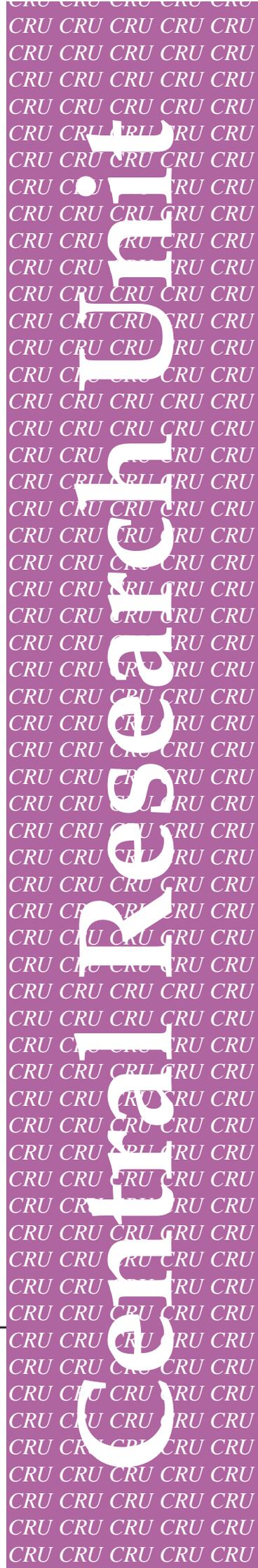


# DISCIPLINING CHILDREN: RESEARCH WITH PARENTS IN SCOTLAND



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

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**DISCIPLINING CHILDREN:  
RESEARCH WITH PARENTS IN SCOTLAND**

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**Scottish Executive Central Research Unit  
2002**

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## Executive summary

### Introduction

This report presents the findings of research with parents relating to disciplining children. It was carried out by NFO System Three Social Research on behalf of the Scottish Executive and was undertaken between March and August 2002 when consideration was being given to changing the law in relation to physical discipline. The research was designed to provide information about attitudes and behaviours amongst parents in Scotland and had two main components. The first stage consisted of a series of **qualitative** interviews with couples, focus groups and individuals in March and April 2002 to facilitate a detailed exploration of relevant themes. This was followed by a nationally-representative **quantitative** survey of 692 Scottish parents, carried out between May and August 2002 designed to provide robust quantitative data on the prevalence of particular views and behaviours. The main themes and findings emerging from the research are outlined in summary here and in more detail in the main body of the report.

### Discipline in context: perceptions of parenting and family life

The qualitative interviews highlighted the need to situate the issue of discipline within the context of broader perceptions of parenting and family life. Contemporary parents clearly feel that they face significantly greater pressures than earlier generations. In this context, research participants cited the difficulty of maintaining an appropriate work-life balance, the loss of routine in family life and the pressure of their own and their children's material expectations.

It was also widely held that there has been a significant change in the general relationship between children and adults, with the former becoming more assertive and less accepting of adult authority in general. Although many parents welcomed this shift, there was a view that it has made it more difficult to discipline children effectively.

Against this backdrop, there is evidence of increased parental anxiety about their abilities and of a greater sense of being held to account for the behaviour of their children.

That said, there was resistance from parents to the idea that their children's behaviour is a matter for outside expertise and they are likely to deal with such issues with reference only to their spouse or partner, close friends or family.

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**Physical and non-physical discipline: perceptions and behaviour**

Although there is a widespread view that, in general, parents are less 'strict' than in earlier eras and that physical discipline is both less common and less severe than it once was, current parents are more likely to see continuity than difference when comparing their parents' and their own approaches to discipline.

Most of those interviewed felt that smacking is still widespread, if not universal, among parents in Scotland – in other words, it tends to be seen as a 'normal' part of parenting, rather than as an exceptional practice.

The survey data on actual parenting behaviour reinforce this view. Although the most common forms of discipline tend to be non-physical, around half of those interviewed (51%) said that they had used some form of physical chastisement within the past year, rising to eight out of ten parents of children aged between 3 and 5 (77%). A fifth of all parents of children under 5 said they had used some form of physical discipline within the past week.

There is some evidence of a class effect here, with C2DE<sup>1</sup> parents more likely than those in groups ABC1 to have used physical discipline (58% having done so within the past year compared with 45%). Women (54%) are also more likely than men (46%) to have done so – a finding almost certainly explained by the greater involvement of the former in childcare.

A smack on the bottom or on the hand, arm or leg is by far the most common form of physical chastisement, accounting for 96% of all incidents. In 87% of cases, the child was smacked or hit just once.

Survey data on parents' own experience of discipline as children provide evidence of a decline in the readiness of parents to use more extreme forms of physical chastisement. The research also shows that parents who were smacked as children are themselves more likely to smack their own children. For example, 33% of those whose own parents had never used physical chastisement did so with their own child, compared with 53% of those who had experienced physical chastisement themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> In the survey, respondents were classified into one of the six social grades commonly used in survey research. These are based on the current or previous occupation of the chief income earner in the household. Broadly speaking, the groups ABC1 correspond to professional, managerial and clerical occupations whilst groups C2DE refer to skilled-manual and unskilled manual occupations and the economically inactive.

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### **The use of smacking: orientations, situations and justifications**

Although outright opposition to the use of smacking is relatively rare, so too is a robust defence of it. Most parents have an ambivalent attitude towards it – 58% agreed with the statement ‘I don’t think it’s a good thing to do but sometimes parents need to do it’, compared with 29% with the statement ‘I don’t think there is anything wrong with using smacking to teach children right from wrong’.

There is a social class dimension here, with ‘principled’ opposition to smacking more common among ABC1 parents and support for it more common among C2DE parents.

In terms of typical ‘smacking situations’, there is a slight disjunction between the survey data and the qualitative interviews. In the latter, parents tended to refer most frequently to situations in which smacking is used to signal danger. The survey data, on the other hand, suggests that it is more commonly used as a straightforward punishment than to send a message of this kind.

The other key theme in parental talk about smacking is its construction as a tactic of ‘last resort’. In this context, it is usually a response to the persistence rather than the seriousness of children’s behaviour, and is clearly often bound up with situational factors relating to parental stress.

In terms of typical ‘smacking situations’, the survey data reveal physical chastisement to be overwhelmingly private in character, with 90% of incidents taking place within the home.

The act of smacking is often immediate and emotionally charged – rather than a deliberate and distanced application of a sanction – and often leaves parents with feelings of guilt (53% said that they felt guilty or sorry after using it on the most recent occasion. Again, this suggests that parental attitudes are more complex than might usually be supposed.

On a related note, even among those who think that smacking is sometimes justifiable, 80% felt that one should not smack children below a certain age. Around 45% of *all* parents think that children under three, for example, should not be smacked – though this does not necessarily mean that they think it should be illegal to do so. Interestingly, there was also significant support for the idea that children above a certain age should not be smacked.

A majority of parents who smack tend to see it as either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effective both in stopping the behaviour at the time (74%) and in preventing similar behaviour later on (66%).

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### **Awareness and views of possible changes in the law**

The research period coincided with consideration of changes to the law on physical discipline. In particular, section 43 of the Criminal Justice Bill proposes a ban on smacking under 3s and in relation to children of all ages, banning the use of implements, blows to the head and shaking a child. At various points throughout the fieldwork period, there was media coverage of the proposed changes in the law particularly the proposals relating to under 3s.

Widespread confusion about the current legislative position on smacking was evident, with half of all parents believing that smacking is currently illegal, either for all children (15%) or for children of a particular age (37%). A third (32%) thought that it is not currently illegal to smack a child of any age.

Although there was relatively widespread awareness that the Executive was considering changes to the law (59% of parents saying they had heard something about it), the vast majority of parents claimed to know 'not very much' (75%) or nothing at all (6%) about the details of the proposed changes.

The research indicates that around four in ten parents (38%) favour banning smacking for the under threes, 48% support a ban on smacking of children aged under two and 52% a ban on smacking children under one. Forty-one per cent think it should remain legal to smack a child.

The main arguments advanced against banning smacking were: that it would criminalise 'ordinary' parents who are already doing their best in difficult circumstances; that it would be better to put the resources into provision for children and families to reduce the stress that often creates problems; that the Executive should be finding ways of identifying and tackling 'real' child abuse rather than diverting resources into the policing of smacking; and that the legislation would be unworkable or impractical.

Opposition to the proposed legislation appears to be underpinned by a reluctance to view smacking as potentially abusive and by a commitment to the idea that parents should be largely free to decide how to bring up their own children.

There was little evidence that parents who currently smack under 3s would greatly modify their behaviour in response to a ban.

There was strong support for the aspects of the legislation related to implements, shaking and blows to the head, since these behaviours chime much more closely with most parents' views of what constitutes abuse – 79% agreed with the proposal to ban shaking, 79% to ban the use of implements and 84% to ban hitting around the head or face.

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## **Conclusions**

Although there is some evidence of change over time in the unacceptability of many forms of physical chastisement, the research indicates that specific use of smacking remains deeply embedded in parenting culture within Scotland. But it would be simplistic to characterise parental attitudes as overwhelmingly or straightforwardly pro-smacking. The most common attitude is one of ambivalence - recognising that smacking can have negative consequences and that there are better ways of dealing with most situations, but nevertheless concluding that sometimes children simply 'need a smack'. This suggests that there are potential points of contact for policies and arguments that seek to promote 'positive alternatives' to physical discipline.

The fact that smacking typically takes place in the home and appears to be a highly charged interaction which leaves parents feeling guilty or upset raises questions about how amenable such responses are likely to be to modification through law alone. This is reinforced by the findings that many of those who smack already believe it to be illegal and that – regardless of the legal position – would continue to smack in their own homes if they thought it appropriate.

There was strong support for the aspects of the legislation related to shaking, hitting around the face or head or use of an implement. Parents are not only much less likely to use such methods, they see them much more clearly as 'abusive'.

The research suggests a tension between heightened expectations about parenting and reducing parental control without offering positive supports. A key message suggested by the research, therefore, is that any legislation needs to be explained and presented in a way which acknowledges the difficulties and pressures faced by contemporary parents and which situates issues of discipline in the broader context of support for families and questions of work-life balance.

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## A. Introduction

This report presents the findings of a study of research with parents in Scotland related to disciplining children. It was carried out by NFO System Three Social Research on behalf of the Scottish Executive.

In September 2001, the Justice Minister, the Right Honourable Jim Wallace QC, announced a number of proposals to make changes to the law on physical punishment. These proposals subsequently became part of the Criminal Justice Bill. The proposals are: that it should be an offence to smack a child under the age of three; that it should be an offence to hit or strike a child of any age with an implement or around the face or head; and that it should be an offence to shake a child of any age. Against this backdrop, the research was commissioned to provide specifically Scottish information on the subject of disciplining children..

Among the questions the study sought to answer were the following:

- What forms of discipline or chastisement (both physical and non-physical) do parents in Scotland use with their children?
  - How does this relate to their own experiences as children – in other words, is there any evidence of significant change in parenting practices over recent decades?
  - To what extent are different forms of physical chastisement seen as appropriate and effective ways of disciplining children? How do perceptions of effectiveness and appropriateness vary with the age of the child?
  - How much do Scottish parents understand about the current law on physical chastisement, particularly as it relates to smacking?
  - How aware are they of the changes proposed within the Criminal Justice Bill? And what is their view of those?
-

### Existing literature

The global literature on parenting, discipline and physical chastisement is extensive (and often contradictory), covering a range of sociological, socio-legal and psychological themes. These include:

- factors influencing parental use of smacking and other forms of physical chastisement (e.g. Graziano et al, 1992; Wolfner and Gelles, 1993; Buntainricklefs et al, 1994; Maxwell, 1995; Gilessims et al, 1995; Vargas et al, 1995; Ellison et al, 1996; Flynn, 1998; Qasem et al, 1998; Murphy-Cowan and Stringer, 1999; Dietz, 2000; Eamon, 2001)
- attitudes towards legislation and the impact of legislation (e.g. Pronay et al, 1995; Larzelere and Johnson, 1999; Durrant, 2000; Roberts, 2000; MORI, 2002; NFO System Three, 2002)
- children's views and experiences (e.g. NCB/Save the Children, 1999; Save the Children Scotland, 2002)
- the psychological effects of physical chastisement (e.g. Larzelere, 1996; Baumrind, 1996; Strauss *et al*, 1997; Simons *et al*, 1994).

However, other than some recent opinion polls on the proposed legislation, little research has been carried out within a specifically Scottish context. An ESRC funded project in the UK (Ghate *et al* - final report as yet unpublished) included Scottish respondents but in insufficient numbers to draw out specifically Scottish data.

### Research methods

The current research had two main components. The first stage consisted of a series of **qualitative** interviews with parents. These took a variety of forms, including individual depth interviews, interviews with couples, conventional focus groups (involving participants not known to each other in advance) and 'peer' focus groups (based on existing friendship groups). Because of the potential sensitivity of the topics under discussion – and the possibility that some parents would feel inhibited and others reassured by the presence of partners, friends or strangers – it was hoped that each approach might afford a slightly different perspective.

In order to canvass as wide a range of attitudes and experiences as possible, the qualitative sample was segmented by geography, gender, socio-economic group and age of child. It was also deliberately structured to include some interviews with single parents. In total, 20 qualitative interviews (5 of each type) were carried out in March and April of 2002. Further details on the composition and segmentation of these can be found in Appendix A.

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The second stage of the research took the form of a nationally-representative **quantitative** survey of parents. This was carried out in respondents' homes by interviewers from the NFO System Three fieldforce between May and August 2002 using Computer Aided Personal Interviewing (CAPI). Although much of the questionnaire was interviewer-administered, respondents also self-keyed responses to a set of more sensitive questions relating to their own experience and use of different forms of chastisement.

The sampling for the survey was based on probability techniques, involving the random selection of sampling points, of addresses within those points and of individuals for interview at those addresses (in cases where there was more than one parent in residence). No substitution of addresses or respondents was permissible and up to five calls were made to each address to secure an interview. At the close of fieldwork, 692 interviews had been completed. Further details about the methodology of the survey component are contained in Appendix B.

### **Structure of the report**

The report has the following structure:

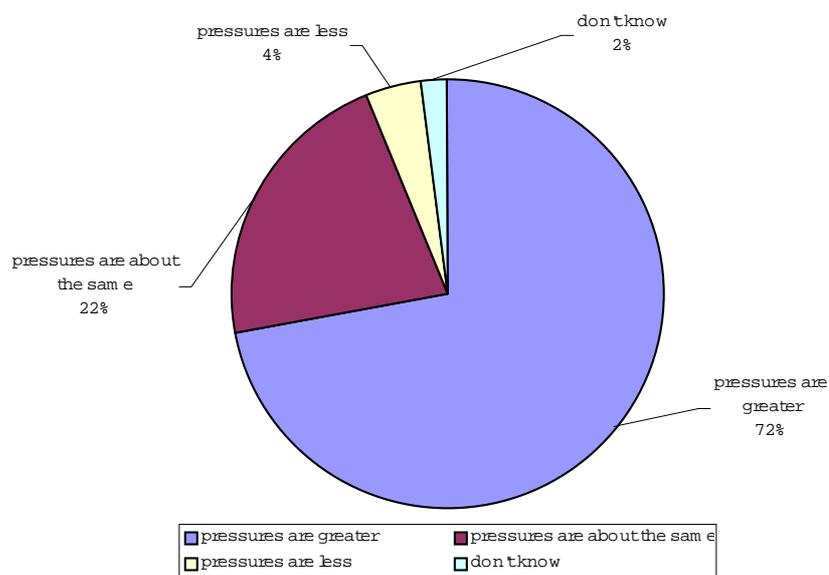
- Drawing largely on the qualitative data, Section B attempts to situate the question of parental discipline in the context of broader views of contemporary parenting and family life.
  - Section C uses both qualitative and quantitative data to look at parental perceptions of how common physical chastisement is and details the survey evidence of the actual prevalence of such behaviours. It also focuses specifically on smacking and explores general attitudes, typical 'smacking situations' and the ways in which parents seek to explain or justify its use.
  - Section D examines awareness of and attitudes towards the legal position relating to smacking. How much do parents know about the current law? How much have they heard about the proposed changes within the Criminal Justice Bill? Do they support or oppose such change? What impact, if any, do they think changes in legislation would have on their own behaviour and that of others?
  - Section E draws out and summarises the most important themes emerging from the research and looks at the potential implications of these.
-

## B. Discipline in context: perceptions of parenting and family life

### Introduction

This section of the report does not focus directly on the issue of parental discipline, but locates this in the context of broader perceptions of parenting and family life. Although most of the data that follow are drawn from the qualitative work, it is worth beginning with a single, stark finding from the survey exercise. When asked whether they thought the pressures on parents today were greater or less than for their parents' generation, roughly three-quarters (72%) of respondents replied that they thought the pressures were greater, a fifth (22%) that they were about the same and just 4% that they were less.

