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The Attitudes of Parents towards Managing Young Children's Behaviour - Revised Report: Executive Summary

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The Attitudes of Parents towards Managing Young Children's Behaviour:
Revised Report
National Survey for Wales, 2014-15 – Re-contact Survey

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

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Introduction

1.1 The report presents findings from research undertaken with parents of children aged six years old or under about their attitudes towards managing young children's behaviour. The fieldwork took place in early November 2015 and involved telephone surveys with 387 parents (or guardians) of young children who had previously taken part in the 2014–15 National Survey for Wales. Parents were asked about their attitudes towards parenting and the physical punishment of children. The survey also asked parents about accessing advice and their views on legislative change.

1.2 The Welsh Government's Programme for Government commits to working towards making the physical punishment of children and young people unacceptable through the promotion of positive alternatives. This survey will serve as a baseline for a campaign which has been launched to promote positive parenting messages to the parents and guardians of young children. The findings will also be used to inform policy development in this area.

Key findings

1.3 Drawing on the results of the survey, the following key findings emerged. It should be noted that the answers to the survey questions record *self-reported* attitudes and behaviours and all results are based on sample data.

Attitudes towards smacking

- 44% of parents reported that they may smack in certain circumstances
- Only 4% of parents are comfortable with the idea, with an additional 40% doing so if nothing else works
- 22% of parents reported that they had smacked their child in the last six months
- 25% of parents indicated that they think that smacking is sometimes necessary

Understanding smacking behaviour

1.4 It is circumstantial factors which appear to best account for reported parental smacking behaviour. In particular:

- the parent smacks as a last resort
- the parent smacks in situations in which they perceive the child to be causing harm to themselves

- the parent smacks in situations in which they perceive the child's behaviour to be out of control

1.5 Some parents also reported that they smack to stop harm coming to other children and as a punishment for naughty behaviour.

1.6 Beneath these circumstantial factors are two key factors relating to the individual parent:

- The parent has not found parenting advice helpful (where they have accessed it)
- The parent finds the child's behaviour embarrassing

1.7 There is also evidence that parents who feel that they sometimes lack the necessary time and energy to care for their children are more likely to report smacking them.

1.8 However, there is insufficient evidence to suggest that:

- the age, gender or marital status of the parent is associated with reporting smacking
- the deprivation level of the area in which the parents live, or their educational attainment, is associated with reporting smacking
- parental satisfaction with their health, relationship or overall life is associated with reporting smacking
- parents' perception of the child's general behaviour is associated with reporting smacking.

Changing smacking behaviour

1.9 19% of respondents who strongly disagreed that smacking is sometimes necessary and 27% of those who somewhat disagreed have not always held this opinion.

1.10 24% of respondents who strongly agreed that smacking is sometimes necessary and 12% of those who somewhat agreed suggested they had been less inclined to agree previously.

1.11 A higher percentage (63%) of parents who reported that they did not smack their children indicated that they had found advice helpful than those who do smack (47%)¹.

¹ This finding only relates to those parents who reported accessing some form of advice or support.

Sources of advice

- 1.12 The most frequent source of advice accessed was friends or relatives, followed by advice from health professionals.
- 1.13 When asked from where they would like to receive support, more parents wanted to access support from family (52%) and health professionals (38%) than from any other source.
- 1.14 In the majority of cases (70%) the support accessed had been given face-to-face, with 12% having found advice online and 11% having received personal support over the phone (and a further 2% from helplines).
- 1.15 When asked how they would ideally like to receive support, face-to-face was by far the most popular option (72%), followed by personal support over the phone (10%).
- 1.16 Parents reported that not knowing where to look and receiving conflicting advice from different sources were the most common barriers to accessing support.
- 1.17 Those parents who reported smacking in the last six months are no less likely to have reported using other parenting techniques during that period.

Legislative change

- 1.18 51% of respondents disagreed that the law should allow parents to smack their children, whilst 34% agreed that it should (with 12% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or answering 'don't know').
- 1.19 46% of respondents agreed that there should be a complete ban on hitting children, even as a smack, whilst 43% disagreed that there should be a ban (with 9% neither agreeing nor disagreeing, or answering 'don't know').
- 1.20 Under a sixth of parents (13%) who are comfortable with smacking their children and a fifth (19%) of those who smack as a last resort felt that a change in the law would influence their attitude.

Conclusion

1.21 The survey results give a nuanced position of attitudes towards smacking. They suggest that traditional ways of justifying smacking as part of an explicit parenting philosophy may be less important in modern Wales, and the majority of parents reported that they think smacking is unnecessary. Smacking attitudes in this study could not for the most part be explained by neat demographic profiles, and most of the parents who smack appeared to do so reluctantly, and as a last resort. Feelings of embarrassment may be important in such circumstances, as well as concern over harm coming to the child and losing control of situations. The 'noise' created by the multitude of well-meaning but in some ways contradictory sources of advice, which may include friends and family, could be unhelpful to parents. This may be why many parents would ideally like to access advice from health professionals. Attitudes towards smacking can and do change, and there are indications that more people may support legislative change than are against it, although this does not currently represent a majority view.