

## Growing Up in Scotland – Sweep 2 – Topic Research Findings

### Parenting styles and parental support

The Growing Up in Scotland study (GUS) is an important longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of a cohort of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. Its principal aim is to provide information to support policy-making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by academics, voluntary sector organisations and other interested parties. Focusing initially on a cohort of 5,217 children aged 0-1 years old and a cohort of 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old, the first wave of fieldwork began in April 2005. This document is one of a series that summarise key findings from the second sweep of the survey which was launched in April 2006. At the second sweep, interviews were successfully completed with 4,512 respondents from the birth cohort and 2,500 from the child cohort.

#### Methods

GUS is based on a cohort or longitudinal design involving the recruitment of a 'panel' of children (and their families) who will be revisited on a number of occasions over an extended period of time. Members of the panel were identified in the first instance from Child Benefit records. For the second year of the study, interviews were sought with the person who had responded at sweep 1. In virtually all cases (98%), this proved to be the child's mother. As well as the main interview, at sweep 2, interviews were also undertaken with the resident partner of the main respondent, where applicable. A total of 2,975 partner's interviews were successfully completed in the birth cohort and 1,541 in the child cohort. As well as information on parenting, the main interview also collected data on food and nutrition, childcare, child health and development and local neighbourhood.

This report looks at two broad areas of parenting. The first – parenting styles – explores respondents' awareness, use of and attitudes towards a range of approaches to parenting and discipline, as well as the prevalence of different parent-child activities. On the latter topic, data from the partner interviews is used to compare differences in parent-child interactions between the child's resident carers. The second area is parental support which examines the availability and use of informal and formal support for parents, parents' attitudes towards parenting advice and support, and data on their contact with various professionals in health and welfare services.

### Main Findings

- Most parents have heard of a wide range of discipline techniques. Parents of the older cohort (aged just under 4) in particular are making use of many of these techniques for disciplining and controlling their children's behaviour.
- The perceived usefulness of the various techniques varied depending on the age of the child, with ideas like the naughty step, time out and reward systems or sticker charts seen as more useful for the older cohort (aged just under 4).



- The vast majority of male and female carers take part in ‘bonding’ activities like cuddling or playing with their children on a daily basis. Gender divisions are more apparent with respect to activities like bathing children, getting them dressed and getting them ready for bed, with women doing these activities more often than their male partners.
- Most parents had good relationships with family and friends, were part of a wide and strong informal social network and, as a result, felt they received enough support from this network. However, mothers aged over 40, those with no qualifications and those living in lower income households all appear to have weaker informal social networks and were also more likely to have support deficit.
- Younger mothers and parents in lower income households were more wary of professional support or intervention than were older mothers and those in couple families. Yet respondents in the former groups were also more likely to suggest that professionals do not offer enough parenting advice and support.
- Service contact is higher among younger mothers, lone parents and lower income families in services where contact is service-led and targeted. Those services where the responsibility lies with the user – i.e. the parent – to make contact and seek advice see lower use from the same sub-groups.

## Parenting techniques

The second sweep of GUS interviews explored parents’ awareness, use of and views on a range of approaches to parenting and discipline. The approaches included:

- Time out
- Reward system/sticker chart
- Ignoring bad behaviour
- Naughty step/room/corner/area
- Removing treats or privileges