**Figure B-1 Perceptions of pressures on parents today compared with own parents' generation**  
Unweighted base=692



While this should not necessarily be taken as meaning that *parenting* itself is seen as more difficult than in the past (though there is some evidence that many people do feel this), it does suggest that the context in which it takes place is seen as more complex and challenging. The following sub-sections explore why this might be the case and begin to highlight some of the potential implications of such beliefs in relation to physical discipline.

The emergent themes are:

- changes in the structure of family life
- meeting family expectations
- impact of pressures on parenting
- changes in the relationship between adults and children
- parental accountability and anxiety
- influences on parenting style

**‘There’s no routine anymore’: changes in the structure of family life**

There was a strong sense during the discussions for the research that the structures and boundaries of work, family, school and leisure were less clearly defined than in the past – with participants contrasting the hectic and fluid character of their daily lives with what they saw as a more ordered, predictable and routinized past. Whether imagined or not, participants invoked childhoods in which mothers stayed at home; fathers went out to work but came back at the same time every day; meals took place at set times, around a dining table with a single menu for all the family; and children took part in fewer external ‘activities’ but took greater pleasure in simple entertainments.

*\*It was a much more sort of regimented system for everyone. All your friends were the same. You all carried the same routine. For meals, out playing, the time you came in at nights.*

*Focus group, Dundee, Males, C2DE*

While the following is, at one level, simply a description of change in dietary habits, it can also be read in this light: that is, as an example of a lost sense of familiarity and routine in family life.

*\*The one thing I remember was, coming home from school at lunchtime, and it was like a 3-course lunch. It was all cooked. It was like meat and potatoes, and a cooked pudding and everything. It’s not like that now.*

*\*Not in my house.*

*\*It’s a sandwich. Take it or leave it. I don’t know.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

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Pressure of work was frequently mentioned in this context – partly in relation to the difficulty of arranging appropriate childcare in households in which both parents need or choose to work, but also in terms of the perception of a more general encroachment of work into the private or family sphere. Overall, then, while most parents tend to see themselves as better-off in material terms than earlier generations, they see much greater difficulty in maintaining an appropriate work-life balance, with obvious consequences for issues of parenting and discipline. We return to this theme later in the report.

*\* And you're working as well. For myself, when my mum was younger, she was just looking after the family. Whereas now you've got your work. So it's harder.*

[...]

*\* When I worked during the day, over half my salary was for childcare. And it is tiring because I'm going back to work after I've had my baby and working till 10 o'clock at night and still getting up during the night. It is stressful. And that is when you lose it sometimes. If you've got a toddler ...*  
Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE

### **‘They want so much more now’: meeting family expectations**

In addition to simple economic pressures, many participants identified a set of more subtle pressures arising from both their own and their children’s material expectations and demands. These clearly interact to some extent with work pressures, in that parents feel constrained to meet such expectations through work and, as a result, sometimes substitute material ‘treats’ for more personal forms of interaction.

*\*I think it has changed dramatically, I think children now are so much more spoiled and there are so much more material things that they are so much harder to please whereas when we were wee you were pleased with anything.*

*Focus group, Glasgow, Males, C2DE*

*\* I think you try and compensate, because you are working. Like if you go to the supermarket, and there's wee toys on the shelf, you think "oh I'll just buy that" and it's like a little treat for them. Because you feel a bit guilty for working.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

### Impact of pressures on parenting

Of course, while there may be a broad consensus that pressures on contemporary parents are greater than in the past, this does not mean that such pressures are experienced uniformly across different groups, or even within individual households. The survey provides useful evidence, for example, of variation in the extent to which pressures of various kinds impact on parenting by social group and by gender.

Overall, parents are most likely to cite lack of time, work pressures and money worries as having either ‘a lot’ or ‘quite a lot’ of impact on how they bring up their children.

**Table B-1 How much impact different pressures have on the way respondents bring up their children (% respondents)**

	A lot	Quite a lot	Not very much	None at all
Work pressures	11	32	33	21
Worries about money	10	24	37	28
Lack of help or support from spouse/partner	8	15	24	51
Lack of help or support from friends or family	4	13	31	52
Not having enough time to do everything	14	38	30	16

Unweighted base=692<sup>2</sup>

Broadly speaking, those in the more affluent social groups, ABC1<sup>3</sup>, are more likely to see work and time pressures as impacting on their parenting, while those in the less affluent groups, C2DE, are more likely to see money worries and lack of support as doing so. Within these groups, men are more likely to see work and time pressures as impacting on their parenting, while women are more likely to mention lack of support from their spouse or partner.

<sup>2</sup> In all tables, unless otherwise indicated, the number of respondents answering "don't know" is not shown but is included in the analysis. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number and responses of zero or of less than half of one percent are shown as "0". The sum of responses will therefore not always sum to exactly 100%.

<sup>3</sup> In the survey, respondents were classified into one of the six social grades commonly used in survey research. These are based on the current or previous occupation of the chief income earner in the household. Broadly speaking, the groups ABC1 correspond to professional, managerial and clerical occupations whilst groups C2DE refer to skilled-manual and unskilled manual occupations and the economically inactive.

### **‘When your dad stood up, you knew it was time to back down’: changes in the relationship between adults and children**

Parents also identified significant change in recent decades in the general relationship between children and adults. Most of those interviewed felt that children were now more assertive than in the past and less automatically accepting of adult authority. Some saw this as symptomatic of a general erosion of respect for authority and linked it to problems of youth crime, lack of discipline in schools and anti-social behaviour more generally.

*\* (Children are) far more outspoken.*

*\* More opinions than we ever had.*

*\* Yeah. In my day it was children should be seen and not heard. Now they get too much listened to if you ask me.*

*\*Interviewer: Why do you think that is?*

*\* I think you're pressurised to listen more to your children now. And be so tolerant. And put up with things that our parents never had to put up with.*

*Focus group, Inverness, Females, C2DE*

Other parents welcomed what they saw as a more ‘equal’ style of communication between children and adults, seeing it as appropriate that ‘respect should be earned not expected’ and as evidence of children being treated as individuals in their own right.

*\*I think I have a better relationship with my children when it comes to discipline, than my parents did. You know, it was kind of, you know, you obeyed. [...] Whereas now, I think, if you're giving your child a punishment, you tend to tell them why they're getting the punishment and, I think, you just have a better relationship. You know, it's not such a "them and us" as I felt. With your parents, it was kind of like, you know, respect your parents, but I think now, you've just got a better relationship with your children.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

Even among this group of parents, however, there was often an anxiety that their children would not listen to them or that they found it hard to impose any form of discipline.

*\* We got a smack sometimes but she never went about belting us all the time. I remember having this healthy respect and I don't think mine have got it.*

*\* Mine don't.  
[...]*

*\* When I was younger, if adults said something and it didn't matter if it was your mum and dad or not, you listened to them - unless you were really cheeky and then ran away from them. The youngsters now will face up to their parents and any other adult. There's no respect for any adult like there used to be.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

*\*It's like saying to them, if you do that again I will smack you, if you do that again I really will smack you, now stop doing that! How many times do you say it till you do it? It was like when as a child your Dad stood up then you knew it was time to back down, so I think a lot of the time you threaten them but you don't mean it and they know it.*

*Peer group, Glasgow, Mixed, ABC1*

### **'You're constantly scared that big brother's watching you': parental accountability and anxiety**

Against this backdrop of perceptions of greater pressures within family life and the erosion of traditional respect for adult authority, it is perhaps not surprising that many parents are anxious about their abilities and fearful of situations in which their children are seen to be 'out of control'. Whereas parenting was once something 'you just did', perhaps with the help of your family and friends, recent decades have seen it turn into a much more reflexive activity, with a huge increase in sources of information and advice, ranging from health and educational practitioners to women's magazines and daytime TV. (As we shall see below, however, parents can be aware of this 'professionalisation' of their role, yet still hold on to a belief that parenting is more about experience than education.)

At the same time, a range of policy initiatives (such as the current proposals to explore ways of stopping benefit payments to parents of truants) have focused attention on parental accountability. Parents talked of their concern, not simply in relation to the behaviour of their children in particular situations in the present, but in relation to the *future*, in terms of how their children will 'turn out'. In this context, there was evidence from the interviews that many parents feel anxious about 'getting things wrong' and about being scrutinised by others, especially when dealing with issues of discipline in public places.

*\* There are so many groups now for children like Childline and Children First. And you're constantly scared that, if you do anything wrong to your child [...]. You're constantly scared that in 10 years, it's going to phone Childline and you're going to be arrested for giving it too many sweets. Nothing our parents went through. Now there's so much emphasis on proper parenting. The way the government thinks we should do it. There's not many children that go into crime. Or children of abusive parents when they grow up, they become abusive parents, because of what their parents did. You're constantly scared that big brother's watching you. Watching you with your children in the park. In the shops.*

*Paired depth (couple), Inverness, C2DE*

As this tension between parenting as a public and private practice is a long-established one, any reconfiguration of the relationship between families and the state (of the kind implicit in the proposed legislation) is, not surprisingly, a potential source of contention and controversy.

### **‘Nobody can tell you how to be a parent’: influences on parenting style**

In this context, it may be worth examining what parents consider to be the key influences on their own style of parenting. Survey participants were asked how much they would say they had learned from a variety of sources about useful ways to deal with their child’s behaviour. As Table B-2 shows, they were most likely to cite their own experience of being a parent and then their own experience of being a child as strong influences in this respect – though, as some of the qualitative discussions made clear, the effect of their own childhood experience could take both positive and negative forms.

**Table B-2 How much learned from different sources about useful ways to handle child’s behaviour (% respondents)**

	A lot	Quite a lot	Not very much	Nothing at all
Own experience of being a parent	43	49	5	1
Own experience of being a child	26	54	16	3
Other friends or family	9	42	37	12
Other parents	9	37	40	13
Health visitor, social worker, teacher or other professional	6	25	36	33
Television, books, or articles in papers or magazines	4	23	42	31

Unweighted base=692

When asked who they would be most likely to talk to if they needed advice about their child’s behaviour, survey respondents were most likely to mention their own partner (78% of those who were living with a partner), followed by their own mother (29%)<sup>4</sup> and friends (23%). ‘Outside’ help is sought relatively more often in relation to younger children: around a quarter (28%) of those with a child under five would seek advice from a health visitor (37% would talk to their mother about a young child). Considerably fewer of those with a school-age child would consult a teacher (15%).

<sup>4</sup> Only 11% said they would talk to their father - and they were no more likely to talk to their father about a son than a daughter or about an older child than a younger child

Two points are, then, worth emphasising here. First, one's own parents - mothers in particular - are a central reference point for most parents' accounts of how they bring up their children. Secondly, parents do not typically see their children's behaviour as a matter for outside expertise (unlike, for example, ill-health) and are likely to deal with such issues either entirely without reference to others or by talking only to close friends or family. In such a context, resistance from parents to the idea of government 'telling us how to do our job' is not surprising.

### **Key points**

- It is important to situate the issue of discipline within the context of broader perceptions of parenting and family life.
  - Contemporary parents clearly feel that they face significantly greater pressures than earlier generations. In this context, research participants cited the difficulty of maintaining an appropriate work-life balance, the loss of routine in family life and the pressure of their own and their children's material expectations.
  - It was also widely held that there has been a significant change in the general relationship between children and adults, with the former becoming more assertive and less accepting of adult authority in general. Although many parents welcomed this shift, there was a view that it has made it more difficult to discipline children effectively.
  - Against this backdrop, there is evidence of increased parental anxiety about their abilities and of a sense of being held to account for the behaviour of their children.
  - That said, most parents remain resistant to the idea that their children's behaviour is a matter for outside expertise and are likely to deal with such issues with reference only to close friends or family.
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## C. Discipline: perceptions and behaviour

### Introduction

This section of the report looks at two main sets of issues. First, drawing largely – but not exclusively – on the qualitative data, it explores *perceptions* of how common different forms of parental discipline are. How likely do parents think that *other* parents are to use physical chastisement? And what changes do they think there have been in parenting styles in general in recent decades? The themes covered in the sub-sections are:

- continuities and discontinuities in parental discipline over time
- perceptions of other people's use of smacking

Secondly, it examines – via self-reported survey data – the *actual* prevalence of different forms of parental discipline and their patterning through the population. This draws largely on responses to questions about how parents deal with situations in which their own children misbehave, though an additional set of questions relating to their own experience *as children* gives some quantitative purchase on the question of whether or not there have been significant changes in styles of parental discipline over time. The themes covered are:

- actual use of different forms of discipline
- most recent use of physical discipline
- parents' own experiences as children

### **‘You used to get walloped’: Continuities and discontinuities in parental discipline over time**

In most of the qualitative interviews, it was suggested that parents tend to be less ‘strict’ than in earlier eras and that physical discipline is both less common and less severe than it once was. As in relation to the broader shifts in relationships between children and adults, some of those interviewed put this down to a ‘creeping political correctness’; others to more positive developments in family life.

When asked about their own experiences as children, interviewees often talked of being ‘walloped’, ‘belted’, ‘hammered’ or ‘leathered’ in describing the punishments meted out by their own parents – terms which suggest a significant degree of force, the use of implements or repeated blows. Some consciously sought to distance their own parenting from such methods and, even among those

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parents who smack, there was a concern to stress that they were talking about ‘a wee tap’, ‘a quick smack’, or some other similarly measured and limited response. This shift in language is interesting and can be read in different ways: as reflecting a narrowing of how physical chastisement is actually practised; or as evidence of parents’ need to present socially-acceptable accounts of their own parenting.<sup>5</sup>

*\*You used to get walloped, when I was wee.*

*\*When I was about 10. You know, in front of the mains, I was playing there, in wee square at the tenements. We stayed at the top, and dad was watching us fighting. You know, I was filling this guy in, but his mum saw us, so I was like that, but dad was watching us. “You get up the stair”, and I got in that house, and I was kicked right up and down the lobby. I got battered.*

*Focus group, Dundee, Males, C2DE*

*\*I got belted. Yes, I remember I was fourteen at the time, I’ll never forget this, and I went along to my friend’s, and you know when you get in with a bad crowd or whatever, she started drinking so I thought I was a big woman. ‘Come on we’ll have a wee drink of cider’. So I was drinking. And we come back along the road, you know, trying to walk in a straight line and all this. And I walked in the door. My dad was standing at the side of the door and my mum was waiting for me straight on. So I didn’t see my dad and I got knocked from one end of the hall to the other and I never ever done that again. But that isn’t the way I treat my kids. I talk to my kids. I’d rather talk to them and try and deal with it that way. Rather than slap them. That’s not going to make matters any better.*

*Depth interview, Glasgow, Female (single parent), C2DE*

*\*I think it is as well, we can’t say we have never smacked, because we have but it is not a wallop it is just a light smack.*

*Paired depth interview (couple), Edinburgh, C2DE*

But despite these apparent examples of inter-generational differences in parenting styles, the survey data also provide evidence of significant continuity. Respondents were shown a series of statements about the way in which they had been brought up and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each. The results, shown in Table C1, suggest that current parents are more likely to see continuity than difference when comparing their parents’ and their own approaches to discipline. Moreover, respondents were likely to characterise their own parents as fair; as not over-using physical punishments; and as not having harmed them through the use of such punishments.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a significant methodological point for any study on parenting, regardless of the ‘sensitivity’ of the specific issues under discussion. Parenting is an inherently ‘moral’ activity in that it is almost an in-built expectation of parents that they will put their children’s needs first. Consequently, research interviews can become another space in which parents need to demonstrate that they have at least tried to do this (McCarthy et al, 2000).

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**Table C-1 Extent of agreement/disagreement with statements about own upbringing**

	Agree strongly	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Disagree strongly
I tend to handle my child's bad behaviour in much the same way as my parents did.	9	35	21	24	10
My parents were usually fair in the way they handled that kind of situation	21	54	12	9	4
My parents didn't explain enough about why the behaviour was wrong	6	27	17	39	11
My parents tended to use physical punishments too much <sup>6</sup>	5	12	12	44	26
When my parents used physical punishments, I usually deserved it	12	49	20	13	6
My parents used physical punishments sometimes, and I don't think it did me any harm	22	49	14	10	4

Unweighted base=692 Statements on physical chastisement only, unweighted base=599

There is an interesting tension in some participants' talk about their own parents disciplining practices – one of many contradictions that run through discussions of physical chastisement. On the one hand, many current parents see themselves as the 'product' of those practices (e.g. 'it never did me any harm', 'it kept me on the straight and narrow') and are reluctant to be openly critical of their upbringing; on the other, they have often chosen subtly or radically different disciplinary practices or ways of relating to their own children – albeit ones that sometimes leave them feeling uncomfortable about the extent to which they are 'in control'.

*\*It certainly worked for us but, whether you'd want it for your own kids.*

*Focus group, Dundee, Males, C2DE*

*\*It must be hard though, not to smack at times. I mean they can wind you up so much kids, I have had to go through it and.... Well, it didn't do me any harm when I was young. But to me smacking is, I am not saying I agree or don't agree...*

*Paired depth interview (couple), Edinburgh, C2DE*

*\*Well, it's sort of the modern approach to it. Like anything, things change with the generation. We've got different views and different outlooks, you know and, basically, I think physical punishment is not really accepted so much in society as much now, as it maybe was, going back into my generation. So, I only use it as a last resort, when things are getting totally out of hand, and there's a real danger of someone getting hurt.*

*Depth interview, Edinburgh, Male, C2DE*

<sup>6</sup> Statements on parental use of physical punishment only given to the 87% of respondents who said their parents had used some form of physical punishment. %age given is of those asked.

