



# Research Update

## Bringing up baby

By Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd



### Introduction

The debate about whether or not parents can legally physically punish their children is both emotive and long running. At present, the law in Northern Ireland does not stipulate how parents should discipline their children. However, parental discretion must be used within certain boundaries, such as the limitations outlined within criminal law relating to the use of physical punishment.

The law in other regions is equally nebulous. On 2 November 2004, MPs voted 424 to 75 against an outright ban on smacking in England and Wales (BBC News Online, 2004). However, a compromise amendment outlawing smacks which leave marks or cause mental harm was backed by 284 votes to 208.

Within this debate, the attitudes of the public have been tested several

times. In March 2001, one third (34%) of respondents to the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey stated that physical punishment was acceptable. In contrast, nine out of ten respondents to the 2001 consultation paper produced by the Office of Law Reform in Northern Ireland thought that physical punishment is an effective form of punishment, and a similar proportion thought that it is an appropriate form of discipline (Office of Law Reform, 2004).

Using data from Wave 3 of the **Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey** (NIHPS) undertaken in 2003, this Research Update explores the different ways in which parents and children interact with one another in their daily lives. Included in this is the use, or otherwise, of physical punishment.

All those survey respondents who were parents were asked a range of questions about the six oldest children aged under 16 years living in

their household. There were 1,629 responses in relation to children living in responding NIHPS households. While this figure includes a broad range of parent/child relationships - including adopted, foster and step children - the vast majority (97%) involved the natural children of respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1: Status of children

|                      | %    |
|----------------------|------|
| Natural child        | 97.2 |
| Adopted child        | 0.2  |
| Foster child         | 0.5  |
| Step/partner's child | 2.1  |

### Talking and quarrelling

Parents were asked about how often their child talks to them about things that matter to them. While nearly two thirds of children (65%) talked to a parent on most days, a minority (8%) hardly ever talked to a parent. Table 2 indicates that there were no significant differences among boys and girls.

Table 2: How often does the child talk to you about things that matter to the child?

|                     | %    |       |     |
|---------------------|------|-------|-----|
|                     | Boys | Girls | All |
| Most days           | 64   | 67    | 65  |
| More than once/week | 18   | 18    | 18  |
| Less than once/week | 12   | 7     | 9   |
| Hardly ever         | 7    | 8     | 8   |

However, there were differences depending on the gender of the parent, as well as on the age of the child. Significantly more children talk to mothers (70%) than to fathers (57%) most days. In addition, the proportion of children talking to a parent most days decreases with age – more than three quarters (78%) of children aged 4-7 years talk to a parent most days compared with two thirds (67%) of those aged 8-11 years. Least likely to talk to a parent most days were young people approaching or within their teenage years (49%).

Looking at other types of verbal interaction, parents were asked about how often their child quarrels with them. While just over one quarter of children and parents argued most days, a slightly higher proportion (33%) hardly ever did, with little difference between boys and girls. However, there are more likely to be quarrels most days between mothers and children than between fathers and children (32% and 21% respectively). In particular, while there is little difference in the rate of arguing with mothers among sons and daughters, arguments between fathers and sons is more common than between fathers and daughters (see Table 3).

Table 3: How often does the child quarrel with you?

|              | % saying 'most days' |         |
|--------------|----------------------|---------|
|              | Fathers              | Mothers |
| Sons         | 24                   | 32      |
| Daughters    | 18                   | 32      |
| All children | 21                   | 32      |

Similar to the pattern relating to talking about things that matter, the rate of quarreling decreases with the age of the child. While quarrels involving children aged 4-7 years happens most

