

Smacking Debate

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

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

FULL REPORT
June 2008

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

NICCY
northern ireland commissioner
for children and young people

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

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Executive Summary

INTRODUCTION - POLICY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

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

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

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

Legislative reform has gone down different routes in different jurisdictions. Currently in Scotland it is illegal to hit children with implements, shake them or hit them on the head. In England, Wales and, more recently, Northern Ireland, the defence of reasonable chastisement has been removed for more serious assaults on children but is retained for the offence of common assault (known as Section 58). Alongside this legislative change, the Welsh Assembly has developed a 'parent action plan' which states that it believes smacking is

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

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

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

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

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

REVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

Review methodology

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

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

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

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

Prevalence of physical discipline

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

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

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

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

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

Factors which influence physical discipline use

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

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

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

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

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

The outcomes of physical discipline use

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

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

such as conscience development and positive behaviours and feelings.

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

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

Views and attitudes toward physical discipline

Although physical discipline is common practice,

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

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

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

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

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

PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland literature

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

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

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

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

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

Northern Ireland survey methodology

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

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

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

Key survey findings

Discipline use in Northern Ireland

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

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

Parental perceptions of outcomes

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

Emotional context of physical discipline

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

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

Sources of information on alternatives to discipline

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

Conclusion and recommendations

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

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

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

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

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

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

RECOMMENDATIONS

Universal Provision

Educative Legislative Change

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

A Public Parent Education Awareness/Information campaign

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

Professional Training and Guidance

In addition to information resources providing clear and consistent positive parenting messages, it is essential that professionals themselves also provide a consistent approach. Professional bodies and associations for those working with children and families need to provide a clear steer with regard to their position on positive parenting and physical discipline, through explicit policies which do not

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

condone the use of physical discipline. Training for these professionals, both pre and post-qualifying, should include coverage of positive parenting and the alternatives to physical discipline use. Such training might also usefully encourage examination of individual views and consideration of how they might impact on practice. Equally, the development of guidance for professionals on how to approach and discuss this issue is also likely to be important given the sensitivities and difficulties around the subject matter.

Parent Education Programmes

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

Targeted Provision

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

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

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

FUTURE RESEARCH AND INFORMATION NEEDS

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

Foreword

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

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

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



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Introduction – Policy and Research Context

BACKGROUND

The 'smacking debate', as it has been popularly conceptualised in the media and political circles across the UK, including Northern Ireland, can be a highly emotive and contentious one. For some people, smacking is considered a parental right and a necessary means of teaching children right from wrong, while for others it is a harmful practice which violates children's rights and legitimises the use of violence. The term 'smacking' itself, means different things to different people and is used to cover a broad range of punitive and disciplinary behaviours ranging anywhere from a 'wee tap on the hand', a 'slap round the back of the legs', to a 'cuff round the head'. There are also a variety of interpretations as to what constitutes acceptable parental disciplinary practice and where the line between discipline and abuse is drawn, making consensus especially difficult. The aim of this introductory section is to look at the different perspectives on physical punishment, in particular: the children's rights perspective and the range of research perspectives identified in the literature as well as UK legislative and policy developments. It then sets out the positions of the three commissioning organisations and discusses the research aims, definitions and terminology within this context.

A children's rights perspective

The increasing international prominence and acceptance of children's rights, as witnessed by the almost wholesale ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), has been central to the smacking debate.

While the UNCRC itself does not specifically reference smacking per se, a number of Articles within the Convention are of clear relevance to the debate. Article 19 outlines States' obligations to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child". The relevance of this Article to the smacking debate is further clarified by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, a body set up to offer guidance on the implementation of and monitor State compliance with, the Articles of the UNCRC. Commenting on the intent behind Article 19

specifically in relation to corporal punishment, they state:

"There is no ambiguity: "all forms of physical or mental violence" does not leave room for any level of legalized violence against children. Corporal punishment and other cruel or degrading forms of punishment are forms of violence and States must take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to eliminate them" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.8 2006:para 14).

The UN Committee's definition of corporal punishment encompasses a much broader range of behaviours and actions than simply 'smacking', including:

"Any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light. Most involves hitting ('smacking', 'slapping', 'spanking') children, with the hand or with an implement – whip, stick,

belt, shoe, wooden spoon, etc. But it can also involve, for example, kicking, shaking or throwing children, scratching, pinching, biting, pulling hair or boxing ears, forcing children to stay in uncomfortable positions, burning, scalding or forced ingestion (for example, washing children's mouths out with soap or forcing them to swallow hot spices)" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.8 2006: para 11).

Other Articles of the UNCRC of direct relevance to the smacking debate include Article 37 which requires States to ensure that no child shall be subjected to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. It is the view of the Committee that corporal punishment is invariably degrading. Article 3 also states that in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration and Article 4 stipulates States' obligation to take "all appropriate" actions to translate the rights of the Convention into reality.