### **‘Folk who say they have never done it, well, I can’t believe it’: perceptions of other people’s use of smacking**

Although largely rejecting extreme forms of physical chastisement and believing current parents to be less strict than earlier generations, most of those interviewed believed that smacking is still widespread, if not universal, among other parents in Scotland.

We asked survey respondents what proportions of their close friends and family, with a child of about the same age as their child, they thought would smack in particular situations. The results are summarised in Table C-2 below. Although few thought that *all* their friends and family would smack, the majority of parents said that most or some of their peers would smack in each situation. Perceptions of prevalence were slightly higher for those thinking of friends and family with children aged one and two.

**Table C-2 Proportions of close friends and family respondents think would smack in different situations (% respondents)**

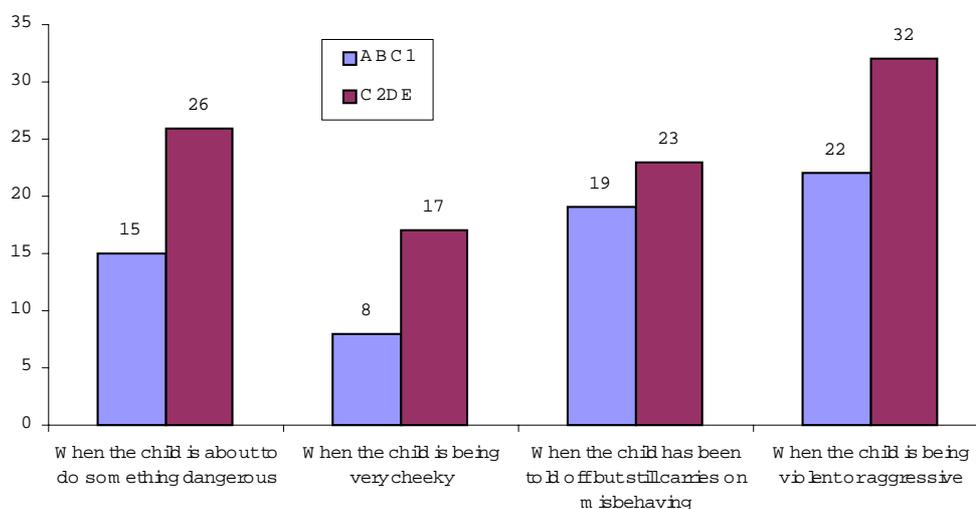
	All of them		Most of them		Some of them		None of them	
	All ages of child	ages 1 and 2	All ages of child	ages 1 and 2	All ages of child	ages 1 and 2	All ages of child	ages 1 and 2
When the child is about to do something dangerous	5	4	15	19	34	32	42	44
When the child is being very cheeky	1	1	11	9	47	52	38	35
When the child has been told off but still carries on misbehaving	3	3	18	17	49	59	27	19
When the child is being violent or aggressive	6	6	21	21	38	37	29	29

Unweighted bases All ages of child=692 Ages 1 and 2 only=95

There were also some interesting variations by socio-economic group. As Figure C1 shows, C2DE parents were significantly more likely than those in groups ABC1 to say that ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their friends and family would smack the child in each of the four situations asked about.

**Figure C-1 Parents saying ‘all’ or ‘most’ of their friends or family would smack in different situations (%)**

Unweighted base=692; ABC1 –n=372; C2DE – n=320



Overall, then, smacking continues to be seen as a ‘normal’ part of parenting and as deeply embedded in Scottish parenting culture. Before starting the research, we had envisaged that some interviewees might be reluctant to talk about the fact that they smack their children. In fact, the research team concluded that it was perhaps more difficult for individuals who did *not* smack to articulate their views and experiences, as these were often seen to run counter to the emergent group norms.

*\*I would say between 60 and 70% smack their kids at some point, but that’s my personal guess at that. It’s hard to say but, I would guess, somewhere about there.*

*Depth interview, Male, Edinburgh, C2DE*

*\*I think I only know of two people who have never smacked a child in their lives. I only know of two people who I could put my hand on my heart and say, they have never smacked their children in their lives, you know what I mean.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

*\*Interviewer: So do you think that most parents would have done that (given a light smack) at some point?*

*\*Definitely, definitely, folk who say they have never done it, well, I can’t believe it.*

*\*You do get parents who haven’t smacked but there are very few of them.*

*Paired depth interview (couple), Edinburgh, C2DE*

### **Parental behaviours: actual use of different forms of chastisement**

So far, we have concentrated primarily on what parents in Scotland *say* about their own and others' use of physical chastisement. But how do such perceptions square with actual behaviour? The following sub-sections draw on self-report data from the survey exercise to offer estimates of the prevalence of various forms of parental discipline. Respondents were asked two main sets of questions: the first related to their own experiences of being parented; the second, to the way in which *as parents* they deal with difficult situations involving their children. In situations in which respondents had more than one child, the latter were asked about just one of their children, selected at random.

#### *Asking survey questions about discipline*

A number of caveats are worth bearing in mind when reading the following data. Like any survey exercise examining the prevalence of sensitive behaviours, the results are affected by both the *ability* and *willingness* of respondents to answer accurately. Ability to answer accurately is primarily a question of recall. For a variety of reasons, respondents may forget that things have happened, or remember incidents incorrectly, including their timing. Willingness to answer is, of course, related to perceptions of the social acceptability of the behaviour in question and the extent to which respondents feel that they will be judged on the basis of their answers.

There is no question that discussion of parenting tends to be deeply imbued with moral judgement and it would, therefore, be naïve to assume that parents will always be willing to admit to behaviours that could be seen as indicative of 'bad parenting' or loss of control. That said, there are a number of methodological practices that can help to encourage open and honest response. These include contextualisation (e.g. setting the questions on chastisement in the context of a broader discussion about parenting), normalisation (e.g. using presumptive language, such as 'how often?', rather than the language of admission/confession, such as 'have you ever?') and inclusivity (e.g. 'even if it only happened once or twice').

What then does the survey tell us about parenting practices in contemporary Scotland? Parents were asked to indicate how often they had used each of a range of disciplinary techniques with their child during the course of the past year. These included both physical and non-physical chastisements and behaviours that ranged from 'non-abusive' (e.g. calmly explaining why the behaviour was wrong) to 'abusive' (e.g. kicking or punching the child).

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The table overleaf shows the different types of behaviour ordered on the basis that parents said they had used them *at least once* in the past year. The types of behaviours most likely to have been used at least once were verbal - whether discussing the issue calmly or shouting/yelling. There were then a number of non-physical forms of chastisement which a majority of parents had said they had used in the past year. The most prevalent of these were threatening to stop the child going out or take away treats, sending the child to their room and telling the child that they had made the parent sad or upset. The least common forms of behaviour were the more severe forms of physical chastisement and those which might be seen as abusive or 'unusual' (e.g. washing the child's mouth out with soap or pulling their ears or hair).

The behaviours most likely to be used many times (i.e. more than 10 times) were also the behaviours most likely to be used at least once. In other words, those behaviours used by most parents are also used most frequently by parents, and the behaviours used by few parents were used relatively infrequently even by those parents who did use them.

There are some important differences by age of child (see Table C-4). The behaviours cited more than any other by parents of the youngest children (aged under 3) were moving something dangerous or tempting out of the child's way, and distracting the child in some way - actions which are intended to stop or prevent the behaviour but which are not forms of chastisement in the same sense as the other methods listed. Not surprisingly, threatening to stop the child going out/taking away treats or sending the child to their room were methods used less commonly with the youngest children. Smacks, and the threat of smacks, were used less with children aged 11 and over. When smacks were used with this age group, they were more often on the hand, arm or leg rather than bottom (the favoured target for all the other age groups). This is perhaps because smacking on the bottom might be seen as more humiliating for an older child (an issue returned to below) and inappropriate for pre-pubescent/pubescent children.

For most of the behaviours, women were marginally more likely to have used them than men and tended to have used them slightly more often - reflecting their greater role in childcare. However, there were surprisingly few differences between the forms of chastisement favoured by mothers and fathers. The exceptions were shouting or yelling (87% of women had used in past year compared with 78% of men), threatening to tell somebody else (e.g. partner) which was used by 59% of women and 45% of men in the past year, and telling the child they had made the parent sad or upset (68% of women and 55% of men in the past year). Men were somewhat more likely to say they had shaken their child (5% compared with 2% of women) and to have smacked or slapped on face or head or cuffed on ear (10% compared with 3% of women).

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**Table C-3 Use of different forms of chastisement with own child in past 12 months (% respondents)**

	Used at all in past year	Used 1-10 times in past year	Used more than 10 times in past year	Used in past week
Discussed the issue calmly/explained why the behaviour was wrong.	88	39	50	52
Shouted or yelled at child.	83	46	37	43
Threatened to stop child going out or to take away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	69	48	21	25
Sent child to his/her room or somewhere similar.	65	45	21	16
Told child that they'd made parent sad or upset.	63	53	10	17
Threatened to smack child but did not actually do it.	58	44	15	17
Actually stopped child going out or took away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	58	48	10	13
Distracted child in some way.	57	33	25	30
Threatened to tell someone else (e.g. partner).	53	41	13	16
Moved something dangerous or tempting out of child's way.	53	33	19	20
Smacked child's bottom.	39	34	5	8
Gave child a chore or something unpleasant to do.	36	30	6	12
Smacked or slapped child on the hand, arm or leg.	33	29	4	4
Called child stupid or lazy or some other name like that.	23	20	2	4
Walked out on child, or left the room or house.	22	20	2	2
Refused to talk to child / gave child the silent treatment.	20	18	2	3
Grabbed, pushed or handled child roughly.	11	11	0	1
Said wouldn't love child, or would send child away, or would go away and leave.	7	6	1	1
Smacked or slapped child on the face or head, or cuffed child on the ear.	6	6	0	1
Shook child.	3	3	0	0
Threw something at child that could hurt (whether or not it actually hit child).	2	2	0	0
Hit child with something like a slipper, belt, hairbrush or some other object.	2	2	0	0
Bit or pinched or nipped child.	1	1	0	0
Punched or kicked child.	1	1	0	0
Threw or knocked child down.	1	1	0	0
Pulled child's ears or hair.	1	1	0	0
Washed mouth out or made child swallow something unpleasant	1	0	0	0

Unweighted base =692

**Table C-4 Use of different forms of chastisement by age of child (% of parents using in past 12 months)**

	All n=692	under 3 n=131	3 to 5 n=116	6 to 10 n=219	11+ n=226
Discussed the issue calmly/explained why the behaviour was wrong.	88	58	99	98	91
Shouted or yelled at child.	83	57	94	92	86
Threatened to stop child going out or to take away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	69	24	80	86	76
Sent child to his/her room or somewhere similar.	65	28	77	81	67
Told child that they'd made parent sad or upset.	63	37	73	75	62
Threatened to smack child but did not actually do it.	58	47	79	70	42
Actually stopped child going out or took away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	58	21	63	76	60
Distracted child in some way.	57	63	79	57	42
Threatened to tell someone else (e.g. partner).	53	31	63	65	50
Moved something dangerous or tempting out of child's way.	53	76	77	57	21
Smacked child's bottom.	39	38	68	49	14
Gave child a chore or something unpleasant to do.	36	1	23	49	51
Smacked or slapped child on the hand, arm or leg.	33	33	46	35	23
Called child stupid or lazy or some other name like that.	23	4	13	28	34
Walked out on child, or left the room or house.	22	17	26	20	23
Refused to talk to child / gave child the silent treatment.	20	10	21	24	23
Grabbed, pushed or handled child roughly.	11	14	14	11	8
Said wouldn't love child, or would send child away, or would go away and leave.	7	2	4	13	6
Smacked or slapped child on the face or head, or cuffed child on the ear.	6	1	3	10	6
Shook child.	3	0	1	5	5
Threw something at child that could hurt (whether or not it actually hit child).	2	0	0	1	5
Hit child with something like a slipper, belt, hairbrush or some other object.	2	0	1	2	5
Bit or pinched or nipped child.	1	2	0	2	0
Punched or kicked child.	1	0	0	1	1
Threw or knocked child down.	1	0	1	1	1
Pulled child's ears or hair.	1	0	1	2	0
Washed mouth out or made child swallow something unpleasant	1	0	0	0	1

Unweighted base=692

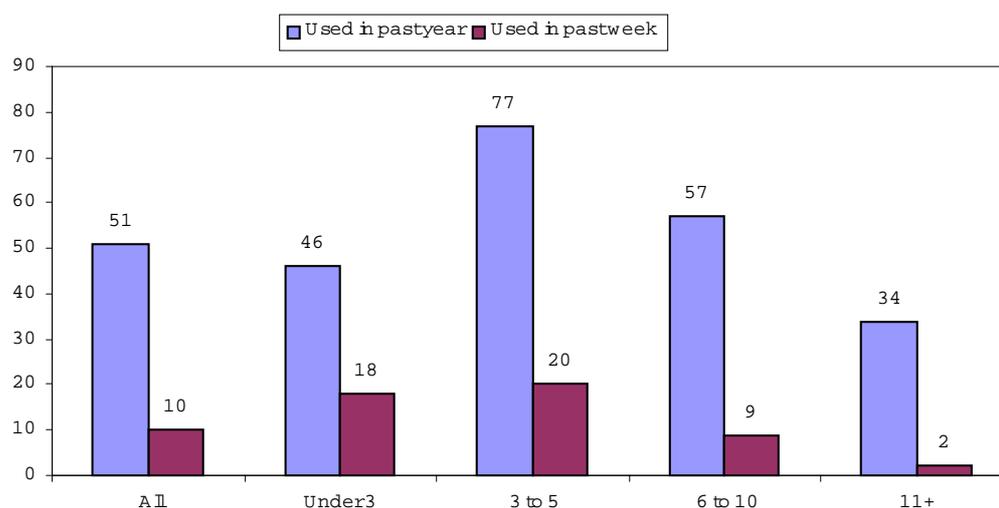
There were also some differences of note by socio-economic group. For each particular behaviour, those in social class C2DE were more likely to have used it at all and to have used it slightly more often – with the exception of ‘distracting the child in some way’ (29% ABC1 compared to 20% C2DE using more than 10 times). For example, those in class C2DE were more likely to give a child a chore or something unpleasant to do (41% had done this in the past year compared to 32% of ABC1s) and were slightly more likely to send a child to their room (71% had done this in the past year in comparison with 62% of those in class ABC1). Those in class C2DE were also more likely to threaten to tell someone else (e.g. a partner): 60% had done this in the past year compared to 48% in class ABC1. This was despite the fact that those in class C2DE were more likely to be single parents and could reflect more traditional roles of mothers and fathers or greater involvement/proximity of grandparents and other relatives. Parents in class C2DE were somewhat more likely to smack and to threaten to smack - in the past year, 45% had smacked on the bottom and 65% had threatened to smack. This compares with 34% and 54% respectively for ABC1 parents.

#### *Prevalence of any physical discipline*

A slightly easier way of exploring patterns of use of physical chastisement is to create a summary variable that combines the main the types of such behaviour<sup>7</sup>. Figure C-2 and Table C-5 illustrate the prevalence of physical chastisement using this variable.

**Figure C-2 Use of any physical discipline by age of child (% respondents)**

Unweighted base=692: under 3 n=131, 3 to 5 n=116, 6-10 n=219, 11-15 n=226



<sup>7</sup> (i.e. smacking on the bottom; smacking on the hand, arm or leg; smacking or slapping on the face or head or cuffing on the ear; shaking; biting, pinching or nipping; pulling ears or hair; grabbing, pushing or handling roughly; punching or kicking; throwing or knocking down; hitting with an object; washing mouth out or making child swallow something unpleasant;)

**Table C-5 Use of any physical chastisement (% respondents)**

	All	Male parent n=196	Female parent n=496	ABC1 n=372	C2DE n=320	Male child n=354	Female child n=338
Used in past year	51	46	54	45	58	53	49
Used in past week	10	10	10	7	15	11	10

Unweighted base=692

*Most recent use of physical discipline*

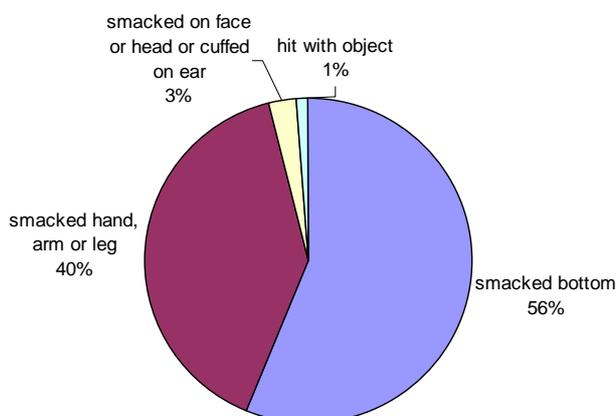
So far, we have looked at the forms of chastisement that parents may have used *during the last 12 months* or *during the past week*. The survey also provides information, however, about what exactly happened on the *last occasion* on which parents used some form of physical chastisement.

