment'. As such, the term 'physical discipline' was used throughout the survey and hence throughout the rest of the report. The survey used the Conflict Tactics Scale to measure the prevalence of physical discipline and the Perceived Outcomes of Physical Discipline scale to measure parental attitudes. In total, 40% of those contacted agreed to take part in the survey and the final sample was weighted by education and religion to better reflect the demographics of the Northern Ireland parent population.

Key survey findings

Discipline use in Northern Ireland

- Almost all parents have used non-violent discipline (98%) while four out of five have used some form of psychological aggression (79%).
- Just under half of parents (47%) had used some form of physical discipline: all reported use of 'minor' physical discipline and 2% reported that they had also engaged in 'severe' or 'extreme' physical discipline at some time.
- Results indicated that parents are more likely to have used physical discipline with children aged 3–6 in the past year than with those aged 0–2 or those aged 7–10. Nevertheless, 33% of parents of children in the 0–2 age group had used physical discipline in the past year.
- Parents are less likely to use physical discipline with children who have a statement of special educational needs.
- Generally, parents with a higher family income tend to use physical discipline less than those with lower incomes. However, the fact that those in the middle income brackets had the lowest rates of physical discipline use suggests different factors: financial pressures at the lower end and work-related stress at the upper end may influence the relationship between physical discipline use and income.
- Parents with no formal educational qualifications

were less likely to have used physical discipline than those with some form of secondary level educational qualification. This appeared to be more related to other factors such as parental age and gender.

Parental perceptions of outcomes

- Approximately three in five parents think that physical discipline never or infrequently has positive outcomes such as teaching acceptable behaviour and increasing respect and obedience.
- Two thirds of parents perceive physical injury to be a potential outcome of physical discipline.
- Three quarters of parents perceive long-term emotional upset and two thirds perceive physical injury as a potential risk of physical discipline use.
- Three in five parents thought that feelings of guilt or regret are frequently or always an outcome of physical discipline use.
- The more parents perceived physical discipline to have negative outcomes the less likely they are to use it. However, the relationship between attitudes and behaviour is not always clear cut and the results indicate that substantial numbers of parents who have a negative attitude to physical discipline still use it.

Emotional context of physical discipline

- Overall, two in five parents who had administered physical discipline thought that their child was at sometime afraid of them, with one in five reporting this frequently or always.
- Overall, 82% of parents who had administered physical discipline thought that their child was at sometime upset by this, with more than two in five reporting this outcome either frequently or always.
- Although a majority of parents (88%) reported that the physical discipline they administered was not at all or not very painful, 12% considered it to be moderately to very painful.
- A majority of parents (84%) reported some degree of frustration when they administer physical discipline, with half describing themselves as frustrated or very frustrated.

- Three in five parents reported being frequently or always upset after they administer physical discipline.
- Three in ten parents reported some degree of feeling out of control when they have administered physical discipline, with 12% reporting this frequently or always and 5% sometimes.

Sources of information on alternatives to discipline

- Almost one in five parents recalled receiving advice on the alternatives to physical discipline from a health visitor and one in ten from some form of parent education programme.
- Overall, two thirds of parents could not recall receiving any advice on the alternatives to physical discipline.
- Parents who recalled receiving advice on the alternatives to physical discipline were more likely to have used physical discipline than those who could not. This is likely to be influenced by a number of factors such as the parents' past disciplinary history, the nature of the discipline message received and the reason why the parents were provided with such information to start with.
- There was a significant relationship between the receipt of information and perceived outcomes, with those parents who recalled receiving advice on the alternatives to physical discipline tending to view its outcomes more negatively.

Conclusion and recommendations

In light of the recent UK-wide debates and public consultations and in order to facilitate evidence-based policy development, NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) undertook a comprehensive review of the international literature relating to physical discipline, together with a survey of disciplinary practices specifically in Northern Ireland.