Taken together, these Articles and subsequent commentary by the Committee on the spirit behind the text, unambiguously "recognise the right of the child to respect for the child's human dignity and physical integrity and equal protection under the law" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.8: para 2). It is the Committee's unambiguous position that no exceptions or exemptions should exist in law, with regard to the protection of children from physical assault. The Committee explicitly comments on the continued existence of provisions that allow some degree of violence against children (e.g. "reasonable" or "moderate" chastisement or correction) in their homes/families or any other setting, stating that adherence to the Convention demands the removal of any such provisions.

This point is also clearly reiterated by the United Nations Study on Violence against Children, a

worldwide study commissioned by the UN General Assembly in 2001 in response to grave concerns regarding the continued use of violence against children within a variety of settings, including the home. Though recognising that "eliminating and responding to violence against children is perhaps most challenging in the context of the family, considered by many to be the most "private" of spheres", the Study clearly concludes that "children's rights to life, survival, development, dignity and physical integrity do not stop at the door of the family home, nor do States' obligations to ensure these rights for children" (Pinheiro, P. S. (2006)).

"No violence against children is justifiable; all violence against children is preventable. Yet...in every region, in contradiction to human rights obligations and children's developmental needs, violence against children is socially approved and is frequently legal and State-authorized. [This] should mark a turning point – an end to adult justification of violence against children, whether accepted as "tradition" or disguised as "discipline". There can be no compromise in challenging violence against children. Children's uniqueness – their potential and vulnerability, their dependence on adults – makes it imperative that they have more, not less, protection from violence" (UN Study on Violence against Children 2006:4).

Proponents of continued exemptions in law, with regard to the use of physical discipline within the home, often cite Article 3 – 'the best interests of the child' – as part of their defence. This 'spare the rod, spoil the child' defence argues that the use of physical means of discipline is necessary to educate a child in right and wrong and, therefore, ultimately in their 'best interests'. The UNCRC Committee recognise the existence of this argument but do not in any way accept it, clarifying that "interpretation of a child's best interests must be consistent with the whole Convention, including the obligation to

protect children from all forms of violence and the requirement to give due weight to the child's views; it cannot be used to justify practices, including corporal punishment and other forms of cruel or degrading punishment, which conflict with the child's human dignity and right to physical integrity" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.8:para 26).

In emphasising the need for full protection under the law, the Committee further states:

"It is clear that the practice directly conflicts with the equal and inalienable rights of children to respect for their human dignity and physical integrity. The distinct nature of children, their initial dependent and developmental state, their unique human potential as well as their vulnerability, all demands the need for more, rather than less, legal and other protection from all forms of violence" (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment No.8: para 21).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child is not alone in its condemnation of the continued existence of legal exemptions with regard to the physical discipline of children within the home environment and the Council of Europe has also condemned such exemptions as a clear breach of children's rights and the principle of equal protection under the law. Calling for a Europe-wide ban on corporal punishment of children in 2004, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stated that:

"Any corporal punishment of children is in breach of their fundamental right to human dignity and physical integrity. The fact that such corporal punishment is still lawful in certain member states violates their equally fundamental right to the same legal protection as adults. The social and legal acceptance of corporal punishment of children must be ended"

(Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Recommendation 1666, 2004)

As illustrated above, from a children's rights perspective, children have the right to be protected from all forms of physical force or violence, without exception, as is the right of every adult in the UK. Nonetheless, calls for an outright ban on the use of smacking and other forms of physical punishment within the traditionally private sphere of the home have caused concern amongst some sectors regarding a potential wave of prosecutions of parents and carers. The Committee is equally clear that this is not its intent in calling for an outright ban, as it explains in paragraph 40 of United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment No.8 (2006):

"The principle of equal protection of children and adults from assault, including within the family, does not mean that all cases of corporal punishment of children by their parents that come to light should lead to prosecution of parents. The de minimis principle – that the law does not concern itself with trivial matters – ensures that minor assaults between adults only come to court in very exceptional circumstances; the same will be true of minor assaults of children...While all reports of violence against children should be appropriately investigated and their protection from significant harm assured, the aim should be to stop parents from using violent or other cruel or degrading punishments through supportive and educational, not punitive, interventions".

Research perspectives

In addition to the children's rights perspective on physical punishment there are a number of research based arguments and positions which have developed and contributed to the smacking debate. Benjet & Kazdin (2003) usefully identify three key positions:

1] Anti-corporal punishment position

This view is based on social learning theory where physical punishment is seen as influencing future negative outcomes through the modelling of violence and teaching that inflicting pain on others is acceptable (McCord, 1996). Supporters argue that any form of violence towards a child, including spanking, is harmful for short and long-term development (e.g. Straus, 1994) and that the consequences can increase child aggression, criminality, behaviour problems and mental health problems. This stance also has a strong moral position which holds that inflicting pain on others should be discouraged (Graziano et al, 1996).

2] Conditional corporal punishment position

This position holds that a ban on physical punishment is not supported from the scientific evidence base and that the effects of spanking are not necessarily negative or positive; the outcome depends on many other conditions and could be either. For example, under certain conditions, studies have found that a mild spank between the ages of 2–6 as a back-up to other alternatives is an effective component of a discipline strategy and does not contribute to negative child outcomes (Larzelere, 2000).