What does the survey tell us about the specific forms of physical chastisement used by parents? When asked what best described what they had done on the last occasion, the vast majority of parents said they had smacked the child on the bottom (56%) or on the hand, arm or leg (40%). Around 1 in 100 said that they had hit the child with an implement of any kind, and 3% had slapped or cuffed them around the face, head or ear.

Slight differences were evident here by age of the child, with older children relatively more likely to be smacked on the hand, arm or leg. In most cases (87%), parents said that they smacked or hit the child just once, though 9% did so twice and 5% three times or four times.

**Figure C-3 What happened on last occasion physical chastisement used**

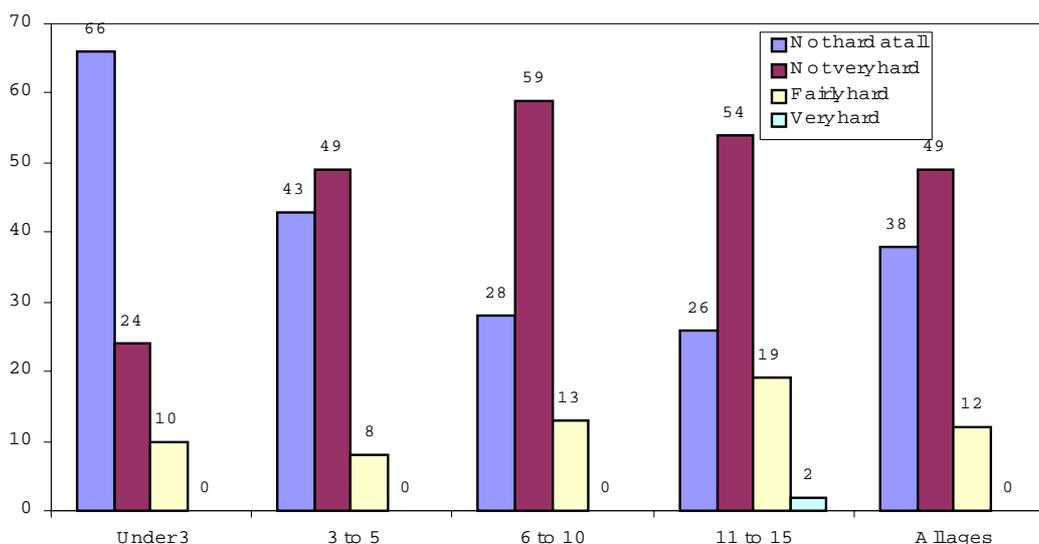
Unweighted base=359



The following graph shows parents' perceptions of how hard they hit the child on that occasion. Overall, almost 9 in 10 said that they hit the child 'not very hard' (49%) or 'not at all hard' (38%), though there was some variation by age with older children slightly more likely to be hit 'fairly' or 'very' hard.

**Figure C-4 How hard parent hit or smacked on last occasion, by age of child (% respondents)**

Unweighted base=359, under 3 n=63, 3 to 5 n=91, 6 to 10 n=128, 11 to 15 n=77



To gain a sense of whether the use of physical chastisement was controlled or not, parents were also asked whether that was: 'about as hard as you meant', 'a bit harder than you meant' or 'quite a bit harder than you meant'. More than nine out of ten (93%) said it was 'about as hard' as they had meant, 6% that it was 'a bit harder' and 1% that it was 'quite a bit harder'.

#### *Parents own experiences as children*

As a side note, it may be interesting to relate current parenting behaviour to that of the previous generation. As well as being asked about their own behaviour, respondents were asked how often, if at all, their own parents had used the same forms of discipline when they were younger. The results are illuminating in two main ways. First, they provide some evidence of change in the readiness of parents to use more extreme forms of physical chastisement. Secondly, the results suggest that current parents who were smacked as children are themselves more likely to smack their own children.

Although - because of differences in recall periods - it is not possible to make a direct comparison between parents' experiences as children and the forms of chastisement they use with their own children, the results do lend some support to the idea that there has been a decline in the use of physical punishments over time. It is noticeable, for example, that four out of five (81%) respondents said that they were smacked on the bottom as children – 13% saying that this happened 'many times'. Similarly, a third said that they had been hit with an implement by their parents (5% 'many times'), a quarter (26%) that they had been hit around the face or head (5% 'many times') and 13% that their parents had shaken them. Overall, just 10% reported that their parents had never used any form of physical chastisement.

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**Table C-6 Experience of different forms of chastisement during own childhood (% respondents)**

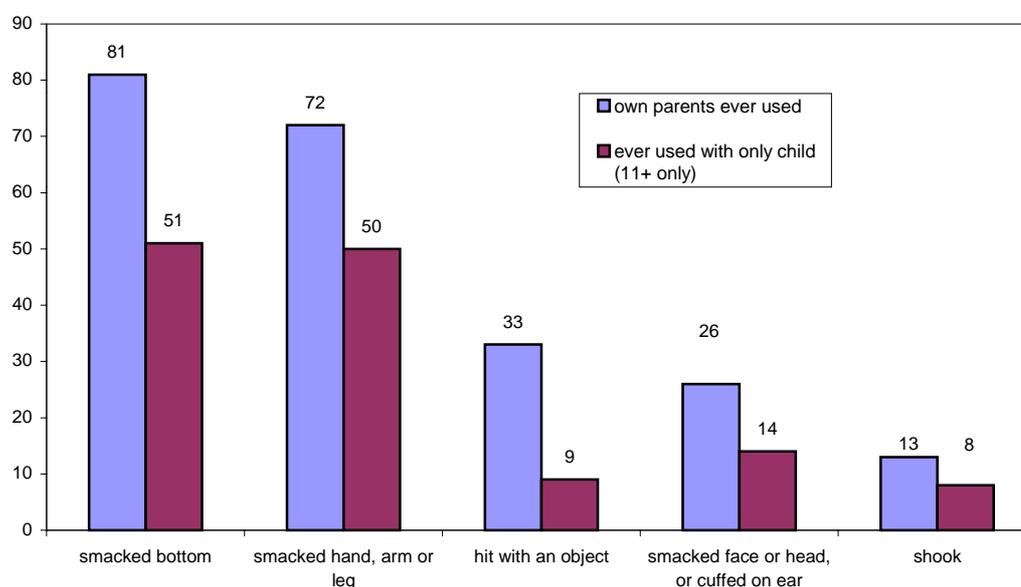
	Many times	Sometimes	Just occasionally	Never
They discussed the issue calmly/explained why the behaviour	34	35	17	9
They shouted or yelled at you	30	40	23	6
They threatened to stop you going out or to take away treats	28	42	18	10
They sent you to your room or somewhere similar	23	39	21	15
They gave you a chore or something unpleasant to do	13	33	22	28
They smacked your bottom	13	30	34	18
They threatened to smack or hit you (but did not actually do it)	13	39	26	20
They threatened to tell someone else about what you'd done	11	30	25	31
They actually stopped you going out or took away treats.	11	37	30	20
They smacked or slapped you on the hand, arm, or leg	10	29	29	26
They hit you with something like a slipper, belt, hairbrush	5	12	15	67
They told you that you'd made them sad or upset	5	34	29	28
They smacked or slapped you on the face or head, or cuffed you on the ear	5	8	13	72
They refused to talk to you/gave you the silent treatment	5	13	19	61
They called you stupid or lazy or some other name like that	4	14	24	55
They grabbed, pushed or handled you roughly	4	8	15	70
They said they wouldn't love you, or they would send you away	2	4	7	84
They threw something at you that could hurt you (whether or not it actually hit you)	1	5	5	87
They walked out on you, or left the room or house	1	7	11	77
They shook you	1	4	7	84
They pulled your ears or hair	1	2	2	95
They threw or knocked you down	0	2	2	95
They punched or kicked you	1	1	2	96
They washed your mouth out with something (e.g. soap) or made you swallow something unpleasant	1	2	3	94
They bit, pinched or nipped you	0	0	1	98

Unweighted base=692

If these figures are read alongside those in the previous section, the argument that there has been a significant change in parenting practices over time appears to be a strong one. Of course, there are reasons for treating such comparisons with caution – parents may well be less forthcoming about their use of such measures than about their own parents' use of them. Moreover, there are obvious differences in the recall period covered. Perhaps the best comparison we can make is between parents' recollections of their own childhood and the data relating to whether current parents of the oldest age group (11 to 15 year-olds) have *ever* used different forms of physical chastisement.<sup>8</sup> This suggests that there may have been significant shifts in the use of smacking and other physical punishments – in particular, hitting a child with an implement or around the face or head.

**Figure C-5 Use of physical chastisement: changes over time (% respondents)**

Unweighted bases own parents=692; 11+ only=227



<sup>8</sup> Although the specific recall periods that parents were asked about in relation to their own children were 'last 12 months' and 'last week', both questions allowed a response of 'not within the past year/week but this has happened before'.

**Table C-7 Use of different forms of chastisement (%)**

	Used in past year with own child (All)	Ever used with own child (11+ only)	Own parents ever used
Discussed the issue calmly/explained why the behaviour was wrong.	88	96	91
Shouted or yelled at child.	83	93	94
Threatened to stop child going out or to take away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	69	88	90
Sent child to his/her room or somewhere similar.	65	83	85
Told child that they'd made parent sad or upset.	63	77	71
Distracted child in some way	57	60	not asked
Threatened to smack child but did not actually do it.	58	64	80
Actually stopped child going out or took away treats (e.g. sweets, TV).	58	78	80
Threatened to tell someone else (e.g. partner).	53	60	68
Moved something dangerous or tempting out of child's way.	53	55	not asked
Smacked child's bottom.	39	51	81
Gave child a chore or something unpleasant to do.	36	59	71
Smacked or slapped child on the hand, arm or leg.	33	50	72
Walked out on child, or left the room or house.	22	31	20
Refused to talk to child / gave child the silent treatment.	20	31	37
Called child stupid or lazy or some other name like that.	23	39	43
Grabbed, pushed or handled child roughly.	11	20	28
Said wouldn't love child, or would send child away, or would go away and leave.	7	14	14
Smacked or slapped child on the face or head, or cuffed child on the ear.	6	14	26
Shook child.	3	8	13
Threw something at child that could hurt (whether or not it actually hit child)	2	8	12
Hit child with something like a slipper, belt, hairbrush or some other object.	2	9	33
Bit or pinched or nipped child.	1	1	2
Punched or kicked child.	1	3	4
Threw or knocked child down.	1	2	5
Pulled child's ears or hair.	1	3	5
Washed mouth out or made child swallow something unpleasant	1	3	6

Unweighted bases own parents=692 11+ only =227

We saw earlier that parenting style is often seen as a (positive or negative) response to one's own experience as a child. The survey results certainly suggest that parents who were not smacked as children are significantly less likely than those who were to use physical chastisement with their own children: of those whose own parents had never used physical chastisement, 33% had done so in the past year with their own child compared with 53% of parents who had experienced physical chastisement themselves. The figures for use of physical chastisement in the past week were 5% (parents who were not physically chastised themselves) and 11% (parents who were physically chastised themselves). We should be wary of over-reading such data, however, as this group may also share with their parents a higher level of educational attainment, higher income and better structures of social support – all of which may also be important factors in shaping the way that children are brought up.

### Key points

- Although there is a widespread view that, in general, parents are less 'strict' than in earlier eras and that physical chastisement is both less common and less severe than it once was, current parents are more likely to see continuity than difference when comparing their parents' and their own approaches to discipline.
  - Most of those interviewed felt that smacking is still widespread, if not universal, among parents in Scotland – in other words, it tends to be seen as a 'normal' part of parenting, rather than as an exceptional practice.
  - The survey data on actual parenting behaviour reinforce this view. Although the most common forms of chastisement tend to be non-physical, around half of those interviewed said that they had used some form of physical chastisement within the past year, rising 77% of parents of children aged between 3 and 5. A fifth of all parents of children under 5 said they had used some form of physical chastisement in the past week.
  - There is some evidence of a class effect here, with C2DE parents more likely than those in groups ABC1 to have used physical chastisement. Women are also more likely than men to have done so – a finding almost certainly explained by the greater involvement of the former in childcare.
  - When parents were asked about the *last time* they used physical chastisement, two key points emerge. First, a smack on the bottom or on the hand, arm or leg is by far the most common form of physical chastisement, accounting for 96% of all incidents. Secondly, in almost 9 out of 10 cases, the child was smacked or hit once.
-

- Survey data on parents own experience of chastisement *as children* provide some evidence of change in the readiness of parents to use more extreme forms of physical chastisement and suggest that current parents who were smacked as children are themselves more likely to smack their own children.
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## D. Smacking: orientations, situations and justifications

### Introduction

While the last section looked at parental views of how common physical chastisement is and at survey evidence of a range of actual parental behaviours, this section focuses specifically on how parents think and feel about *smacking* and its use. It examines general orientations towards smacking – asking whether those who support it do so whole-heartedly or with ambivalence – and the ways in which parents talk about, rationalise and explain its use in specific situations. In doing so, it also draws on survey evidence of typical ‘smacking situations’ and explores parental perceptions of the effectiveness and appropriateness of smacking for children of different ages. The themes covered in the sub-sections are:

- general attitudes towards smacking
- typical smacking situations
- explanations and justifications: smacking to signal danger and smacking as a last resort
- smacking and stress
- perceived influences on likelihood of use
- parental reactions to smacking
- parenting in public
- alternatives to smacking
- age and appropriateness
- perceptions of effectiveness
- attitudes to non-parental physical chastisement

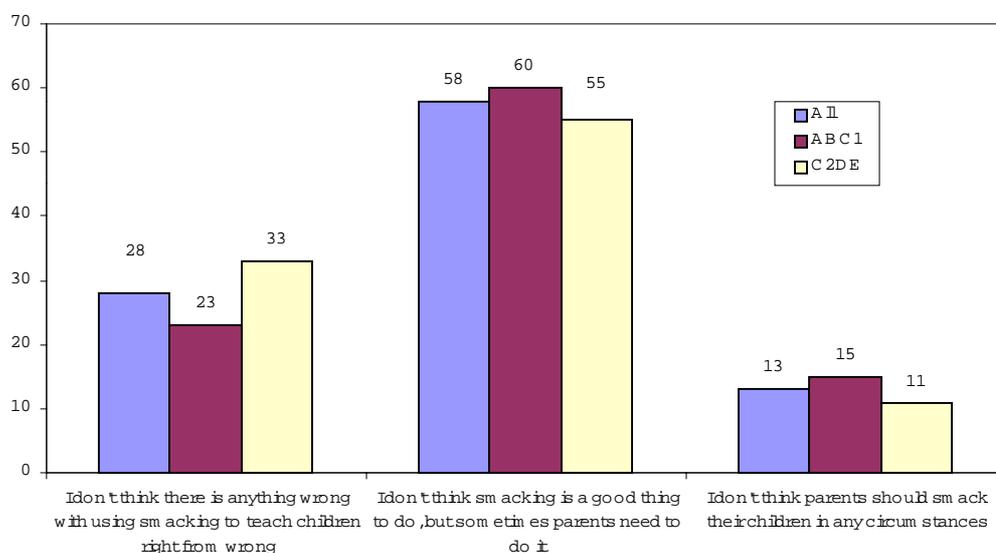
### General attitudes towards smacking

As the following results from the survey indicate, although outright opposition to the use of smacking is relatively rare among parents, so too is a robust defence of it – articulated by only one parent in four. Most parents have an ambivalent attitude towards smacking – they recognise that it can have negative consequences and is best avoided, but feel that sometimes they or other parents are left with no alternative. This construction of smacking as a tactic of last resort is returned to below.

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**Figure D-1 Attitude towards smacking by social class**

Unweighted base=692, ABC1 n=372, C2DE=320



Although the differences should not be over-emphasised, there is a social class dimension in attitudes here, with those in social groups ABC1 significantly less likely than those in C2DE to say that there is nothing wrong with using smacking to teach children right from wrong and more likely to say that one shouldn't smack in any circumstances.

Across all social groups, however, the most striking aspect of these results is not that a majority of parents position themselves as broadly in favour of smacking but that *of that group* a clear majority do so in a slightly apologetic way. The interesting point here, and one that is returned to later in this section, is the complexity of parental attitudes.

### Situations

In what circumstances or situations, then, do parents tend to smack and when do they feel it is appropriate or effective to do so – assuming that these do not always coincide? Again, it is instructive to look both at the way that parents *talk* about such issues (in the context of qualitative interviews) and the survey data on *actual behaviours*. We begin with the latter.