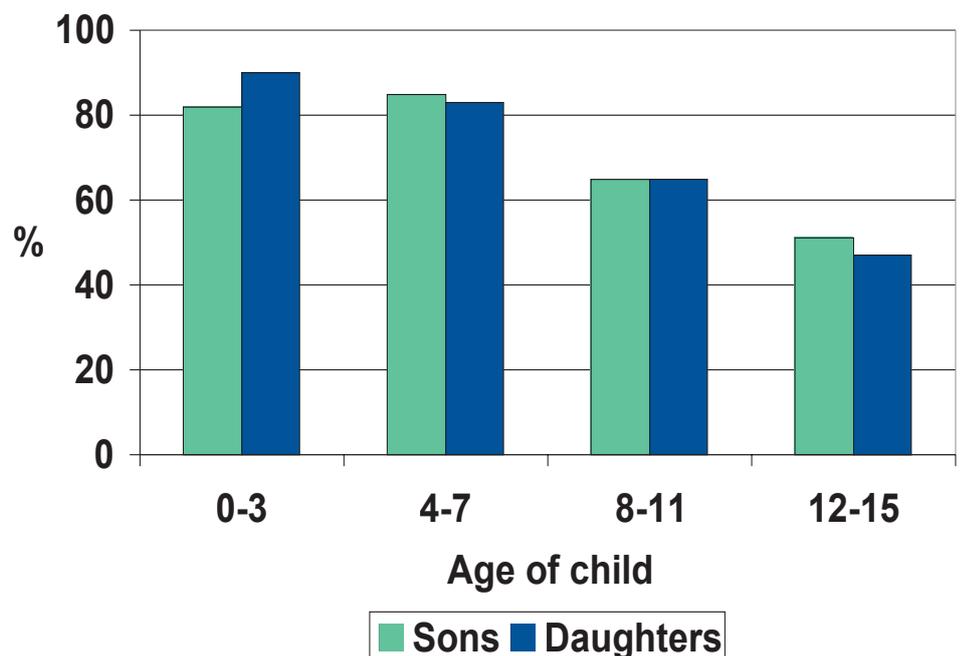
days (37%) the proportion for children aged 8-11 years is lower at 26% and is only 20% for those aged 12-15 years.

## Parent-initiated interaction

Parent and child contact and interaction is wide-ranging, and can be perceived in many ways, such as being positive, negative, reinforcing or disciplining. Within the NIHPS, parents were asked about a range of parent-initiated interactions with their children: how often they praise each of their children, how often they hug them, how often they spank or slap them and how often they yell at them. On the positive side, overall, the majority of parents say they praise their children very often (71%) and over one quarter (27%) praise their children 'sometimes'.

Responses in relation to boys and girls are nearly identical. However, there are differences according to the gender of the parent, with mothers being much more likely than fathers to say that they praise a child 'very often' (77% and 60% respectively). In contrast, fathers were more likely than mothers to say that they 'sometimes' praised a child (37% and 21% respectively). The frequency of praise is very much related to the age of the child – while 86% of parents praise a child aged 0-3 years 'very often', the figure for older children aged 12-15 years is 49% (see Figure 1). However, this latter age group are much more likely to be praised 'sometimes'. There is little difference in how frequently fathers praise sons or daughters, or how frequently mothers praise their sons or daughters.

Figure 1: Proportion of children praised 'very often'



Looking at the interaction of age and gender, Table 4 shows that fathers are especially likely to praise very young daughters more than very young sons (86% and 75% respectively). This pattern also follows for the 8-11 years age group. While mothers are also more likely to praise very young daughters, they give more praise to sons aged 8-11 years than daughters of a similar age.

Table 4: How often do you praise the child?

|                  | % saying 'very often' |         |     |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------|-----|
|                  | Fathers               | Mothers | All |
| <b>Sons</b>      |                       |         |     |
| Age 0-3          | 75                    | 86      | 82  |
| Age 4-7          | 79                    | 89      | 85  |
| Age 8-11         | 44                    | 77      | 65  |
| Age 12-15        | 35                    | 60      | 51  |
| <b>Daughters</b> |                       |         |     |
| Age 0-3          | 86                    | 93      | 90  |
| Age 4-7          | 73                    | 90      | 83  |
| Age 8-11         | 55                    | 71      | 65  |
| Age 12-15        | 35                    | 55      | 47  |

Looking at other types of positive contact, the majority of parents (70%) say that they hug or cuddle their child very often, with a further one fifth (20%) saying that they do so 'sometimes' (see Table 5). Worryingly, 4% of parents never hug or cuddle their child. While there are no significant differences depending on the gender of the child, there are significant differences depending on the gender of the parent. Mothers are much more likely than fathers to say that they cuddle or hug their children 'very often' (76% and 58% respectively).

Table 5: How often do you hug the child?

|            | %       |         |     |
|------------|---------|---------|-----|
|            | Fathers | Mothers | All |
| Never      | 6       | 3       | 4   |
| Seldom     | 9       | 4       | 6   |
| Sometimes  | 25      | 16      | 20  |
| Very often | 58      | 76      | 70  |

There are also large differences depending on the age of the child: parents hug almost all (93%) children aged three or under 'very often', compared with 39% of children aged 12-15 years. Older boys are the group most likely to never be hugged or cuddled - they are twice as likely to be never hugged than the same age group of girls (17% and 8% respectively). This pattern is even starker when the gender of the parent is taken into account. Fathers hug or cuddle their 12-15 year old sons 'very often' in 15% of cases, which is half the respective figure for daughters (30%). However, nearly one half of mothers and sons (47%) and mothers and daughters (49%), hug or cuddle 'very often'.