3] Pro-corporal discipline position

This position holds that spanking is beneficial and to fail to spank would be detrimental (Smith, 2003). Proponents view spanking as a method of teaching respect for authority and believe it is parental failure to use physical punishment (rather than parental use) which has contributed to societal discord and violence. Although rarely found in research and academic writing, Benjet & Kazdin (2003) state that this position is readily found in lay recommendations and advice to parents and that it is a deeply held belief by many in the population in general.

Whilst there is considerable disagreement between these three positions, the weight placed on research evidence is a common thread. This is more

pertinent to the anti and conditional corporal punishment perspectives as the pro-corporal punishment position echoes the 'spare the rod and spoil the child' defence but is rarely found in academic literature because of the limited evidence to support it. As with the children's rights position, the anti-corporal punishment position considers all forms of physical punishment to be wrong but differs in the reasoning behind this conclusion. The anti-corporal punishment position is grounded in an understanding that research has shown the use of physical punishment, including smacking, to be associated with a range of negative outcomes. However, the children's rights perspective, whilst making use of research evidence, is not reliant on it; it is based on the understanding that the practice of physically hitting a child to ensure their compliance is wrong and a violation of their rights as set out under the UNCRC.

Another key aspect of different research perspectives is the use of different definitions. This in itself is a cause of controversy, with terms such as physical punishment, physical discipline, corporal punishment, smacking, spanking and slapping often being used as distinctly separate practices or interchangeably within the research literature. For example, some are in agreement that 'spanking' is a subset of the broader category of corporal punishment and stress the importance of distinguishing mild to moderate physical discipline from physical abuse and harsher forms of punishment (Baumrind et al, 2002). In contrast, the definition developed by Straus (1994) and used extensively by many researchers, shares more in common with the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child definition, by focusing on the much broader concept of 'physical force':

"Corporal punishment is the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to experience pain but not injury for the purposes of correction or control of the child's behaviour" (Straus, 1994:4)

Proponents of the Straus definition tend to view spanking as an act of violence along a continuum of violence, a view which has drawn criticism from some quarters (Benjet & Kadzin, 2003; Larzelere, 2000; Baumrind et al, 2002) for being unclear about the boundaries between physical punishment, harsh/excessive physical punishment and physical abuse. Nevertheless many researchers defend this approach by highlighting the difficulty in adequately distinguishing between injurious and non-injurious physical discipline. They emphasise the importance of keeping a broad perspective on the issue because real life disciplinary practices cover a wide range of behaviours and actions, arguing that for research to focus exclusively on 'spanking' would deny the reality of other forms of physical discipline and their potential impact on children.

UK legislative and policy developments

Given the disparate perspectives evident, it is unsurprising that debate around the use of physical discipline has been ongoing in the UK for over the last decade. Although the UK ratified the UNCRC in 1991, it has not followed the example of the 23 other countries which have taken steps to comply with the UNCRC by introducing some form of legislative ban. The UK is not alone in its non-compliance and all American states, with the exception of Minnesota, still regard physical discipline as a defence to the charge of assaulting a

child. Likewise, physical discipline is also permitted under Section 43 of the Canadian Criminal Code. Although the Canadian Supreme Court recently upheld a parent's right to use "reasonable force" against children, it did state this was only acceptable against children aged 2-12.

The UK has been heavily criticised by the UN Committee (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 1995 & 2002) as the Convention requires removal of any provisions that allow some degree of violence against children (e.g. "reasonable" or "moderate" chastisement or correction) in their homes/families or in any other setting (UNCRC General Comment No.8:para 31). Since the millennium, all UK jurisdictions have undertaken public consultation on the issue of physical punishment. The Scottish Executive produced a consultation paper in 2000 and, on the back of this, the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 2003 was implemented, introducing the concept of justifiable assault on children but banning blows to the head, shaking and hitting with implements. Also in 2000, the Department of Health (DoH) in England and Wales issued a consultation paper which acknowledged the need for change in the area of child physical punishment, but considered a complete ban unnecessary. The consultation provoked a diverse range of views but led the DoH to conclude that no further change in the law was

Children are protected by law from all corporal punishment in the following 23 states:

- Sweden (1979)
- Austria (1989)
- Latvia (1998)
- Germany (2000)
- Romania (2004)
- Greece (2006)
- New Zealand (2007)
- Chile (2007)
- Finland (1983)
- Cyprus (1994)
- Croatia (1999)
- Israel (2000)
- Ukraine (2004)
- Netherlands (2007)
- Uruguay (2007)
- Spain (2007)
- Norway (1987)
- Denmark (1997)
- Bulgaria (2000)
- Iceland (2003)
- Hungary (2005)
- Portugal (2007)
- Venezuela (2007)

*Italy: The Supreme Court declared all corporal punishment to be unlawful in 1996, however this has not yet been confirmed in legislation.

required at the time and that the current defence of reasonable chastisement should remain.