#### *Reasons given for smacking/hitting*

Parents who said they had smacked (or hit) their child in the past year were asked to think back to the last occasion this had happened and to say what the child had done (more than one reason could be given). The results are shown in Table D-2 below. The first is that there are clear variations in the reasons given by age of the child. The second is that smacking as punishment is more common than

smacking as prevention – even among younger children. As we shall see below, this is not always the impression given in the qualitative discussions with parents.

The most common reason given for smacking a child under three was that "they had done something naughty" (39%) closely followed by "they had done/were about to do something dangerous" (36%). For children between three and 10, the most common reason was "they wouldn't stop doing something they'd been told not to do" (38% of 3-5 year olds and 32% of 6-10 year olds). This resonates with the construction by parents of smacking as being a 'tactic of last resort' – again explored below in relation to the qualitative discussions. Older children (11-15) were most likely to have been smacked or hit for being cheeky or answering back.

**Table D-1 Reasons why smacked or hit child on last occasion (% respondents)**

Age of child	All n=359	less than 3 n=63	3-5 n=91	6-10 n=128	11-15 n=77
They wouldn't stop doing something they'd been told not to do	33	32	38	32	27
They had done something naughty (e.g. thrown stones, hit another child)	22	39	29	16	10
They had been cheeky/answered you (or someone else) back	24	8	22	26	35
They wouldn't do what they were told	23	16	24	23	27
They had done/were about to do something dangerous	13	36	10	9	5
They were having a tantrum	20	19	22	19	22
Something else had happened	7	5	3	7	12
Really can't remember	17	12	14	19	20

### *Location*

Parents were also asked *where* they were on the last occasion that they had smacked or hit their child. The results suggest that the use of physical chastisement is overwhelmingly confined to the home, with 9 out of 10 (90%) incidents taking place there. A further 5% of incidents took place at someone else's home and hardly any in a public place or somewhere else (3% in each case). This is an important finding when read in conjunction with the material relating to perceptions of the impact that any ban might have – as we shall see later, parents tend to see it as unlikely to impact on their behaviour 'behind closed doors'.

## Explanations and justifications

While the survey provides a rough outline of the types of situations (and locations) in which parents are most likely to smack their children, the qualitative interviews add considerable depth to this picture. The specific forms of explanation and justification used, however, also tell us something about parental perceptions of the acceptability and appropriateness of smacking.

### Smacking to signal danger

The situation mentioned most frequently in the qualitative interviews – which, as we have seen, may say as much about perceived acceptability as actual prevalence – was that of smacking to signal danger. In defending their own use of smacking or its use in general, parents often drew on situations such as the following.

*\*Well, I've got an under 3, and the things that he has got his hand smacked for, are for dangerous things. You know, like the radiator. He kept going back and forward to it and we said, no you can't touch it, you can't touch that, you can't touch that, it's too hot and you go on like that for about 20 times, and you just had to smack him on his hand and say, no more, and it does stop him from going there. So, if you weren't able to do that. I mean, I suppose maybe some of them listen to you eventually and don't go and touch it. Maybe there would be an accident happened before. I'm not saying it's always good to smack their little fingers, but.. It has stopped him from being burnt. Other people I've spoken to have done the same thing. You know, a little tap on the fingers doesn't do them any harm.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABCI*

It is not immediately clear why smacking appears to parents to be such an appropriate response in this sort of situation. However, it may be seen as an effective means of conveying the potential seriousness of the child's behaviour and there is also an intuitive appeal in smacking the hand that is reaching for danger.

*\* If it's something that could be really dangerous, like trying to pull something off the cooker when it's hot, or something like that. A danger thing. They need to realise that, you just can't do that. Something very serious.*

*Depth interview, Male, Edinburgh, C2DE*

*\*Last year L ran right on the road in front of a car so he got a smack on the bottom for that and he knew because he is not used to getting smacked, he knew he had done something terrible.*

*Focus group, Glasgow, Males, C2DE*

It is also, of course, often an instinctive ‘panic’ reaction on the part of parents, involving little or no deliberation, which raises interesting questions about the potential for changing behaviour.

*\* I think sometimes you just panic. I remember with R, he got up to the toilet. And I remember him sitting on the windowsill at the open window. And I remember panicking. And I grabbed him and said ... "Don't ever do that again". I think you just get such a fright yourself, it's just your reaction. You don't even think about it. You just do it. He could've fell out of the window and killed himself. And I just grabbed him down and smacked him and said ... "Don't ever do that again.". He never did actually!*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

*\* I think she had about two or three smacks ever. One time it was ... I don't know if it was for my benefit or for hers, she got the smack ... but I got such a fright. I grabbed her and smacked automatically.*

*\* Interviewer: That was when she ran across the road?*

*\* Yes. She'd actually disappeared. And legged it after the dog. And I'd chased her half way through the scheme. She was about 4 at that time. And I got such a fright by the time I caught her, I just ... But I don't know if it was to make me feel good. Or to punish her. And after that, I thought I'm not doing that again.*

*Focus group, Inverness, Females, C2DE*

### **‘Nobody wants to smack their children’: the construction of smacking as a tactic of ‘last resort’**

Insofar as it tends to be a response to a sudden and unforeseen situation, smacking to signal danger differs significantly from many other situations in which parents tend to smack. Although sometimes parents would talk about the *seriousness* of a child’s behaviour (e.g. throwing stones at cars), more commonly, they would describe its *persistence* and the failure of other disciplinary strategies. It was extremely rare for parents to defend smacking in positive terms: much more commonly, they described it in terms of a tactic of ‘last resort’. While recognising the limitations of smacking as a disciplinary tactic (especially if it is overused) and even its potentially harmful effects, many parents continue to argue that children sometimes reach a point where they simply ‘need a smack’.

*\*Well, we'll start off with, "Excuse me. Don't do that. Excuse me. Don't do that, because you'll knock that over. Excuse me. Are you deaf? Excuse me. Do you hear me? Do you hear me?" "Yeah, I do hear you". "What did mummy say"? "Not to touch it". "OK, that's fine", and then it'll maybe happen again, and then. Well, before they smash something or whatever, and then. I often find that, we'll work up to that, and then they get their bum smacked or whatever, and then it's just as good as gold. It's like it's just built up to a point, and then they're fine. But, I really think there is a place for smacking.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

*\* So in principle. I agree with it. I would love not to smack. Because I think you're actually just teaching them to hit. Do you know what I mean? But I have actually smacked my child. I can't deny that. But I try not to. It's usually a last resort.*

*\* Yes. I think everyone in this room has probably smacked. They push you too far sometimes. You just try and be reasonable and it doesn't work.*

*[...]*

*\* Nobody wants to smack their children. That's the thing. The majority of people aren't wanting to do it. It is the last resort. And it is when you've come to the end of your tether. It's really stressful. It is stressful.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

Despite talk about 'needs' - which may tell us more about parents' need to offer moral accounts of parenting - the important point to appreciate here is that, with a handful of possible exceptions, most parents who smack do not do so out of a positive conviction that the practice is 'for the good of the child' but out of a sense that they have run out of other options. Interestingly, then, smacking - which embodies parental power and control - is often constructed by parents as happening in those moments in which they feel *least* powerful.

#### **'You lose it sometimes': smacking and stress**

It is also clear that the reassertion of parental control is often far from being controlled and is instead emotionally charged. We saw in Section B that the task of parenting in general needs to be understood within the context of competing and increasing pressures on parents. What are the implications of this for the way in which issues of discipline and chastisement are handled? While the discussion so far has centred on the child's behaviour, several of those interviewed as part of the qualitative research were willing to admit that other stresses and pressures also influence their use of smacking and other disciplinary techniques - in other words, it's not just what the child does but how the parent is feeling.

*\*A lot comes from how you feel at the end of the day, if you are really tired sometimes you get wound up with them and so maybe do go over the top with their punishments.*

*Focus group, Glasgow, Males, C2DE*

*\*I think it's right what you said as well, if you are having a particularly lousy day, a lot is to do with how you are feeling at the time.*

*Peer group, Glasgow, Mixed, ABC1*

*\* This is terrible but when I'm stressed. You know what I mean ... you snap easier. And that's not my son's fault. So I try not to. But I have.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

*\* You know, if I'm really wound up, say I've had a bad, like I did yesterday, it was a terrible, terrible day I had yesterday, and the kids are all at me, and I just lost the plot. I really lost the plot. And then I feel terrible after it and I says, I shouldn't have done that, but it's got to be done, or else the kids will walk all over the top of you, definitely.*

*Depth interview, Glasgow, Female (single parent), C2DE*

### Perceived influences on likelihood to use smacking

As part of the survey exercise, those parents who had ever smacked were asked about situations in which they might be more likely to smack. These included both descriptions of the child's behaviour and of the pressures on the parent. The results are shown in Table D-2 below.

**Table D-2 Whether parents think themselves more likely to smack in different situations**

	Much more likely to smack	A bit more likely to smack	No more likely to smack
When he/she has been told off but still carries on misbehaving	18	53	29
When he/she has been aggressive or violent	12	39	47
When you feel you've lost control of him/her	9	39	50
When you've been worried or scared about him/her	5	26	68
When you've had a long, tiring day	4	22	73
When you feel things are getting on top of you	3	25	71
When you're very busy or pushed for time	2	19	79

Unweighted base=485

The questions about the 'last occasion' are also interesting in this respect. When parents were asked how they were feeling immediately before they had last used some form of physical chastisement, they were most likely to reply that they were feeling 'angry or frustrated' (48%), 'stressed or hassled' (25%), 'tired' (16%) or 'worried about something' (6%). A quarter (24%) said that they felt none of those things and 10% that they did not know or could not remember.

### **‘I’ve never smacked them and not regretted it’: parental reactions to smacking**

On a related theme, it is worth noting that, despite feeling that their children sometimes ‘need a smack’, parents often feel guilty or upset at having actually smacked them. There was some suggestion from the qualitative interviews that such feelings were especially strong among mothers – though this may reflect differences in the way that males and females tend to talk about the issues and was not reflected in the survey results.

*\* I could put my hand on my heart and say, I’ve never smacked them, and not regretted it after. I’ve always felt that I’ve failed, if I’ve smacked, right, because. Not because I’ve lost it. Well, probably because I have lost it, and that’s why I’ve smacked, you know what I mean, but it’s like. [...] Not so much now, because they’re older, and you don’t need to but, I think to myself, well I maybe should have done that different, or maybe I should have handled that different. You know what I mean.*

*\*Do you not think it’s part of being a mum? You like beating yourself up about everything you do though?*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

*\* It makes me feel really guilty. I’m quite a big lad eh? I’ve got quite a big pair of hands, so if I was to smack them, I would knock them next door so I’m always saying to my wife to do it but she never does! I’m always wary of smacking them - I’m not saying I’ve never smacked them, I think I’ve smacked them about three times but every time I do it, I feel guilty. You get to a point though that you just break.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

Overall, 53% of parents said that they felt guilty or sorry after using physical chastisement on the last occasion they had done so. Around a third (34%) said they felt annoyed at the child ‘for making me have to smack them’. Just 10% said that they felt much the same after smacking as before, 7% said they felt none of these things and 7% did not know or could not remember. Only a very small number (2%) said they felt better.

### **‘Smacking for other people’: parenting in public**

We noted earlier that parents are probably increasingly reflexive about and preoccupied with their own parenting skills and that they feel scrutinised by others, especially when dealing with issues of discipline in public places. Often this acts to inhibit the use of smacking – many of those interviewed indicated that they would be reluctant to smack their child because of concern that other people would disapprove or even intervene.

*\*Interviewer: Is there a difference between how you manage things in the house, and how you manage things in public, with the boys?*

*\*Yes, obviously. I mean, I’m not going to smack them in public.*

*\* Interviewer: You wouldn’t?*

*\*No.*

*\* Interviewer: Why not?*

*\*Again, it's not socially accepted. Somebody would maybe intervene, and maybe assault you.*

*Depth interview, Edinburgh, Male, C2DE*

On other occasions, however, as in the following examples, a sense of external scrutiny may encourage the use of smacking. Again, the themes of both accountability and anxiety are evident here.

*\*I've seen me smacking one or other of my children, for other people. You think, folk are looking at us, and they think that I'm not disciplining them.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

*\* My wee boy doesn't take that many tantrums, but people look at me like I'm a bad mother, because my child's taking a tantrum. He wants something and I'm not giving him it. And he'll be lying on the floor and I just ignore him. Because I think to respond to it, is just ...*

*Interviewer: So who are these people who look at you?*

*\* Older people.*

*\* Old ladies. You hear them saying something like that bairn should be smacked.*

*\* Tut tutting, shaking the head.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

We return to this theme below in relation to the proposed legislation. For the time being, it may be sufficient to make the point that parents often already feel judged and scrutinised when dealing with their children's difficult behaviour in public places. The proposed legislation, as we shall see, has the potential to contribute to that feeling.

### **Alternatives to smacking**

It was indicated earlier that smacking was generally seen as a tactic of last resort. Among the more common alternative strategies discussed by parents were distraction (especially for very young children), the rewarding of good behaviour, reasoning, withdrawal of treats or 'grounding'.

There was also discussion of alternative forms of physical chastisement, which might be less visible, especially in public.

*\*I remember my mum used to do it to my younger brothers and that. And she used to walk along and nip their hands. Or nip their finger. She used to say "I'm amazed that my son has got the power of his right hand", because she used to squeeze it that hard!*

*Focus group, Edinburgh, Females, ABC1*

There was also discussion about the potential harmful consequences of some non-physical responses, such as a parent threatening to leave or to send the child away.

*\* I'm in charge of a bad children's home in \_\_\_\_\_ and one day I was in \_\_\_\_\_ and the mobile phone goes off and it was an emergency at the bad children's home. We've always said "you're going to the bad boys home" but I turned round and the kids are screaming their heads off thinking "this is it, I'm going to the bad boys home". It does actually make you aware of what you're saying to them. You would have no idea what's going on in their wee minds because you threatened them in the past about something and their minds are working overtime.*

*Peer group*

Several participants contrasted the 'short, sharp' character of a smack with the potential for lasting psychological damage from some non-physical punishment.

*\* I would rather skelp a bairn because the way some folk speak to their bairns, to me it's worse than giving a smack. A smack looks worse but the way some folk speak to their bairns, it's awful.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

*\*I think sometimes like the mental... The mental thing that you do to attack could be worse than smacking them.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

### **Age and appropriateness**

Among those who felt that smacking was a justifiable method of disciplining children (i.e. 87% of the parents interviewed<sup>9</sup>), there was a range of opinion about the appropriateness of its use for children of different ages. In general, though, there was relatively little support for smacking either very young *or* older children. Indeed, most people saw smacking as a useful and appropriate strategy only within a relatively narrow age band.

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<sup>9</sup> unweighted n=600

When those who thought smacking was a justifiable method were asked whether there was an age *below* which children should not be smacked, four out of five (80%) said there was. Of these, 17% thought the age below which one should not smack a child was one year, 29% thought the age was 2 and 23% thought the age was 3. Almost all of the remainder offered responses between 4 and 8 years; 14% said they did not know.

A smaller, though still sizeable, proportion (66% of the 600 respondents who thought smacking was justifiable) thought that one should not smack a child *above* a certain age. Although there was considerable variation in views of what that age should be, around three-quarters (76%) of those who thought one should not smack a child above a certain age suggested 8 or above.

What was the logic behind these age-based cut-off points? In relation to younger children, parents tended to argue that there was little point in smacking a child, as he or she would not be capable of understanding, and that there would be little need – except perhaps to signal danger.

Above a certain age (which varied, from 4-5 up to 8-9), smacking was also widely seen as inappropriate, for a variety of reasons. First, the child should be capable of reasoning and, therefore, alternative approaches should be possible. Secondly, the child would be capable of understanding the meaning of violence – and would, therefore, interpret a smack very differently. Finally, some parents argued that to smack an older child would be embarrassing or humiliating.

*\* Maybe they should make a law that you're not allowed to smack at the wrong age because the age that a little smack, and it's a little smack that I'm talking about, is useful is maybe 2-4 years old. And then once they're past that age, that's when you should start being able to speak to them because they can understand.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

*\* I can't remember (being smacked). I think it's because you normally smack a child between the ages of three and five. Because under three they're too young. And when they get to five or six, they can understand when you give them a row. So you stop smacking then. So if you're getting smacked in between those ages, you're going to forget when you're older. Because you can't remember anything.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

*\* Younger kids benefit from a smack as they get older deprivation of something they like works better.*

*Peer group, Glasgow, Mixed, ABC1*

By far the most common reason given in the survey for why children under a certain age should not be smacked was that the child would not understand - four out of five respondents who thought there was an age below which one should not smack gave this as a reason. Other reasons cited were that other methods would work better (15%), that it might harm the child (14%) and that it would not work (9%).

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Just over half (54%) of the parents who felt that children above a certain age should not be smacked said this was because one should be able to reason with them/talk to them by that age. Over a third (39%) indicated that they should know right from wrong by that age, and a quarter (23%) that smacking would not work. A number of parents also suggested that it would make things worse (20%) or that it would embarrass/humiliate the child (17%).