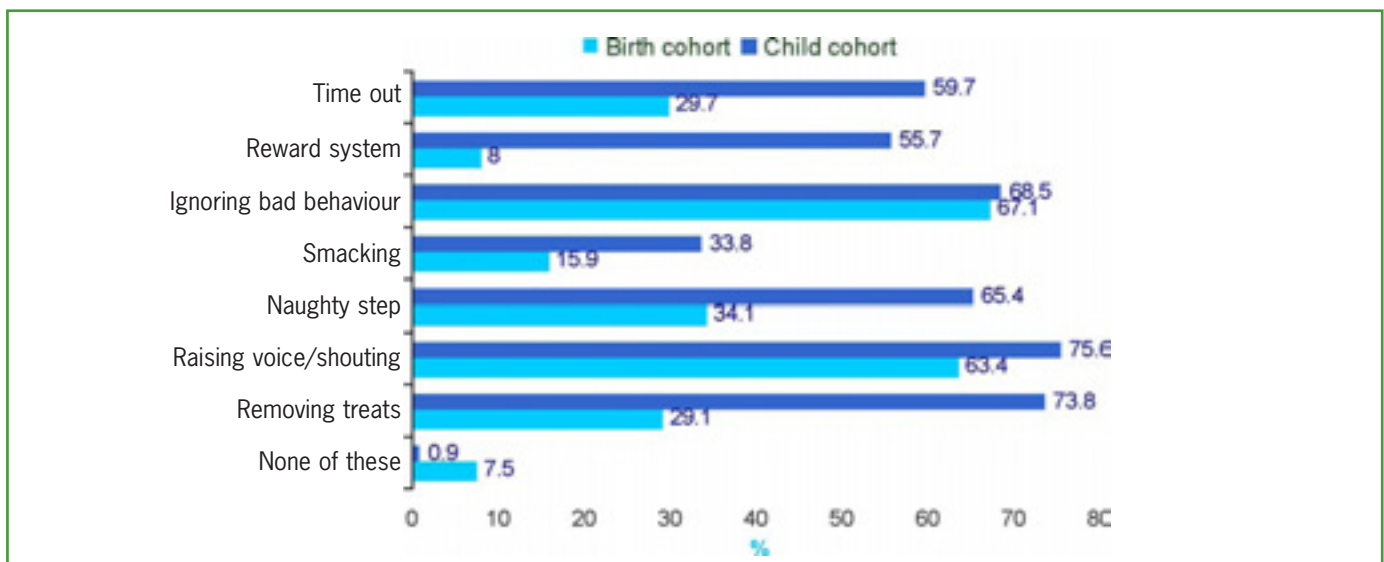
## Awareness of techniques

Parents reported a very high level of awareness of all the discipline techniques; over nine out of ten main carers of children in couple households in both the birth and child cohort had ‘definitely heard’ of each of the techniques we asked them about.

## Use of different techniques

There were differences in the extent to which parents had used various techniques with the sample child (Figure 1). For example, parents of children in the older cohort (whose child was aged 46.5 months) were more likely than those in the younger cohort to use removing treats or privileges, the naughty step (or room/corner/area) and ‘time out’. This may reflect perceptions of the increased effectiveness of such techniques in controlling children’s behaviour as they develop greater understanding of consequences.

**Figure 1 Discipline approaches respondents ever used with cohort child by cohort (couple households only)**



## Usefulness of different techniques

Smacking was the approach least likely to be rated useful across both cohorts, although there was more variation by cohort in the other techniques perceived as useful. For example, in the child cohort, removing treats or privileges was seen as ‘very’ or ‘fairly useful’ by 82% of main respondents in couple households compared with 42% in the birth cohort. Instead, parents of younger children rated ignoring bad behaviour as the most useful technique (73% citing it as very or fairly useful). Again, this probably reflects perceptions of the appropriateness of different techniques for children at different stages of development.

## Parent-child activities

Sweep 2 of GUS asked parents about a range of ‘everyday’ parent-child activities associated with both care-giving (such as bathing the child) and emotional bonding (such as cuddling, or just talking or chatting with them).

Although main respondents were more likely than their partners to play with their children, cuddle them or just chat or talk to them more than once a day, the vast majority of both main carers and their partners do all these things with their child at least once a day (Table 1). Gender divisions between parents were more apparent with respect to activities like bathing the child, dressing him/her, and getting them ready for bed. In both the child and birth cohort, the main respondent did these activities more often than their partner.

79% of children in both cohorts had looked at books or read stories every day. Of those children in couple families, around three-quarters had read with their father in the last week, leaving a quarter of fathers not reading to their children on a regular basis, despite this often being seen as a ‘bedtime activity’, which many fathers have the potential to be involved with.

## Parental support

Issues around parental support were explored at sweep 1 including emergency childcare, attendance at groups and classes for parents and children and attitudes towards support. Several new areas were explored at sweep 2 in order to broaden our understanding of parental support including informal social networks and use of specific formal support services.

### Informal social networks

Four questions were used to explore aspects of respondents’ informal social networks, including their perceived relationships with friends and family members and the amount of support received from informal sources.

To explore variations in informal social networks, three of the items were converted into a single scale indicating the strength of the respondent’s social network. Older mothers, those with no qualifications and those living in lower income households all recorded lower mean scores on the scale suggesting weaker informal social networks amongst those subgroups.