However, the advent of the Children Bill in 2004 reopened the debate resulting in legislative change in the form of Section 58 of the subsequent Children Act 2004. While not banning physical punishment outright, the new legislation means that the defence of reasonable chastisement is only available for the lowest charge of common assault and not for offences such as wounding, assault occasioning actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm or cruelty to a child. The Welsh Assembly appears to have gone a step further and developed a 'parent action plan' which states that it believes that smacking is wrong and that it will continue to promote positive parenting (Welsh Assembly Government, 2005). However, there have been no similar developments in England and debates within the House of Lords about the practicality of Section 58 have raised questions as to how exactly parents are expected to gauge the exact force and velocity they can use without causing a bruise or other injury (HL Deb 2005-6, 678 Col 991-992). Peers have also argued that the new legislation is likely to create more public and professional confusion about what levels and types of physical punishment are acceptable or not, particularly when the definition of 'smacking' and 'normal practice' means different things to different people.

Equally, in June 2006 the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights expressed concern in relation to the invention of special legal concepts such as Section 58 in place of imposing a full ban. In addition, in its recent General Comment No.8, the UN Committee reminded all State parties that they had an "immediate and unqualified obligation" to "move quickly to prohibit and eliminate all corporal punishment and all other cruel or degrading forms of punishment of children", while at the same time outlining the legislative and other awareness-raising measures that States must take. They reiterated the point that, while Article 19 does not

explicitly refer to physical punishment, there is no ambiguity to be found in the words of Article 19 when it says the child has the right to be protected from all forms of physical violence (i.e. no room for legalised violence).

As in other UK jurisdictions, on this topic Northern Ireland has also witnessed public consultation, carried out by the Office of Law Reform (OLR) in 2001. This consultation found divided views between individuals, organisations and health professionals, with some arguing the law enabling parents to physically punish their children should be maintained and others that there should be an outright ban on smacking. While the OLR consultation did not result in full legal reform, Article 2 of the Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) (NI) Order 2006 has extended the same provision contained in Section 58 of the Children Act 2005 to Northern Ireland, bringing it in line with England and Wales. The introduction of this Order has been underpinned by ongoing work on positive parenting via the establishment of the Inter Disciplinary Group on Positive Parenting (IDGPP) under the approval of the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People. Consisting of representatives from across Government and the voluntary/community sector, the Group has undertaken a number of initiatives, including the publication of 'Top Tips for Parents – Your Guide to Positive Parenting' and 'Top Tips for Parenting Teenagers – Your Guide to Positive Parenting'.

Project aims and organisational context

Recent debates and policy developments across the UK and Northern Ireland clearly make physical punishment a timely and topical issue to examine in greater depth, taking account of the differing perspectives illustrated above. In terms of their own positions on physical punishment, NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) all take a children's rights perspective, believing that all forms of physical violence towards children are wrong and actively seeking legislative reform in this area. However, the

organisations seek educative rather than punitive legislative change which will not result in the trivial prosecutions of parents/carers and which will involve support and advice to parents on positive parenting strategies.

Whilst taking a children's rights perspective, the three organisations still consider research evidence to be a key element in further developing policy and practice in this area. To this end, the organisations commissioned a broad ranging review of the international research evidence relating to physical punishment with the aim of better understanding its prevalence, the factors which influence its use, associated outcomes for children and the views and attitudes held by parents, children and professionals. This review was undertaken by researchers employed internally within the three organisations who worked on the project from January 2005 to August 2006.

In conjunction with the review, several areas of primary research with the Northern Ireland population emerged and the research project was expanded to include a prevalence survey of physical punishment use by parents in Northern Ireland. This was considered essential in providing a baseline for physical punishment use in the region from which to monitor changes in practice and attitudes over time and to inform government policy, particularly in the context of legal reform.

Research definitions and language

From the outset it was clear that the review encompassed a wide range of literature which looked at a variety of different practices and behaviours. NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) utilise the broad definition of physical force outlined in the UNCRC and conceptually define smacking as part of a continuum of violence rather than a discreet and distinct practice. As such, the review encompassed a wide range of disciplinary practices rather than concentrating specifically on smacking or spanking.

A variety of terminology was evident, with a considerable number of different terms used across research studies and even within individual studies. NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) all consider the use of language in this area to be an important issue and are of the view that the term physical punishment more accurately reflects the use of physical force with children, whilst the term physical discipline might potentially be construed as normalising this behaviour and giving it a degree of respectability. However, the term physical discipline was adopted for research purposes as a generic expression to cover a range of terms which are frequently used to refer to this issue, such as physical punishment, corporal punishment, corporal discipline, smacking, spanking and hitting. The core rationale for the application of this terminology is directly related to its use within the survey element of the research. Given the sensitive nature of the questions contained within the survey and the need to encourage honest responses, it was felt that the term physical discipline provided a broad catch-all which did not have the same negative connotations of the term physical punishment or the association with educational settings of the term corporal punishment. Physical discipline is therefore used throughout the rest of report in order to provide consistency and clarity in reporting and enabling comparisons and conclusions to be drawn between the two elements of the research using the same language.