In the context of the legislation, the finding that most parents see smacking as inappropriate for children of particular ages is important. However, two points need to be borne in mind. First, they are almost as likely to see it as inappropriate for older as younger children. Secondly, agreement that children of a particular age *should not* be smacked is not the same as saying that it should be *illegal*.

### **Perceptions of effectiveness**

Most parents may smack their children, at least occasionally, but how effective do they think it is? Parents were asked to say how effective they felt smacking or hitting their child was on the last occasion they had done it, both in stopping the behaviour *at the time* and preventing similar behaviour *later on*. The results suggest that a majority of parents feel that smacking does work, especially in the short-term. A larger proportion thought smacking was either 'not very' or 'not at all' effective in preventing similar behaviour – though a majority still thought it 'very' or 'fairly effective' in doing so.

Again, there were some interesting variations by age of child as detailed in the tables overleaf.

### **Attitudes towards non-parental physical chastisement**

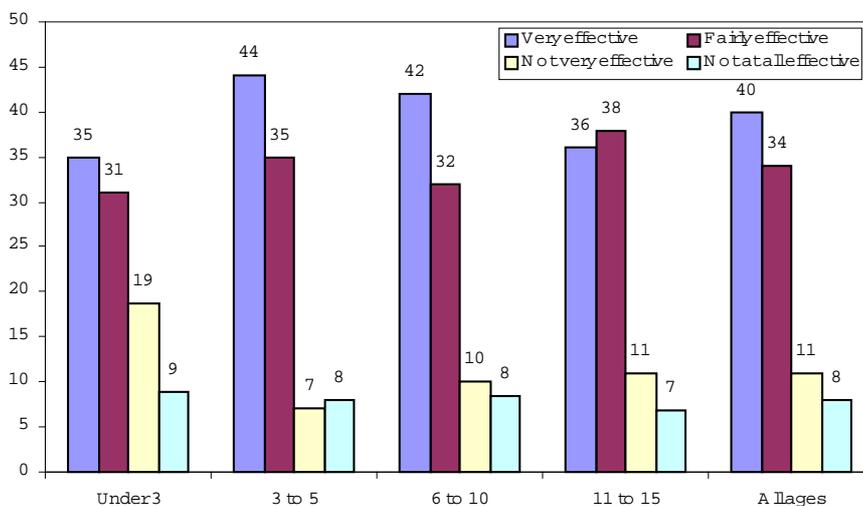
Although many parents argue that sometimes children simply 'need a smack', either because of the seriousness or the persistence of their behaviour, almost all are opposed to the idea of anyone else administering that sanction. For example, even among those parents who are most strongly committed to the use of smacking (i.e. who see nothing wrong with 'using smacking to teach children right from wrong'), 69% say they would definitely not allow another parent they know well to smack their child, 80% that they would not allow a babysitter to do so, and 78% a childminder or other carer. Only a third (36%) of this group, however, would not allow a grandparent to smack their child.

This can be seen as consistent with parents' views, noted earlier in the report, that they should generally make decisions about their children's discipline, but also with the idea that close family are the most likely source of help or support in relation to behavioural or discipline problems.

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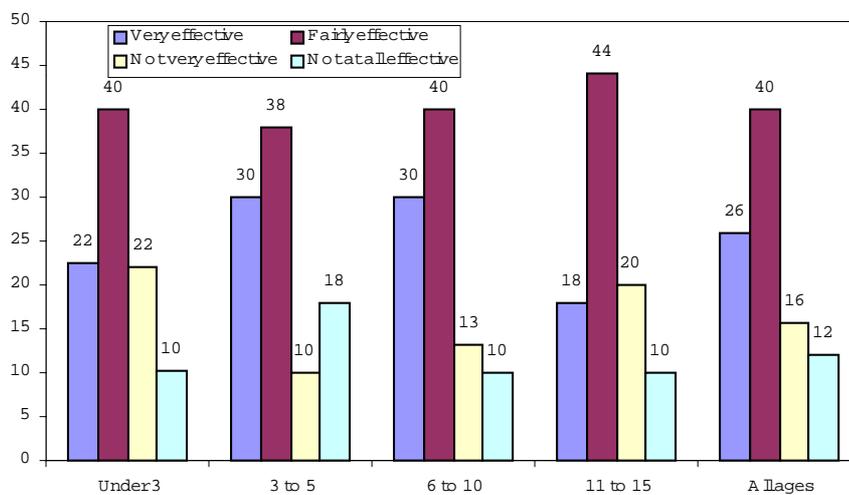
**Figure D-2 Perceived effectiveness of smacking at the time (%)**

Unweighted base=359, under 3 n=63, 3 to 5 n=91, 6 to 10 n=128, 11 to 15 n=77



**Figure D-3 Perceived effectiveness of smacking later on (%)**

Unweighted base=359, under 3 n=63, 3 to 5 n=91, 6 to 10 n=128, 11 to 15 n=77



### Key points

- Although outright opposition to the use of smacking is relatively rare, so too is a robust defence of it. Most parents have an ambivalent attitude towards it – while recognising that it can have negative consequences and is best avoided, they argue that they or other parents are sometimes left with no alternative.
  - There is a social class dimension here, with ‘principled’ opposition to smacking more common among ABC1 parents and support for it more common among C2DE parents.
  - In terms of typical ‘smacking situations’, there is a slight disjunction between the survey data and the qualitative interviews. In the latter, parents tended to refer most frequently to situations in which smacking is used to signal danger – perhaps because this is seen as more socially acceptable. The survey data, on the other hand, suggests that it is more commonly used as a straightforward punishment than to send a message of this kind.
  - The other key theme in parental talk about smacking is its construction as a tactic of ‘last resort’. In this context, it is usually a response to the *persistence* rather than the *seriousness* of children’s behaviour, and is clearly often bound up with situational factors relating to parental stress.
  - The survey data reveal physical chastisement to be overwhelmingly *private* in character, almost always taking place within the home – a finding with obvious relevance for questions of legislative enforcement.
  - The act of smacking is often immediate and emotionally charged – rather than a deliberate and distanced application of a sanction – and often leaves parents with feelings of guilt. Again, this suggests that parental attitudes are more complex than might usually be supposed.
  - On a related note, eight out of ten parents believe that children of a particular age should not be smacked. Two points should be noted here: first, although it was widely held that very young children should not be smacked, there was also significant support for the idea that children *above* a certain age should not be smacked; secondly, a belief that children of a certain age *should not* be smacked is not the same as saying that it should be *illegal* to do so.
  - A majority of parents who smack tend to see it as either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effective both in stopping the behaviour at the time and in preventing similar behaviour later on. There is, however, slightly more scepticism about its longer-term effectiveness.
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## E. Awareness and views of possible changes in the law

### Introduction

This final substantive section of the report looks at a range of issues surrounding the law on physical chastisement. In particular, it looks at understanding of the current legal situation; at awareness and understanding of the changes proposed in the Criminal Justice Bill; and at views of the appropriateness and likely impact of those changes. The themes covered in the sub-sections are:

- perceptions and misperceptions of the current law and the proposed legislation
- attitudes towards legislation on smacking
- arguments against the proposed ban on smacking children under three
- perceptions of how a ban would affect parental behaviour
- attitudes towards other aspects of the proposed legislation

### **‘You cannae smack them once they turn three’: perceptions and misperceptions of the current law and the proposed legislation**

At the time that the qualitative interviewing was carried out (in March and April 2002), there was a great deal of confusion about the current and proposed legislation. While many parents were aware of a controversy about the law on smacking, most were extremely vague about the details. A surprising number of those interviewed were under the impression that the law had already been changed and that it was now illegal to smack children in general or children of particular ages. The following exchanges are typical of participants’ responses on this theme.

*\*Interviewer: what is the current law on smacking?*

*\*It is not under three's. You're not allowed to smack under three's. Or is it over three's?*

*\*I don't think you're allowed to smack them at all.*

*\*You're not allowed to touch their head. I know that. But I would never touch the head anyway.*

*\*I think it's over three. So if they needed smacked before they were three. A smack on the hand. After three, you can speak to them and say "No you're going in your room".*

*Focus group, Edinburgh, Females, ABC1*

*\*I don't think it's actually law yet. I think they're trying to bring it out. I don't know if it's actually law already.*

*\* I don't think it's actually out. And it's all about not smacking them over the head. You mustn't.  
Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

Understanding of the legislative position had obviously been clouded, to some extent, by media coverage of the court cases involving the school-teacher prosecuted for hitting his daughter in a dentist's waiting room and the French tourist found guilty of assaulting his son in Edinburgh. Despite the fact that both cases involved charges of assault, they tended to be seen as examples of parents being prosecuted for 'smacking' and were commonly linked to discussion of the legislation.

*\* I saw articles in the paper about 2 months ago about this guy in Edinburgh. It was terrible. A French man on holiday in Edinburgh in some restaurant. I think it was a 4 year old and it was misbehaving terribly. So his father took him out of the restaurant onto Princes Street ... I don't think it was Princes Street ... and smacked him. And he was in jail for 2 days in Edinburgh.*

*\* It makes you wonder about what you do.*

*Focus group, Inverness, Females, C2DE*

Despite this final comment, perhaps the most significant thing about parents' understandings of the legislation is that most continued to smack, despite thinking that it was now illegal (at least in certain situations). We return to this issue below.

The quantitative survey provides further evidence of the extent of confusion surrounding the existing law and of the limited awareness and understanding of the changes proposed.

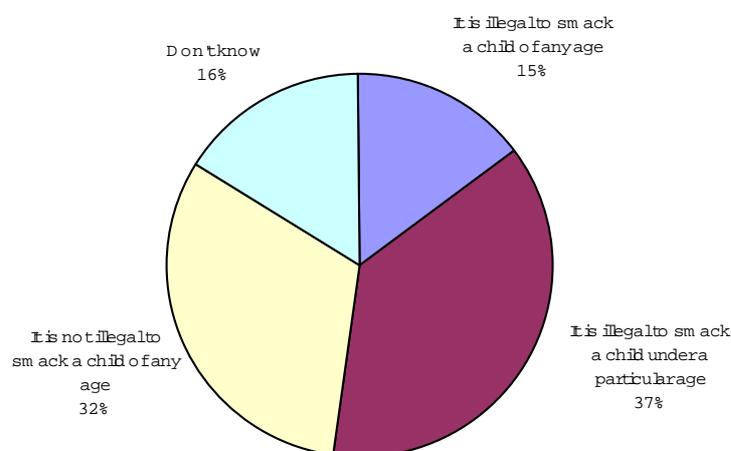
When respondents were asked how much they would say they knew or understood about the current law on smacking in Scotland, four out of five parents said that they knew either 'not very much' (62%) or 'nothing at all' (18%). Just 2% said they knew 'a great deal' and 17% 'quite a lot' about the current law.

When asked which of three statements they thought best describes the current law on smacking in Scotland, 15% thought that it is illegal to smack a child of any age and 37% that it is illegal to smack a child under a particular age. In other words, *half* of all parents believe that smacking is currently illegal, either for younger children or children in general. Around a third (32%) thought that it is *not* currently illegal to smack a child of any age, while the remaining 16% said they did not know.

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**Figure E-1 Which statement best describes the current law on smacking in Scotland?**

Unweighted base=692



Among those who thought it is currently illegal to smack a child under a *particular* age, 53% thought that the age below which it was illegal was three, 13% that it was two and 3% that it was one. The remainder thought it was four or above (20%) or said they did not know (11%).

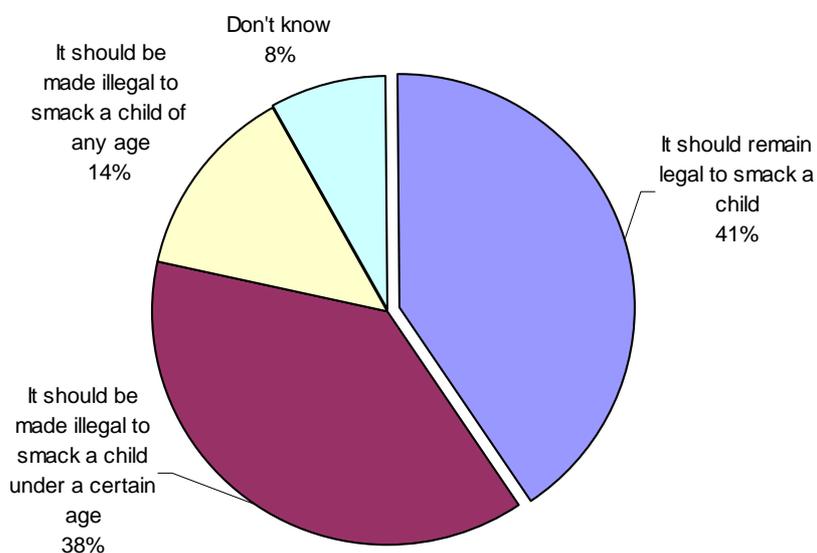
The results clearly show that understandings of the law are not directly linked to behaviour, since those who have used physical chastisement with their child in the last year are no more likely to believe that their behaviour is currently lawful.

During the course of the survey interview, it was explained to respondents that it is currently legal for parents to smack their children, providing they do not use excessive force, but that the Scottish Executive is considering making changes to the law. When asked whether they had heard anything about the proposed changes, roughly 6 in 10 parents (59%) said that they had. But of those who had, the vast majority said they knew either 'not very much' (75%) or 'nothing at all' (6%) about what is being proposed. That said, there was a clear difference in levels of understanding of the current legislation between those who were aware of the proposals and those who were not – 41% of the former believing it is not currently illegal to smack a child of any age compared with 19% of the latter.

Once the current law had been explained to them, respondents were asked about their view of the proposed changes. In the focus groups, there appeared to be little support for the idea of a ban on smacking. The survey results indicate that perhaps around half of parents might, in fact, support such a move – at least in relation to very young children as the following analysis shows.

**Figure E-2 Attitude towards changes to the law on smacking**

Unweighted base=692

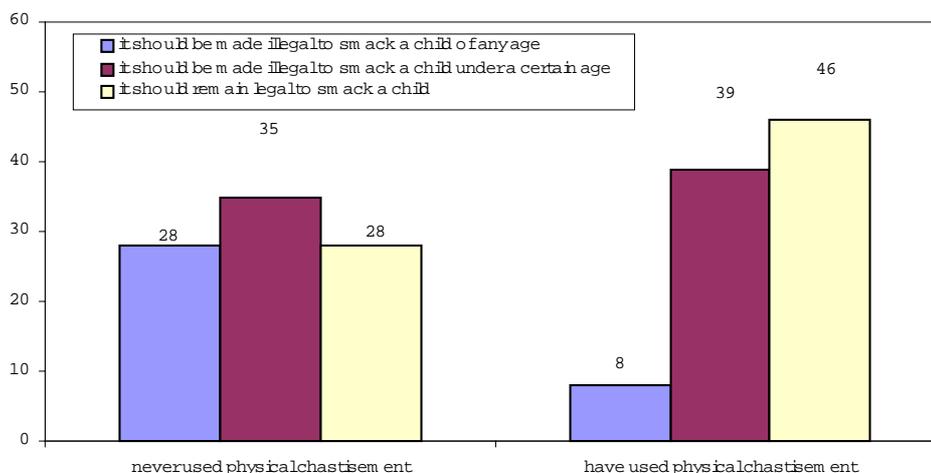


The results suggest that just over half of parents (52%) support a ban on smacking, at least in relation to children of a particular age: 14% think it should be made illegal to smack a child of *any* age and a further 38% think it should be made illegal to smack a child *under* a certain age. Forty one percent think it should remain legal to smack a child.

There is no significant relationship between age of child and parental views on this point. Not surprisingly however, parents' own use of physical chastisement is linked to their views on legislation (see Figure E-3 below). Those who have never used any form of physical chastisement with their own child are much more likely to think that it should be made illegal to smack a child of any age (28% compared to 8% who have used physical chastisement). However, in both groups, those who do not support an outright ban are fairly evenly split between those who think smacking should be made illegal for children under a certain age and those who favour the status quo.