The use of physical discipline is a violation of children's rights under the United Nations

Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, as evidenced from this research, its practice by parents is common across a number of Western and European countries, with much smaller but often significant minorities using 'severe' physical discipline/assault. Similarly in Northern Ireland, results from the survey showed that some form of physical discipline has been used by almost half of parents and 'severe' physical discipline/assault by 2%. Overall, the literature identified a complex range of parent and child, family, community and cultural factors which interrelate in a number of different ways and provides valuable information in terms of targeting preventative work. Likewise, the results from the Northern Ireland survey showed that factors such as parental religion, education and income also have a role to play in this jurisdiction, although investigation of a broader range of multi-level factors is still required.

The literature relating to the impact of physical discipline on children was also complex, with divergent perspectives often apparent. That notwithstanding, there was considerable agreement about the negative impact of harsher and more excessive forms of physical discipline. Equally, while the debate between the anti-physical discipline and conditional physical discipline perspectives seems likely to continue, issuing guidance based on a highly prescriptive and contested notion of 'safe' or 'controlled' levels of physical discipline is unlikely to be of any practical benefit to parents. This was supported by the findings from the Northern Ireland survey, from which emerged a picture of parents using physical discipline, often when they considered it to be ineffective and to have potentially negative outcomes for their children: more often than not in situations in which they felt frustrated just before they used it and guilty and regretful afterwards. Of particular concern was the fact that a significant proportion of parents in Northern Ireland reported feeling always or frequently out of control when they used physical discipline with their children.

Overall, the clear message which emerges from the research literature is the complexity of parent-child interactions and potential outcomes and the myriad of factors which can influence the disciplinary choices parents make. While there is evidence to support the view that legislative reform can change public attitudes and help to reduce the incidence of physical discipline, it would be unlikely to provide a total solution. Both the literature and the findings from the Northern Ireland Physical Discipline Prevalence Study also suggest that simply making parents aware of the alternative non-violent

disciplinary techniques will not be enough to end physical discipline, although it is likely to reduce the frequency with which it is used. Instead what is required is a multi-level preventative approach which embraces a comprehensive positive parenting strategy linked with the legislative reform required in order for the UK to meet its obligations under the UNCRC. The research findings lend themselves to a number of policy recommendations which might provide the beginnings of a framework to take forward such a strategy (see Recommendations).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universal Provision

Educative Legislative Change

Legislative reform plays a pivotal role in sending a message to any society that the physical discipline of children is unacceptable. The UK government and devolved assemblies should go beyond qualified legal reform and introduce an outright ban on the physical discipline of children. This should be linked with increased awareness of children's rights in all jurisdictions and should be viewed as largely educative, providing a framework from which to secure attitudinal change rather than prosecution of parents².

A Public Parent Education Awareness/Information campaign

The UK government and devolved assemblies should run a universal public/parent information campaign aimed at providing advice and information on positive parenting techniques and alternatives to physical discipline to the general population. Such a campaign should be creative in its planning and approach, seeking the views of children, parents/carers and professionals and making use of existing information resources alongside developing new ones where appropriate. The campaign adopted should encompass a multimedia approach which would include a variety of delivery opportunities such as the production of leaflets, parenting handbooks, commercial campaigns, videos etc. Much of this could be delivered through key professionals currently providing advice and information to parents such as health visitors, midwives, GPs, social workers etc. As the research shows, there is a need to ensure consistency of core messages. These messages might include the ineffectiveness of physical discipline approaches, potential risks to children and the parent-child relationship and information on the alternatives that have been shown to be effective.

Professional Training and Guidance

In addition to information resources providing clear and consistent positive parenting messages, it is essential that professionals themselves also provide a consistent approach. Professional bodies and

² Barnardo's supports a full legislative ban on physical punishment provided there are adequate legal safeguards in all four jurisdictions of the UK to prevent unnecessary prosecutions. The NSPCC believes all forms of physical punishment should be illegal. NICCY, with the support of the Children's Commissioners for England, Wales and Scotland, supports an unconditional ban on the physical punishment of children.

associations for those working with children and families need to provide a clear steer with regard to their position on positive parenting and physical discipline, through explicit policies which do not condone the use of physical discipline. Training for these professionals, both pre and post-qualifying, should include coverage of positive parenting and the alternatives to physical discipline use. Such training might also usefully encourage examination of individual views and consideration of how they might impact on practice. Equally, the development of guidance for professionals on how to approach and discuss this issue is also likely to be important given the sensitivities and difficulties around the subject matter.