Whilst few studies included in the review provide an explicit definition of physical discipline, many use standardised research measures such as the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or the updated Conflict Tactics Scale Parent to Child version (CTSPC) to measure the prevalence of a range of disciplinary behaviours in parent populations. The CTS also attempts to provide some sort of framework for examining the different degrees of discipline used by parents by categorising certain types of physical discipline use as 'ordinary' or 'minor' and others as 'severe' physical discipline or assault. As previously

discussed, this can be a contentious area and it can be argued that there is no clear line between physical discipline and abuse and that any attempt to draw one is arbitrary and subjective. Whilst this is inevitably the case, there remains a need for researchers to use some form of measurement which recognises the different behaviours parents engage in and the different risks these might pose to children. The use of this terminology throughout the report reflects the ways in which the research community have attempted to address methodological concerns and lack of consistency with regard to the available research in this field. As such, it should be understood that these categorisations are research defined rather than organisationally defined.

The Conflict Tactics Scale

The original CTS was developed by Straus (1973) to measure partner and family violence. However, it has also been extensively used to investigate child abuse in a variety of different countries and in numerous research settings (Straus et al, 2003), including general population surveys conducted by telephone. In 1998 the CTS was revised and updated by Straus et al and became known as the CTSPC. The core of the CTSPC measure consists of 22 self report items that ask about the frequency of specific non-violent and violent parent-child interactions that have occurred in the past year (Straus et al, 2003). These 22 items are grouped into three scales which measure:

- Non-violent discipline
- Psychological aggression
- Physical assault/discipline (minor, severe and extreme).

This enables the identification of not only the lifetime and past year prevalence rates of a range of disciplinary tactics, but the frequency with which they have been used by parents.

Report structure

Section 1 of this report presents the findings from the international literature review. Given the policy position of the three organisations, a very transparent methodological approach to the review was adopted, an approach outlined at the beginning of this section. Some of the research issues that needed to be considered when evaluating the literature on physical discipline are also discussed, followed by an examination of the international prevalence of physical discipline, the factors which influence its use, the impact of physical discipline on children and what the research tells us about the views and attitudes of parents, children and professionals.

Section 2 looks specifically at physical discipline in Northern Ireland, discussing what we know from previous research and identifying what still needs to be the subject of future research. It also details the methodology used for the Northern Ireland Physical Discipline Prevalence Study and presents the survey results, discussing how they relate to previous local and international research. The report concludes with an overview of key findings and recommendations which we hope will provide the basis for informed debate and future policy development, as well as further research.

SECTION ONE

International Literature Review

1.1 REVIEW METHODOLOGY

Key Points

- The review aimed to answer three research questions:
 - 1] What is the prevalence of different types of physical discipline and what are the associated characteristics and risk factors related to its use?
 - 2] What is the impact of physical discipline on outcomes for children?
 - 3] What are the views, attitudes and beliefs of parents, professionals and children towards physical discipline?
- A broad search strategy was adopted and a range of academic and research databases searched.
- The review focused on journal articles published between 2000 and 2005 and on Western and European populations.
- A total of 138 articles were obtained for in-depth review.
- The journal review was supplemented by relevant voluntary sector and government reports.
- The review attempts to take account of: the definition and measurement of physical discipline and related child outcomes; study design and data analysis and the ability to make causal links; and how other potentially contributory or confounding factors that could account for an association are controlled for in the study.

RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The use of research to develop evidence-based policy positions has been central to the physical discipline debate and a wide range of studies have been completed which have informed this. NICCY, NSPCC (NI) and Barnardo's (NI) undertook to carry out a review of this research literature in order to inform organisational and broader Northern Ireland policy development and identify current research gaps. Although a number of previous reviews had examined the impact of physical discipline, they tended to reach conflicting conclusions and support different perspectives. Equally, although an in-depth understanding of the factors which influence physical discipline use is central to developing and targeting prevention initiatives, comprehensive examination of these factors had been limited. Likewise, research highlighting what is known about the views and attitudes different groups such

as parents, professionals and children themselves hold towards physical discipline was also scarce. As such, key research questions to be answered were identified as:

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

SEARCH STRATEGY AND INCLUSION/ EXCLUSION CRITERIA

In order to ensure adequate coverage of a wide range of literature, a broad search strategy was adopted. This involved a variety of searches of

research/academic databases using the search terms 'physical discipline', 'physical punishment', 'corporal punishment' and 'smacking'. The databases searched were:

- Web of Science (WOS)
- PSYCHINFO
- BIDS
- PubMed
- Care Data.

Initial scoping searches produced a large quantity of references. In order to make the review manageable it was decided to limit the time period for publication to 2000–2005 (Exclusion criteria 1, see

Appendix 1 for inclusion/exclusion criteria). This time period was selected as the most appropriate as the debate on physical discipline, as previously discussed, while ongoing for many years, has gathered momentum since the millennium. In addition, in Scotland, England and Wales, legislation was enacted in this time period limiting the defence of reasonable chastisement in certain circumstances.