**Figure E-3 Attitude towards changes to the law on smacking by own use of physical chastisement**

Unweighted base=692; never used – n=190; have used – n=499



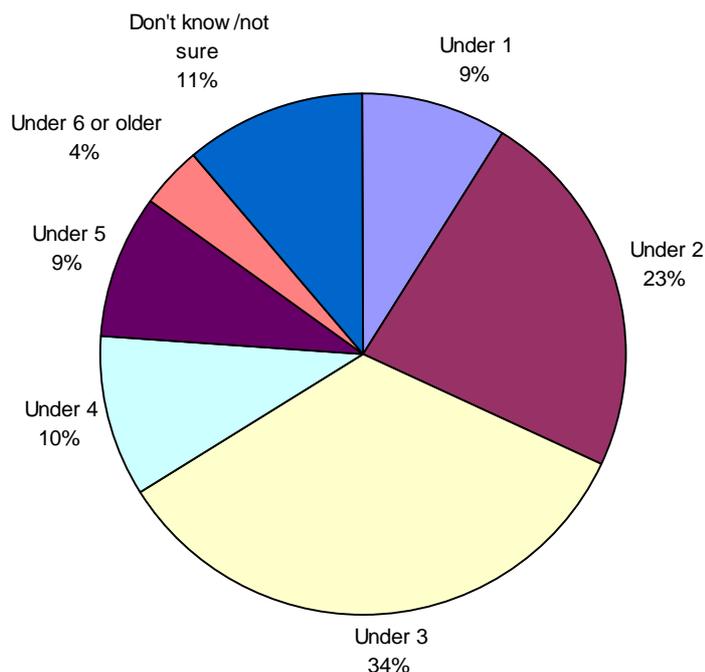
The 38% of parents who thought it should be illegal to smack a child below a certain age, were then asked what they thought that age should be. Most suggested an age under 5 but there was no clear consensus about which particular age that should be: 9% of this group thought that the age should be one, 23% that it should be two and 34% that it should be three. This is illustrated in Figure E-4 below. It must be remembered that these are proportions only of the 38% of parents who think it should be illegal to smack a child below a certain age - as discussed above, a further 14% think it should be illegal to smack a child of *any* age while 41% think it should remain legal to smack a child.

We have estimated the proportions of *all* parents who would support a ban set at different ages (see Figure E-5). These calculations make two main assumptions. The first is that a respondent in favour of a ban for all ages would support a ban on smacking children under a certain age (at least in preference to the status quo). The second is that respondents who would prefer that the limit was set at an older age, would also support a ban on smacking younger children (e.g. if someone thinks that smacking should be banned for children under 4, we have assumed that they would also support a ban on smacking children under 3).

On this basis, we have calculated that the level of support for making it illegal to smack a child under one is around 52% of all parents<sup>10</sup>. We estimate that around 48% of parents would support a ban on smacking children under two, 38% would support a ban on smacking children under three, 24% would support a ban on smacking children under four and 20% a ban on smacking children under 5.

**Figure E-4 Age below which it should be illegal to smack children**

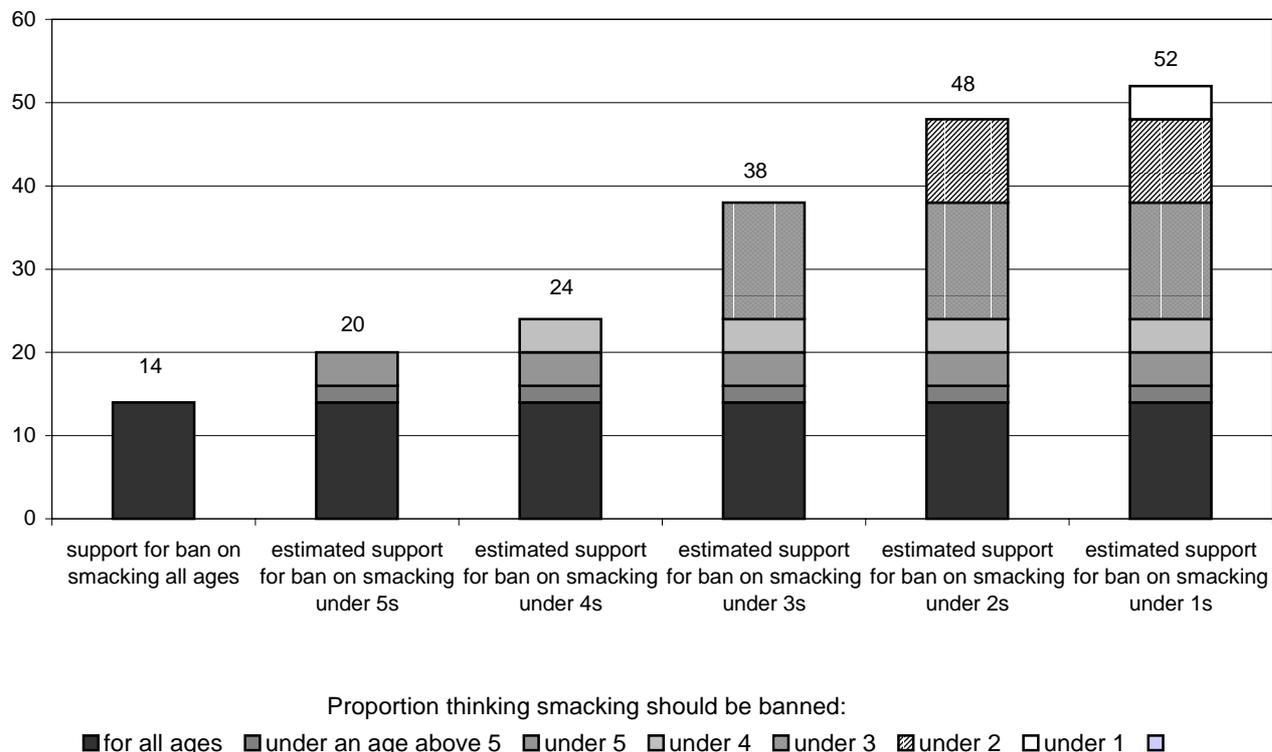
Unweighted base = All those who think it should be made illegal to smack a child under a certain age (n=266)



<sup>10</sup> This is built up from the 14% who think it should be made illegal to smack a child of any age, the 2% who think the age limit should be set at an age above six, the 4% who think it should be under five, the 4% who think it should be under four, the 14% who think it should be under three, the 10% who think it should be under two and the 4% who think it should be under one. The percentages favouring the various age limits are calculated from the ages specified by those who think it should be made illegal to smack a child under a certain age, excluding the "don't knows", and expressed as a percentage of the total sample e.g. of the 38% who think it should be illegal to smack a child under a certain age, 25% of those able to specify an age thought it should be illegal to smack a child under 2, which is 10% of the total sample (25% of 38%).

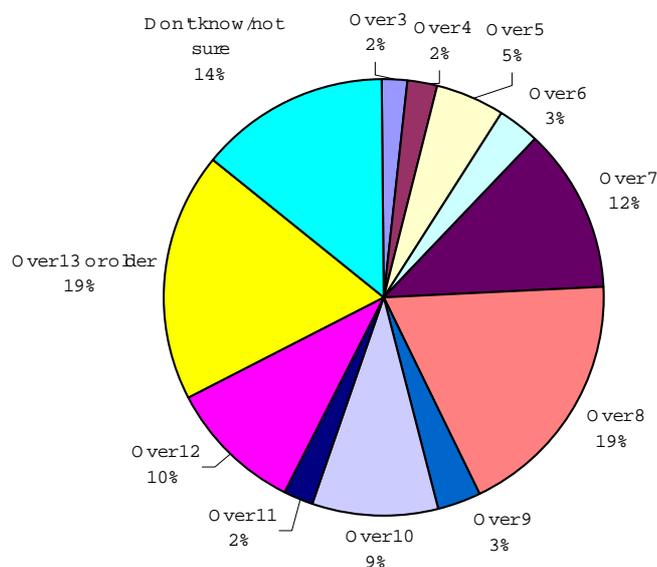
**Figure E-5 Estimated levels of support for banning smacking at different ages (% respondents)**

Unweighted base=692



Interestingly, almost a third of respondents (32%) thought it should be made illegal to smack a child *above* a certain age (43% thought it should not and 25% were not sure). Whether this reflects a strongly committed view, or simply a prompted response to a survey question is debatable, as there was little evidence of strong support for such legislation in the qualitative work. That said, the qualitative interviews did highlight some relevant views – for example, that smacking an older child was closer to ‘abuse’, that it would be counter-productive or ineffective, and that it might embarrass or humiliate the child.

When this sub-group of respondents were asked at what age it should become illegal to smack a child, as the following graph shows, there was little consensus – though most respondents opted for seven or above.

**Figure E-6 Age above which it should be illegal to smack children**Unweighted base = All those who think it should be made illegal to smack a child *above* a certain age (n=216)**Arguments against the proposed ban on smacking children under three**

The research suggests, then, that at least half of Scottish parents are not in favour of banning smacking for children under the age of three. What arguments were expressed in the qualitative work in support of this position?

First, there was a widespread concern that the legislation would potentially criminalise 'ordinary', 'caring' parents who are already doing their best in often difficult circumstances. Secondly and relatedly, it was argued that it would be better to put the resources into positive provision for children and families and, in doing so, reduce the stresses that often lead to problems.

*\*I think they would have been better putting their money in so that there is somewhere for the children instead of telling people what most of them know anyway*

[...]

*\*What would the punishment be, it would be a charge and it is more stress where if they put the money they are going to use into other things that would help the parents*

*Focus group, Glasgow, Males, C2DE*

*\* I think, if they're going to spend money on bringing in laws or ploughing money into that, plough it into giving support to families and make sure that maybe. Maybe there is a bit more nursery, so mum can get 2 and a half hours peace and, maybe when they come out, she'll maybe have had a coffee and 2 hours of peace. She'll maybe not lose the plot. She'll maybe not. That's not going to work for everybody but, if they're going to spend money and time, plough it into a good base for families and for mums and maybe then we can move on, but to hold this flag and wave it about and say, we will not have children smacked. Feed them. Make sure mum is happy. Make sure their heating is on and they're fed and then maybe you can move on from there. That's what I think.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

A third line of argument was that the legislation was focusing on ‘the wrong people’ – in other words, that the Executive should be finding ways of identifying and dealing with cases of serious child abuse, rather than diverting resources into the policing of smacking.

*\*It's annoying because what about these wee children that are starved to death with cigarette burns all over them.*

*\*Yes. And you think ... get your act together. Look at the real world and what's happening.*

*\*Do you think it makes a difference? Nobody's going to make a citizen's arrest in Safeway's. Are they? Or can you? Are you allowed to?*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, ABC1*

In general, opposition to the idea of the ban appears to be based less on a principled defence of smacking than on a commitment to the idea that parents should be largely free to decide how to bring up their own children. While it was accepted that there should be limits to that freedom, and there was concern to prevent ‘real abuse’, most parents simply could not make a connection between the use of a ‘wee smack’ and a need for legislation.

*\*I would hate them to tell me how to bring up my kids and tell me what I can and can't do. I know for a fact that I do not hurt them. if I want to give them a wee smack it should be up to me and I know how far I can go. That would be it a smack, but they should not say I can't do it. But at the same time I can see it both ways. I can, because I think the kids can't face up to an adult, but I would not hurt my kids, but there are parents who would.*

*Paired depth (couple), Edinburgh, ABC1*

*\*If they say that that's the law, you're not allowed to smack your kids. What you do inside your house ... as long as you're not physically or mentally torturing them. I don't think they can tell you what to do.*

*\*Interviewer: They can't tell you or they shouldn't tell you?*

*\*Cruelty to children. But I don't think they can tell you not to give them a smack on the hand.*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, ABC1*

*\* I think the law should be based on common sense. Common sense tells you that if a kid is being abused - you know the difference between a smack and abuse. There's loads of kids who are being abused and nobody knows because it's done behind closed doors. They should spend more time with that sort of thing than innocent folk who either get angry and they might be wrong, who will smack their kids but it has no lasting affect. [...]*

*\* Do you not think the law is hitting the wrong folk anyway. They're not putting it in for decent, upstanding folk who are considering the law because you get the folk who beat their kids up, they don't care what the law says because they're breaking it anyway.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

The proposed legislation was also criticised on other grounds – for example, for what was perceived as the arbitrary character of the age cut-off, and on the basis that it would be unworkable, that it would place impossible demands on the police and social work departments, and that it would have no impact on those people who genuinely pose a risk to their own children.

*\* I don't know if it can be straight across the board like that. And how do you know? You can't come into people's houses checking. If you're smacking, they're not going to be any the wiser to be honest. How do you know? As soon as they turn three, now it's time to start smacking them? Because some kids are doing a lot more early on. I mean it's like walking. Some start at 9 months. Some start at 18 months.*

[...]

*\* Abuse is happening behind closed doors. And it's not even getting picked up, is it? For someone to be fined or arrested for smacking a child in public, when they've done something that is life-threatening. How can that be justified?*

*Peer group, Edinburgh, Females, C2DE*

*\* I don't think the police could cope with that. You imagine that lassie in the supermarket there, they might have had about 20 phone calls about that. The police have got to go there to deal with someone smacking their kid when somebody else is shoplifting or breaking into a house and assaulting old folk.*

*Peer group, Borders, Mixed, C2DE*

*\* If they were going to do anything. If the Social Work Department has to investigate every parent that smacks a child, nobody would get anything done, and none of the children that needed help would get it, would they? I mean, you can't. I don't think you can enforce that. It's a waste of the Scottish Executive time.*

*Peer group, Dundee, Females, ABC1*

*\* I work in the Co-op. And kids are running about all the time. And you hear them giving them ... "wait till you get home boy" or whatever and then they take the punishment at home. Whatever their punishment may be. But they're not doing it in public. So they're just taking it away from one place and putting it in another.*

*Focus group, Highlands, Males, C2DE*

### **Perceptions of how a ban would affect parental behaviour**

We have already seen that a majority of those interviewed indicated that they smack their children at least occasionally and also that many parents believed that smacking was already illegal, at least for children of certain ages. This suggests that, in the short-term at least, one should not expect to see a direct link between legislation and behavioural change.

When asked explicitly whether the introduction of legislation would affect the way they dealt with their children, 46% indicated that they wouldn't smack a child under 3 in any event, 8% said that it would stop them smacking and 5% said they would smack less. Of the remainder, 27% said it make no difference to their behaviour and 14% indicated that a ban would stop them smacking in a public place.

**Table E-1 Anticipated impact of a ban on parental behaviour**

	% of all parents
It would make no difference. I would still smack if I thought it was necessary.	27
It would stop me smacking in a public place, but I would still do it at home if I thought it was necessary	14
It would make me smack less - both at home and in public places	5
It would stop me smacking altogether.	8
It would make no difference. I would not smack a child under three anyway.	46

Unweighted base=692

Survey participants were also asked whether they would be likely to intervene if smacking were made illegal for children under two and they saw a mother in a supermarket giving three 'quite hard smacks' to a child of around 18 months. A third (34%) said that they would intervene, but the vast majority of these (84%) said that they would say something to the mother, rather than report her to the police or other authorities. Interestingly, about as many people (6%) indicated that they would report the incident to supermarket staff as to the police (7%) – suggesting that such legislation might have unexpected consequences for a range of organisations.

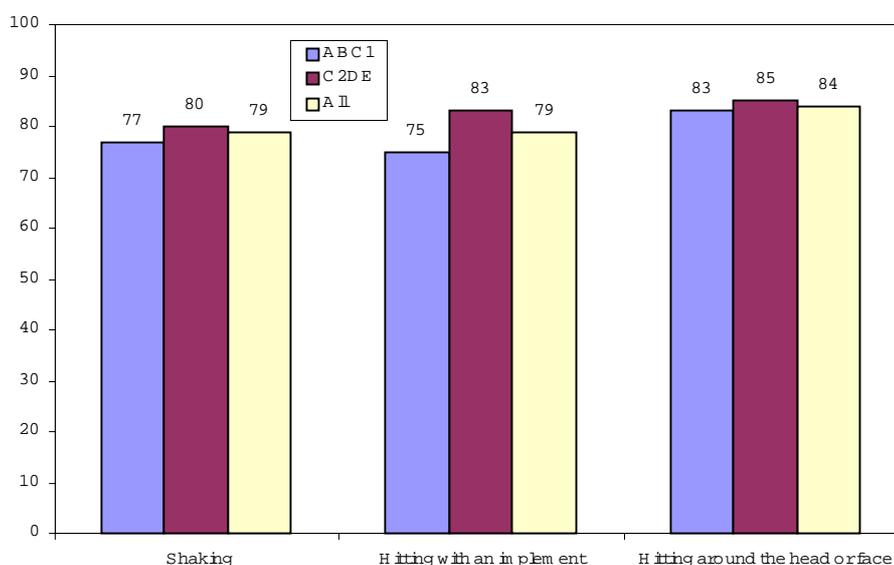
Not surprisingly, perhaps, willingness to intervene in such a situation is strongly correlated with attitudes towards and own use of physical chastisement.

### Attitudes towards other aspects of the legislation

There was far greater support for the other aspects of the legislation – i.e. the proposal to make it unlawful to shake, strike around the head or strike with an implement a child of any age. As the following graph indicates, each of these attracted the support of around 4 out of 5 parents interviewed. Interestingly, there was not the same pattern by social class – indeed, there was slightly higher agreement with the proposals from those in social groups C2DE than ABC1.

**Figure E-7 Agreement with other aspects of the legislation by social class (%)**

Unweighted base=692; ABC1 – n=372; C2DE – n=320



Even among parents who currently use some form of physical chastisement with their own children, around three-quarters were in support of each of these proposals.

In only a handful of the qualitative interviews was any opposition to these proposals voiced, usually framed around problems of definition (e.g. what constitutes shaking?) or consistency (is the use of a slipper really worse than the use of a hand?). There is little doubt that these behaviours chime much more closely with most parents' views of what constitutes abuse and, as such, are much less controversial as the subject of legislation and policing.