Parent Education Programmes

The UK government and devolved assemblies need to develop clear and unambiguous family support strategies which include positive parenting as a key component. These strategies must be accompanied by targets, action plans and have dedicated funding which supports comprehensive parenting education programmes in each jurisdiction. The action plans should be developed through a variety of creative approaches using the range of existing professionals, evaluated programmes, information and technology to deliver better outcomes for children.

Targeted Provision

The review highlights that there are a number of factors likely to influence parents/carers to use physical discipline more frequently or severely. Given the wide range of these factors, it is likely that physical discipline use is often a manifestation of a variety of inter-related difficulties a family may be experiencing. As such, an integrated approach to support and intervention is clearly required. Currently, targeted support and interventions for families are provided through a variety of initiatives and settings, both voluntary and statutory, e.g. Sure Start, Parentcraft and family centres. Current provision might be improved by:

- Having a coherent and co-ordinated family support strategy which is strongly linked to positive parenting and which clearly sets out how targeted support and interventions will be provided to parents and families with more specific needs.
- Training for professionals providing targeted services for children and their families in order to increase recognition of the importance of parental discipline strategies to a child's functioning and family life and increase awareness of positive parenting concepts and disciplinary alternatives.
- Making the assessment of parental use of disciplinary strategies routine across all childcare services. The various assessment models currently in use/development across the UK (e.g. the DoH Assessment Framework and the Common Assessment Framework) all contain sections which allow for the exploration of a parent's/carer's ability to set boundaries and provide guidance for their children.
- Development of a range of more in-depth parent education programmes which promote positive parenting and are tailored for groups with specific needs/difficulties.

| Parent Factors | Child Factors | Family Factors | Community/Cultural Factors |
|---|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Younger parent/caregiver • Female parents for minor/ordinary physical discipline and male parent for more severe forms • Poor maternal physical health • Maternal drug and alcohol user/abuser and alcohol use/abuse • Highly emotionally aroused (angry, upset, frustrated) • Mental health difficulties • Personal experience of physical discipline/abuse, particularly parents who do not view their own childhood abuse as abusive • Inconsistent use of a variety of other discipline strategies • Poor engagement with child • Positive attitude towards/endorsement of physical discipline use | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aged 1–5 • Male child • Dangerous or destructive misbehaviour and rule violation • Repeated misbehaviour despite verbal warning • Behavioural problems • Poor health/developmental delay, disability • Genetic make up – e.g. children who are temperamentally high in activity level, low in self regulation, high in aggressive tendencies or children described by parents as fussy or irritable | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher numbers of children • Single parent • Marital conflict/violence • Lower levels of support • Lower socio-economic group • Higher levels of work-related stress | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deprivation/disadvantage • High murder rates and violence • Lower levels of friends and family living in the neighbourhood (neighbourhood level social support) • Member of an ethnic group which is more likely to endorse physical discipline use • Member of a religious group (most likely fundamentalist) which is more likely to endorse physical discipline use • Resides in region, area of a country in which there tends to be greater support for physical discipline • Resides in a country where physical discipline is legal |

FUTURE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION NEEDS

- Continued surveying of parental discipline practices and attitudes across the UK in order to monitor trends and assess the potential impact of legislative reform, as well as the success of public awareness campaigns and intervention.
- Mapping of existing parent information resources and services.
- Reviewing what works in relation to dissemination of discipline messages to parents/the public.
- Reviewing what works in relation to the impact of various parent education programmes on parents, family and child outcomes.