## Physical punishment

Three out of five parents (61%) say that they never spank or slap their child. Very few parents say that they spank or slap their child 'very often', although one in ten said that they do so 'sometimes'. Younger children are more likely to receive this form of punishment than older children. As Table 6 indicates, there are differences according to the gender of the child - while physical punishment is not used for two thirds of girls (66%), the figure for boys is 11 percentage points less, at 55%. This is a feature among all age groups. Conversely, sons are twice as likely to be spanked or slapped 'sometimes' or 'very often' - 17%

compared to 8% for daughters, especially in the 4-7 and 12-15 years age groups.

Table 6: How often do you spank/slap the child?

|           | % saying 'never' |       |     |
|-----------|------------------|-------|-----|
|           | Boys             | Girls | All |
| Age 0-3   | 55               | 65    | 60  |
| Age 4-7   | 39               | 48    | 44  |
| Age 8-11  | 56               | 65    | 60  |
| Age 12-15 | 72               | 86    | 80  |
| All ages  | 55               | 66    | 61  |

## Yelling

Nearly two thirds of parents (64%) yell at their children 'very often' or 'sometimes', with mothers more likely to do so than fathers. Yelling tends to be a feature of the interaction between parents and children aged four or more, than for the youngest age group. However, as seen in Table 7, differences according to the age of the child are more marked among sons - one third of parents (33%) yell at sons aged 4-7, while the relevant figure relating to daughters is 22%.

Table 7: How often do you yell at the child?

|                  | % saying 'very often' |         |     |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------|-----|
|                  | Fathers               | Mothers | All |
| <b>Sons</b>      |                       |         |     |
| Age 0-3          | 15                    | 17      | 16  |
| Age 4-7          | 30                    | 34      | 33  |
| Age 8-11         | 24                    | 27      | 26  |
| Age 12-15        | 19                    | 30      | 26  |
| <b>Daughters</b> |                       |         |     |
| Age 0-3          | 17                    | 21      | 19  |
| Age 4-7          | 17                    | 26      | 22  |
| Age 8-11         | 15                    | 33      | 26  |
| Age 12-15        | 13                    | 27      | 21  |

## Conclusions

So what do these findings tell us about parenting in Northern Ireland? Overall, talking, quarrelling, praising, hugging and yelling are all regular features of the interactions of parents and their children. In contrast, physical punishment is much less frequent. It is obviously impossible to fully explore the complexities of parent and child relationships in a quantitative survey.

However, even with our limited analysis focusing on age and gender, complex patterns of interaction have emerged. As might be expected, parenting styles differ according to the age of the child. Additionally, they vary greatly depending on the gender of the parent and also on the gender of the child.

Since Wave 3 of NIHPS was undertaken, there has been a rise in the number of

parenting programmes on television, most of which endorse non-physical discipline. In recent years there has also been an increased emphasis on the involvement of fathers with their children. It will be interesting to see if these have any influence on attitudes and behaviour in years to come.

## Key Points

- Two thirds of parents and children talk most days about things that matter to the child, although teenagers are less likely to do so.
- One third of parents and children never quarrel with each other.
- 71% of parents praise their children most days, especially mothers. While 86% of children aged under 4 years are praised every day, only half of 12-15 year olds are.
- Teenage boys are the group least likely to be hugged or cuddled, especially by fathers.
- Three out of five parents do not slap or spank their children.
- Physical punishment is used more on boys than girls across all ages.

## References

BBC News Online (2004) *Smacking laws in other countries*, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3866747.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3866747.stm)

Office of Law Reform, Northern Ireland (2004) *Physical Punishment in the home - Thinking about the Issues, Looking at the Evidence*, Belfast: Office of Law Reform [http://www.olrni.gov.uk/consult\\_Uploads/PunishmentofChildren.pdf](http://www.olrni.gov.uk/consult_Uploads/PunishmentofChildren.pdf)

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The **Northern Ireland Household Panel Survey** is an extension of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The Wave 3 sample of the NIHPS consists of 1,599 households. 2,753 adults (aged 16+) living within these households took part in the survey. The interviews were carried out by NISRA.

Fieldwork for Wave 3 of the NIHPS, and Wave 13 of the BHPS, took place in 2003. The UK dataset is available from the UK Data Archive (<http://www.data-archive.ac.uk>).

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