As such, it was considered that this time period would reflect this heightened interest and accumulation of knowledge, as well as providing an overview of the most up-to-date and current research findings. Equally, this review time period would also include a number of systematic reviews

Table 1.1: Search terms and results from database searches

Database	Search terms	Initial no. of hits	Duplicates	No. of articles excluded under criteria 3	No. of articles excluded under criteria 4	Total for in-depth review
WOS	'corporal punishment' or 'physical punishment' or 'physical discipline' or 'smacking'. Limited to 2000–2005, English language, article.	181	N/A	65	20	96
PSYCHINFO	'corporal punishment' or 'physical punishment' or 'physical discipline' or 'smacking'. Limited to 2000–2005, English language, human subject, journal or peer reviewed journal.	159 (originally 165 but 6 refs not within time period)	97	28	4	30

BIDS	'corporal punishment' or 'physical punishment' or 'physical discipline' or 'smacking'. Limited to 2000–2005, English language, article.	48	28	9	2	9
PUBMED	'corporal punishment' or 'physical punishment' or 'physical discipline' or 'smacking'. Limited to 2000–2005, English, human subject (PubMed includes articles only).	110	94	14	2	0
Care Data	'corporal punishment' or 'physical punishment' or 'physical discipline' or 'smacking'. Limited to 2000–2005, articles only).	47 (Originally 50 but 3 were articles from professional magazines)				
TOTAL	NA	545	250	128	29	138

which include studies dating back several decades, thus ensuring coverage of relevant research outside the review time period.

Decisions were also taken to limit the review by publication type by excluding all other publications except journal articles (Exclusion criteria 2). Journal articles are subject to peer review, while other publications, often referred to as 'grey literature', usually do not undergo such a process. By including journal articles only, the review could be said to focus on 'high quality' research findings which had received validation from other researchers and experts in the field. However, this is not to say that high quality and valuable research is not available in other publication types and would not have proved useful to the review. In recognition of this, it was decided that the in-depth review should be

supplemented by a smaller, selective review of relevant reports from government, the voluntary sector and other sources of 'grey' literature (see 'grey' literature search section for details).

Other exclusion criteria applied to the review included the exclusion of papers not considered relevant to answering the research questions (Exclusion criteria 3) and papers which focused on research with non-Western and European populations (Exclusion criteria 4). While the use of criteria 3 is self-explanatory, the inclusion of Western and European journal articles only was not based on time management considerations alone, but also on the understanding that commonalities in the culture and/or language of these countries was likely to make the findings from these papers more applicable within a UK context.

Where possible, Exclusion criteria 1 and 2 were applied electronically when carrying out the initial searches across the five research databases and the same search terms and keywords used (see Table 1.1). This resulted in the identification of 548 potentially relevant research articles, although the PSYCHINFO search retrieved 6 articles outside the time limits which, when excluded, reduced this figure to 545. A total of 250 retrieved references were duplicates, leaving 295 remaining articles. The titles and abstracts of these articles were reviewed simultaneously by two researchers and a further 157 were excluded at this stage: 128 because they had no or very limited relevance to the research questions (Exclusion criteria 3); and 29 because they involved research with non-Western and European countries (Exclusion criteria 4).

CATEGORISING AND ASSIGNING ARTICLES TO REVIEWERS

From their titles and abstracts, the remaining 138 references were then categorised according to each of the three research questions they were considered relevant to and copies obtained for in-depth review.

Each of the three reviewers was then assigned a number of articles to review. Those which appeared relevant to the research questions on prevalence/characteristics and parental/child/professional views and attitudes were reviewed together as it was apparent that there was considerable overlap between the two areas. A total of 92 references fell into this category and were evenly split between two reviewers. There was also an overlap between these articles and those which appeared relevant to the impact/outcome question, with the third reviewer being assigned a total of 69 articles for in-depth review. This approach was taken rather than splitting the articles evenly between reviewers, as it was envisaged that each reviewer would be responsible for reporting on the review findings for a particular research question in the final report. In

this way, reviewers were able to familiarise themselves with the bulk of articles which were pertinent to their particular research questions.

IN-DEPTH REVIEW

In order to facilitate a standardised approach to the review process, a database was developed which provided a brief data extraction form to be completed for each article (see Appendix 2). This form not only gathered key publication and research details but also asked the reviewers to consider the extent to which the paper was relevant to the research questions they were considering. This took the form of a four-point scale:

- 1 = No relevance
- 2 = Limited relevance
- 3 = Moderate relevance
- 4 = Highly relevant.

In addition to rating the relevance to their own research questions, reviewers were also asked to categorise the papers in terms of relevance to the other research questions. This ensured that relevant information which may have been missed at the initial categorisation stage was appropriately included. Via this process an additional two articles were identified as relevant to answering research question one. Papers that were assigned a moderate or high degree of relevance were then considered for inclusion within the final synthesis. As the review included studies which used a wide range of research methods and techniques, the data extraction form did not include an assessment of research 'quality'; instead reviewers were asked to consider the strengths and limitations of the research designs.