### Key points

- There is widespread confusion about the current legislative situation, with half of all parents believing that smacking is *currently* illegal, either for all children or for children of a particular age. Less than a third thought that it is *not* currently illegal to smack a child of any age.
  - Although there was relatively widespread awareness that the Executive is considering changes to the law (six in ten parents saying they had heard something about it), the vast majority of parents claimed little knowledge of the detail.
  - We estimate that around 38% of parents in Scotland are currently in favour of banning smacking for the under threes, 48% appear likely to support a ban on smacking of children aged under two. Forty-one per cent think it should remain legal to smack a child.
  - The main arguments advanced against the proposed ban are: that it would criminalise ‘ordinary’ parents who are already doing their best in difficult circumstances; that it would be better to put the resources into provision for children and families to reduce the stress that often creates problems; that the Executive should be finding ways of identifying and tackling ‘real’ child abuse rather than diverting resources into the policing of smacking; and that the legislation would be unworkable or impractical.
  - Opposition to the proposed legislation appears to be underpinned by a reluctance to view smacking as potentially abusive and by a commitment to the idea that parents should be largely free to decide how to bring up their own children.
  - Of those who currently smack under 3s, there was little evidence that parents would greatly modify their behaviour in response to a ban. Although some respondents did indicate that it might make them less likely to smack in a public place, as we have already seen, most physical chastisement takes place within the home.
  - There was far greater support for other aspects of the legislation, since these behaviours chime much more closely with most parents’ views of what constitutes abuse and, as such, are much less controversial as the subject of legislation and policing.
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## **F. Conclusions**

This final section of the report draws out and summarises some of the key themes emerging from the research.

### **Situating discussions about discipline and chastisement**

The first point to make is that to understand parental views and behaviours in relation to physical chastisement one needs to examine and appreciate the broader context of contemporary parenting and family life. It is clear that many parents feel that they are dealing with a range of competing pressures and that the tasks of parenting and disciplining are more difficult – and more closely judged and scrutinised – than for previous generations. In this context, the prospect of legislation against physical chastisement is seen by parents not only as depriving them of a ‘coping strategy’ but as failing to address more immediate pressures of parenting and work-life balance.

### **Inter-generational continuities and change**

Two points are worth making in relation to this theme. The first is that, regardless of the legislative position, we should not assume that attitudes and behaviours remain static over time. The research provides plenty of evidence to suggest that, in the course of a generation or so, there have been significant changes in the acceptability of many forms of physical chastisement and that, generally, such punishments are less common and less severe than they once were. But secondly, it also needs to be acknowledged that the specific use of smacking remains very common – up to eight out of ten children in the 3 to 5 age group have been smacked within the past year and around 1 in 5 in the last week. In other words, smacking remains deeply embedded in Scottish parenting culture.

### **Ambivalence in attitudes towards smacking**

If one is to accept at face value the media coverage (and, indeed, some of the existing research) on this topic, it would appear that the population divides neatly into those who oppose and those who support the use of smacking. In fact, this study has revealed a much more complex picture. Only a relatively small minority of Scottish parents have a strongly principled positive commitment to its use. By far the largest group express a much more muted and ambivalent support for it – one that recognises that smacking can have negative consequences and that there are better ways of dealing with most situations, but nevertheless concludes that sometimes children simply ‘need a smack’. This again suggests that – regardless of public views of the proposed legislation – there are potential

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points of contact for policies and arguments that seek to promote ‘positive alternatives’ to physical chastisement.

### **Smacking situations**

The research tells us a number of important things about typical situations in which parents smack. First, contrary perhaps to popular perception, parental use of smacking is overwhelmingly confined to private space. Only around 3% of incidents appear to take place in a genuinely public setting, such as at the supermarket or the play park. Given that parents say that they often already feel constrained in their use of physical punishments in public, but maintain that how they choose to parent at home is largely a matter for them, the scope for legislation to act on behaviour appears to be minimised.

Secondly, despite the fact that in seeking to defend or justify the practice parents frequently refer to the use of smacking to signal danger, the survey data indicate that, even for younger children, this was a factor in only around a third of incidents and that smacking is much more commonly used as a straightforward punishment for persistent or challenging behaviour.

Thirdly, although many parents hold that smacking should be used only in a controlled, measured and distanced fashion, typically, it is a much more highly charged interaction which often leaves parents feeling guilty or upset. Although the construction of smacking by parents as a tactic of ‘last resort’ gives the misleading impression that *no* other disciplinary choices are open to them, it nevertheless captures the sense of parents ‘at the end of their tether’. Again, one has to ask how amenable such responses are likely to be to modification through law alone.

Finally, the use of smacking in this context could be read as a way of parents reasserting power and control. It is worth noting, however, that – whatever the reality of the situation – parents themselves may actually feel powerless. Along with their perception of the degree of force used, this may partly explain why most parents do not make a connection between abuse and their own behaviour and why they are resistant to the idea that their behaviour needs to be subject to external regulation.

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### **Understanding of and attitudes towards the law**

Perhaps the most striking fact about public awareness and understanding of the current debates – apart from the sheer degree of confusion that recent media coverage has engendered – is that more than half of parents in Scotland believe it *already* to be illegal to smack either a child of any age or a child below a particular age. There was little evidence, however, that this belief had impacted on their behaviour.

When the current legislative position and the proposed changes were explained, around a half of parents indicated that they would support a ban on smacking if limited to children aged two and under. Whilst there was some evidence that the introduction of the legislation might reinforce an existing reluctance on the part of parents to smack their children in public places, most parents who currently smack indicated that they would continue to do so in their own homes if they thought it appropriate.

There was, however, much wider support for the other aspects of the legislation – relating to shaking, hitting around the face or head or use of an implement. Parents are not only much less likely to use such methods, they see them much more clearly as ‘abusive’. As long as a majority of parents see smacking as part of the standard repertoire of ‘normal’ or non-abusive parenting, it is unlikely that any proposals that draw on themes of prohibition, policing and enforcement will find widespread support.

### **Parenting culture, discipline and the state**

On this note, what can we conclude about the current state of Scottish parenting culture in relation to the issue of discipline? In discussion of these issues, parents were typically less concerned with children’s rights (the starting point for most anti-smacking arguments) than with an anxiety to protect the parental right to be able to choose how to discipline one’s own children. If the hope is that the introduction of legislation may act as a catalyst for cultural change, it will be important to understand – and address - the attitudes and beliefs that fuel current parental opposition. The above findings suggest that the legislation has the potential, at a time of heightened expectations about parenting, to be seen as a mechanism for reducing parental control without offering positive supports. A key message suggested by the research, therefore, is that any legislation needs to be explained and presented in a way which acknowledges the difficulties and pressures faced by contemporary parents and which situates issues of discipline in the broader context of support for families and questions of work-life balance.

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## Appendix A - Research methods

### Qualitative component

The purpose of the qualitative component of the project was to provide both breadth and depth to the research: breadth in terms of the *context* in which the disciplining of children takes place, and depth in terms of the *meaning* the issues have for parents. It was decided that the qualitative work should precede the survey element in order to ensure that the questionnaire comprehensively covered the relevant issues and that it was couched in appropriate language.

In recent years, focus groups have emerged as perhaps the most common method of exploring public attitudes within applied policy research. This approach certainly has important advantages – for example, some of the tension of the interviewer-respondent dynamic is dissolved and participants often challenge, develop or confirm each other's contributions. However, it can sometimes have significant limitations in relation to sensitive topics, as the group dynamic may inhibit as well as encourage openness in relation to some issues. Parenting can undoubtedly be a sensitive topic and we therefore decided to use a variety of qualitative interview methods as we anticipated that different aspects of the issues might emerge in different settings. The research therefore combined the use of focus groups with individual, paired depth and peer group interviews. Twenty interviews (five of each type) were conducted between March and April 2002.

#### *Conventional focus groups*

These consisted of 6-8 individuals, recruited using conventional face-to-face methods, and not known to each other in advance of the group. The aim was to achieve a high degree of homogeneity *within* each group (through segmentation based on age of child, sex and social class) but heterogeneity *across* the group sample as a whole.

#### *Paired depth interviews with couples*

We felt that there would be value in using paired interviews with couples, since there are often important gender divisions within households in terms of how issues of discipline are handled. In addition, the couples interviewed together were able to reflect on, build on and challenge each other's accounts.

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*Individual interviews with mothers/fathers*

Not all children are raised by two parents, of course, and there are particular issues for single parents that can be best explored in the context of an individual interview. Moreover, even within 'couple' households, some parents feel more comfortable discussing such issues without their spouse or partner being present.

*Peer group interviews*

An alternative to conventional focus group work, where participants are typically not known to each other in advance, is to convene 'peer groups'. For each peer group interview, we recruited a parent and ask them to recruit close friends or relatives with children of the same age. The advantage of this approach was that there was a certain level of existing trust within the group. It was also anticipated that participants' awareness of each other's lives would act as a check on the misrepresentation of views or behaviours.

All participants were recruited from the members of the general public by NFO System Three interviewers. The focus groups and peer groups took place in neutral venues such as a room in a pub or hotel. Most of the individual and couple interviews were conducted in the participants' own homes (one was conducted in a hotel). In keeping with standard research practice for work of this kind, all respondents were paid a small financial incentive to attend. The aim was to encourage participation by those who might not otherwise take part and to offset any childcare or travel costs incurred.

The structure of the sample is detailed below.

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Type of interview	Age of child	Area	Socio-economic group	Gender	Other
Conventional Focus Group	1- under 3	Edinburgh	ABC1	Female	
Conventional Focus Group	1- under 3	Glasgow	C2DE	Male	
Conventional Focus Group	3 - under 11	Argyll	Any	Male	
Conventional Focus Group	1- under 3	Inverness	Any	Female	
Conventional Focus Group	3- under 11	Dundee	C2DE	Male	
Peer Group	1- under 3	Glasgow	ABC1	Mixed	
Peer Group	3 - under 11	Edinburgh	C2DE	Female	Single Parents*
Peer Group	1- under 3	Argyll	Any	Female	
Peer Group	3 - under 11	Borders	Any	Mixed	
Peer Group	3 - under 11	Dundee	ABC1	Female	
Couple	1- under 3	Edinburgh	ABC1		
Couple	3 - under 11	Edinburgh	C2DE		
Couple	1- under 3	Glasgow	C2DE		
Couple	1 - under 3	Inverness	Any		
Couple	3 - under 11	Argyll	Any		
Individual	3 - under 11	Inverness	ABC1	Male	
Individual	1 - under 3	Edinburgh	C2DE	Male	
Individual	1 - under 3	Borders	Any	Female	
Individual	3 - under 11	Edinburgh	ABC1	Female	
Individual	3 - under 11	Glasgow	C2DE	Female	Single Parent*

\*Other than for the interviews with couples, there was no restriction on whether parents were single parents or not. However, to ensure that single parents *were* included, we selected a single parent as the "lead" member of one of the peer groups and for one of the individual interviews.

The discussion moderators/interviewers were Simon Anderson, Lorraine Murray and Chris Martin of NFO System Three Social Research and Dr Julie Brownlie of Stirling University. The general content and flow of the discussions were dictated by the participants themselves, within the framework of a series of topics introduced by the moderator/interviewer. The topics included:

- General orientation towards young people and issues of discipline
- Own experience of parental discipline as a child
- Assessment of the effectiveness and impact of that experience
- Perceptions of the prevalence of use of different forms of physical chastisement among friends and peers, and in society at large

- Perceptions of the relative effectiveness and impact of different forms of physical and non-physical chastisement
- Situations/circumstances in which different forms of physical chastisement considered acceptable and unacceptable
- Use of different forms of physical and non-physical chastisement in relation to own children
- Attitudes towards the role of the state and the appropriateness of legislation in relation to various forms of chastisement

A variety of techniques were used to try to desensitise the issue and normalise particular attitudes and behaviours. These included asking people to reflect on their own experiences as a child, asking about what they thought of other people's attitudes and behaviours. We also anticipated using scenarios to ask how people thought they would be *likely* to react in particular circumstances. In practice, we found that these were rarely necessary as most participants were very willing to talk openly about the forms of discipline they had used in different situations.

With the consent of participants, the discussions were tape-recorded for subsequent transcription. NUD\*IST N5 (a qualitative analysis software package) was used to organise, code, search and retrieve the text.

### **Quantitative component**

The quantitative element of the study consisted of a nationally-representative, probability sample of parents in Scotland. In total, 692 interviews were completed during the period May-August 2002. All interviewing took place in respondents' homes and was carried out by members of the NFO System Three fieldforce using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing (CAPI).

#### *Data collection methods and instruments*

The questionnaire for the survey was developed by the NFO System Three team in collaboration with the Scottish Executive. A small pilot exercise (based on 20 interviews) was carried out in early April 2002 and was used to test issues of wording, question order, acceptability and comprehension. The questionnaire used a mix of interviewer-administered sections and Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (CASI), with the latter used primarily for questions about behaviours and experiences. The final script took on average 30 minutes to administer and covered a range of topics, including:

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- Perceptions of how common the use of physical chastisement is among friends or family with children of the same age
- Prevalence and perceptions of the use of different forms of chastisement by respondents' own parents
- Use of different forms of chastisement with own child, ever, in the last year and in the last week
- Details of characteristics and circumstances of the most recent occasion on which they used some form of physical chastisement
- Sources of knowledge, information and advice about parenting and issue of discipline
- General orientations towards smacking and perceptions of its appropriateness in different situations and for children of different ages
- Understanding of the current legal situation regarding physical chastisement and awareness and understanding of the proposed legislation
- Attitudes towards the various elements of the proposed legislation

The questions on the prevalence of different types of behaviours drew on the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale, developed in the United States by Strauss *et al* (1998) and on its subsequent modification by the Policy Research Bureau/NSPCC/National Centre for Social Research for use in their ESRC-funded study in Britain (see Finch and Ghate, 2001).

A copy of the full questionnaire is available from the research team upon request from the Scottish Executive.

Because of the relative complexity of the sampling approach and the potential sensitivity of the topic, all interviewers working on the survey attended one of three personal briefings held in late April 2002.

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### *Sample design*

The survey was based on a multi-stage probability sampling design, with addresses drawn from the Postcode Address File and 'screened' for households containing children/parents. This is a relatively common technique when sampling populations for whom no separate sampling frame exists, but it is dependent on the target population being relatively prevalent within the household population as a whole. Since only around 28% of households in Scotland were expected to contain children, this meant that – across the issued sample as a whole – interviewers would need to visit almost four households for every one at which they could attempt to secure an interview.

Of course, in some areas, the proportion of households containing children was expected to be higher than 28% and, in others, lower. Consequently, different numbers of addresses were issued per sampling point, depending on indications from Census data about the proportions of households within each containing parents/children. The sampling interval was also varied in order to ensure that, in areas of low density of the target population, interviewers were not faced with large distances between eligible addresses. Overall, the objective was to issue interviewers with addresses that would contain broadly equal numbers of eligible households.

Within each eligible household containing more than one parent, one was selected for interview at random using a Kish Grid.

To summarise, the sampling had the following stages:

- Sampling frame definition – For reasons of fieldwork efficiency all postcode sectors with less than 23.33% of households with children were excluded from the sampling frame.
  - Selection of postcode sectors - 90 postcode sectors were then stratified by old Scottish Region and the Scottish MOSAIC geo-demographic classification and selected with probability proportionate to the number of households containing children.
  - Selection of addresses within selected postcode sectors - Addresses within postcode sectors were sorted by postcode. The first address within each postcode sector was taken as a starting point and the number of addresses then selected and the sampling interval used varied by area according to Census information about likely population.
  - Selection of individuals for interview within households – Within any household identified as containing children/parents, a short screening exercise was carried out to establish the number of eligible respondents and to select one, at random, for interview.
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*Fieldwork and response rates*

At the end of fieldwork, 692 interviews had been achieved. Because it was necessary to continue fieldwork until the last possible moment in order to maximise the sample size, many of the field progress forms (known as contact sheets) have not yet been returned by interviewers, making it impossible to calculate final response rates at the time of publication.

Interim calculations, however, suggest a response rate in the range 50-55%. Although this is lower than for many household surveys, it reflects the peculiar difficulties associated with the screening exercise and the problems of persuading fathers to participate. Moreover, the likelihood of significant non-response bias is likely to be less than in surveys of the general population, in which the non-availability of younger people for interview tends to skew final results.

The data have been weighted to correct for unequal probabilities of selection for respondents in households containing different numbers of parents and to correct the gender imbalance in the achieved sample (using information about the composition of Scottish households from the Scottish Household Survey).

	Unweighted data		Weighted data	
	n	%	n	%
Single parents	174	2.0	92	13.3
Parent in couple	518	26.3	600	86.7
Total	692	100.0	692	100.0
Male	196	28.3	277	40.1
Female	496	71.7	415	59.9
Total	692	100.0	692	100.0

Once the relevant fieldwork materials are returned, a more detailed Technical Report on the survey will be prepared and be available upon request from the Scottish Executive.

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