**Table 1 Percentage of respondents and partners who reported doing each activity once a day or more often by cohort (couple households only)**

	Birth cohort (22.5 mths) (%)		Child cohort (46.5 mths) (%)	
	Respondents	Partners	Respondents	Partners
<i>Bath him/her</i>	47.7	16.9	38.0	11.1
<i>Dress him/her</i>	89.9	24.6	73.9	19.2
<i>Get him/her ready for or put to bed</i>	66.2	24.2	59.6	20.8
<i>Read to him/her</i>	64.0	30.2	58.4	24.5
<i>Play with him/her</i>	96.5	86.5	87.4	74.2
<i>Cuddle him/her</i>	99.6	95.5	99.3	93.0
<i>Just talk or chat to him/her</i>	99.5	96.1	99.5	94.3
<i>Bases (all households with resident partner at sweep 2)</i>				
<i>Weighted</i>	3616	2978	1918	1543
<i>Unweighted</i>	3764	2978	1998	1543

The final question asked respondents whether they felt they received enough help or support from family or friends living elsewhere. Parents could indicate that they got enough help, didn't get enough help, didn't get any help or didn't need help. Responses by cohort are displayed in Table 2.

**Table 2 Perceived level of help and support from family and friends by cohort**

	Cohort (%)	
	Birth	Child
I get enough help	74.3	75.1
I don't get enough help	15.6	15.7
I don't get any help	5.9	5.4
I don't need any help	4.2	3.8
<i>Bases</i>		
<i>Weighted</i>	4469	2486
<i>Unweighted</i>	4476	2485

As expected, those groups who reported weaker informal social ties were less likely to feel they received enough help from family and friends. For example, in the birth cohort 53% of mothers aged 40 or older said they got enough help, compared with 81% of mothers aged under 20 and 77% of those in their twenties.

### Attitudes towards parenting advice and support

To explore attitudes towards and perceptions of parenting advice offered by formal support services, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the following statements.

- If you ask for help or advice on parenting from professionals like doctors or social workers, they start interfering or trying to take over
- If other people knew you were getting professional advice or support with parenting they would probably think you were a bad parent
- Professionals and health visitors and social workers do not offer parents enough advice and support with bringing up their children

Overall, the results suggest that most people are not wary of the impact or connotations of receiving parenting advice or support from professionals and believe that enough support of this kind is already provided. However, a significant minority of one-fifth in the birth cohort, and over one-quarter in the child cohort, agreed that receipt of formal parenting support carried certain negative associations.

Responses from younger mothers suggest a greater degree of wariness towards professional support or intervention than amongst older mothers, but also, and seemingly contradictory, a greater desire for this type of support. This suggests that younger mothers are less sure of the implications of receiving this support as they understand it.

### Contact with health and welfare services

To get a measure of the extent to which families in the cohort are using different formal support services, we asked parents if the cohort child had been seen by any of a range of professionals or formal support services in the last 12 months.

As might be expected, health-related services were those most commonly accessed both for the cohort child and more generally, with respondents from both cohorts most likely to have contacted their local doctor/GP.

Key differences by maternal age, household income and family type were observed, in particular, in contact with health visitors, practice nurses, other health professionals and social workers. For example, a higher level of contact with health visitors and social workers was reported by younger mothers and those in lower-income households – the same sub-groups who, as the data above suggests, are most wary of professional intervention. However, it appears that service contact is only higher among these sub-groups in services where contact is service-led and targeted; that is, where the impetus is on the service provider to maintain contact. Those services where the responsibility lies with the user – i.e. the parent – to make contact and seek advice, see lower use from the same sub-groups.

## Conclusion

The results on parenting techniques suggest that popular TV programmes about parenting, wider media coverage of the role of parents and maybe the existence of parenting programmes such as Triple P, are having some influence on parenting behaviour. It is clear that respondents and their partners think about parenting and parenting styles implying that interventions, such as parenting programmes, might be well received by both mothers and fathers, if they are sensitively delivered in a way that takes into account current good practice and parental expertise.

Almost all parents reported having close relationships. Younger mothers were more likely to report close relationships with lots of people than older mothers.

However, there was a (fairly small) minority whose links to both family and friends were weak or absent, and the capacity of this group to get informal support may therefore be a matter of concern.

Parents' attitudes to using formal and professional services in health, education and social support are somewhat double-edged: some wariness combined with a desire for more support, a pattern more pronounced for younger mothers, lone mothers and those in low income households. All parents' actual use of health services was high, whereas the use of other professional services was very infrequent. However, non-use should not be confused with a lack of need or potential to benefit from such services.

If you wish further copies of this Research Findings or have any queries about the GUS project, please contact:

Education Information and Analytical Services  
Scottish Government  
Victoria Quay  
Edinburgh, EH6 6QQ  
Dissemination Officer on 0131-244 0894;  
by e-mail on [recs.admin@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:recs.admin@scotland.gsi.gov.uk)  
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