GOVERNMENT AND VOLUNTARY SECTOR REPORTS AND OTHER 'GREY' LITERATURE

The in-depth review of journal articles was supplemented by a number of government and voluntary sector reports, as well as other literature relevant to the research questions. This facilitated inclusion of valuable research which had not been

published in journal format. Internal libraries and the researchers' own knowledge of research within this field was considered sufficient for this task. 'Grey' literature was included in the review where it provided additional information not included in the journal review or brought a fresh perspective to the debate. For example, much of the qualitative research on children and young people's views toward physical discipline has been carried out and published by the voluntary sector.

RESEARCH CONSIDERATIONS

Interpretation of the research literature relating to physical discipline is not always straightforward and there are a number of issues which need to be considered when reviewing work in this area. As noted in the introduction, how physical discipline is defined has important implications for the scope of behaviour examined in the study, with those adopting a broad definition reporting on a much wider range of behaviours than those focusing on much narrower definitions. While few studies included in the review adopted an explicit definition of physical discipline, many used measures of physical discipline which encompassed specific behaviours, such as the original Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) or the updated Conflict Tactics Scale Parent to Child version (CTSPC) to measure the prevalence and frequency of a number of disciplinary tactics

How child outcomes are measured is an equally important concern given that much of the research in this field attempts to link physical discipline use within a range of different child outcomes. In order to measure difficult child behaviour, many of the studies in this review employed either the Behaviour Problems Index (BPI) [Zill & Peterson, 1990] or the Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) developed by Achenbach (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983; Achenbach, 1991). Both instruments are commonly used to measure social problems among children and are used extensively in children's research literature.

Behaviour Problems Index

The BPI was developed for children aged 4–17 and includes 28 items reported by mothers. It measures behaviours common among the general child population and includes six subscales which specifically measure anti-social behaviour, anxiety/depression, head-strong behaviour, hyperactivity, immature dependency and peer conflict/social withdrawal.

Child Behaviour Checklist

The Child Behaviour Checklist (CBCL) is originally an American behavioural questionnaire (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983; Achenbach, 1991) which has become widely known in recent years and is now used in more than 30 countries. The CBCL comes in different forms and there are two versions for children aged 1/2 to 5 years old and another for 6–18 years. Teacher report forms, youth self report forms and direct observation forms are also available. CBCL measures behaviours similar to BPI such as aggression, hyperactivity, bullying, conduct problems and violence and also provides scores on a broader range of issues such as thought-problems, withdrawal and internalising behaviour.

The ability for research to make causal links between physical discipline and child outcomes is another important issue when reviewing the literature. In an ideal research situation causality would be established by randomly assigning children to a physical discipline group and a non-physical discipline group. Various outcomes would be measured across both groups and, if differences between the groups were found, this would then effectively prove that physical discipline was the cause. However, clearly in the real world it is not possible to assign children to groups in this way. Another way of establishing causality is through the use of an experimental or prospective longitudinal design; this enables a temporal sequence to be established, showing whether the outcome

occurred prior to or simultaneously with the presumed risk factor. For example, this could help us understand whether a child displays disruptive behaviour because they have been smacked, or if a parent chooses to smack to manage the child's disruptive behaviour.

However, a vast majority of the research relating to physical discipline is cross-sectional in nature. Cross-sectional designs cannot establish temporal order as they are taken at one point in time. This type of design produces correlational data which, while identifying factors which are associated with physical discipline, does not provide information on whether physical discipline is a cause or an effect of the outcome. For example, in relation to aggressive child behaviour, physical discipline could be viewed as the cause of such behaviour but an equally plausible explanation may be that a child's aggressive behaviour resulted in physical discipline being administered.

Therefore, a causal link can only be established when research illustrates that an outcome is generated, caused or produced by a causal risk factor. Baumrind et al (2002) state that although experimental studies are the gold standard in separating causal from non-causal explanations, correlational studies can still contribute as long as they establish temporality and control for other potentially contributory or confounding factors that could account for an association. For example, how can we be sure that a child is displaying high levels of aggression as a result of parental use of physical discipline when in the same household various others factor related to child aggression are also present (domestic violence, low parental warmth, high levels of parental stress and substance misuse)? Any one of these variables, or a combination of any of them, along with the physical discipline, could be influencing the child's development in such a way as to present in high levels of aggression. Regression analysis is frequently used to combat this difficulty as it is able to isolate those factors which have an independent

effect on physical discipline use and are not confounded by their relationship to other factors.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This review provides a comprehensive and transparent approach to drawing together key findings from the recent literature published in relation to physical discipline. Where possible, it takes account of the research considerations discussed above, looking at the definition and measurement of physical discipline and any implications this might have for interpreting the findings, particularly in relation to prevalence statistics. When discussing the factors which influence physical discipline use and attitudes toward it, particular attention is paid to how potentially contributory or confounding factors have been controlled for, with the focus being predominantly on the factors that have been identified through regression analysis. The section exploring the outcomes of physical discipline addresses the research literature associated with both the anti and conditional physical discipline perspectives, examining the competing claims and exploring what conclusions can be drawn from these divergent views. An important aspect of this is the evaluation of the research design which dictates the study's ability to establish causal links between physical discipline and the outcomes measured.

While focusing mainly on journal publications, the review is supplemented by a range of other relevant literature to provide a wide-ranging overview of the issue from a variety of perspectives. Although relatively narrow in focus, the review time period also included a number of systematic reviews which report on studies dating back several decades, thus ensuring coverage of relevant research outside the review time period. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the findings presented concentrate on research relating to Western and European countries and extrapolation to other regions should be treated with caution.

1.2 THE PREVALENCE OF PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE IN THE HOME

Key Points

- Physical discipline rates vary between countries, although direct comparison is difficult because of the different timings, definitions and forms of measurement used.
- Of the countries included, Italy, Germany and Britain appear to have the highest rates of physical discipline use (70–80%).
- Sweden tends to have the lowest figure for physical discipline (25–45%), a finding which is often attributed to Sweden having the longest standing legal ban.
- Although rates of 'severe' physical discipline/assault are much lower than 'minor' or 'ordinary' physical discipline (as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale), a sizeable minority of parents still use it.
- National surveys have highlighted rates of 'severe' physical discipline/assault of 25% in America and 16% in Britain.
- Physical discipline does not tend to be used by itself but is instead used as part of a wider repertoire of disciplinary strategies.

In order to provide a brief overview of the international use of physical discipline, this section presents prevalence statistics from a variety of different countries including America, Canada, Sweden, Italy, Germany and the UK. (See Table 1.2 for a tabular overview of American studies and Appendix 3 for an overview of Canadian, Swedish, Italian and UK primary research studies included in this section).

USA

The review identified six nationally representative surveys which provide information on the use of physical discipline across the United States. All relied on parental self report but, as Table 1.2 illustrates, a variety of different physical discipline measurements, timeframes and parent groups were

used. Research involving all parents (i.e. of parents of children aged 0–18) and focusing on lifetime use of physical discipline found the highest rates, with two thirds reporting having ever spanked or slapped their child (Xu et al, 2000). Surveys concentrating on lifetime prevalence with parents of younger children produced lower rates, with 38% of parents of children aged 4–35 months (Regalado et al, 2004) and 40% of parents of children under 3 (Wissow, 2001) reporting having spanked their child at least once. All three of these surveys also relied on a narrow range of behaviours and it would be expected that research using a broader range of disciplinary behaviours would produce higher figures.

In addition to looking at lifetime use of physical discipline, there were also a number of national surveys which measured physical discipline over specific time periods. Dietz's (2000) survey measured the broadest range of behaviours, using the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus et al, 1998) to measure disciplinary practices used by parents in the preceding year. In keeping with the previous surveys, 57% reported using some form of 'ordinary' or 'minor' physical discipline, defined as spanking a child or slapping them on the hand, arm or leg. Of those who reported using physical discipline, 61% did so at least six times during the year. The results also showed that a quarter of respondents reported using 'severe' physical discipline/assault (25.7%) on more than one occasion.

Similarly, Tajima's (2000 & 2002) secondary analysis of married/cohabiting participants in the 1985 National Family Violence Surveys also used the original Conflict Tactics Scale, indicating that 61.6% of parents reported the use of some kind of physical discipline in the previous year. Furthermore, 4.1% reported physical abuse (i.e. the very severe physical assault component of the CTS) and nearly all of the respondents who physically abused their children also physically disciplined

them. This is a much lower figure than Dietz's (2000) 26% for severe physical discipline/assault as the behaviours categorised as physically abusive were much more extreme and included behaviours such as throwing things, kicking, biting, burning, scalding, threatening with a knife etc. Analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Eamon & Zeuhl, 2001, Eamon, 2001b) analysis used the most recent time frame, but only measured spanking, indicating that 37.4% of the single mothers had spanked their children in the past week, compared with 19.2% of mothers of 10–12 year olds who had spanked in the past week.

Overall, the surveys show that a majority of American parents have used physical discipline, usually in the form of spanking or slapping. While the figures suggest lower rates of physical discipline with younger children (a factor explored in much depth in the next section), they do indicate that physical discipline is used with a sizeable minority of very young children. Likewise, 'severe' physical discipline/assault also appears to be used by a sizeable minority of parents, while physical abuse was reported by a much smaller but significant minority.

Table 1.2: Nationally representative American surveys of parental discipline use

Authors/study details	Physical discipline measured and results
<p>Tajima (2000 & 2002) – Subset of National Family Violence Surveys carried out in 1985. The original survey was administered via telephone interview involving 6,002 randomly selected households. The subset consisted of the respondents from the original sample who were married (or living together) with at least one child under 18.</p> <p>Sample size – 2,733 Research Time Frame – past year</p>	<p>Definition/Measurement: CTS, 'physical discipline' defined as any one or more of the pushed, grabbed, shoved the child; slapped or spanked; or hit or tried to hit with an object.</p> <p>'Physical abuse' defined as any one or more of the following; threw something at child; kicked; bit or hit with a fist; beat up; burned or scalded; threatened with a knife or gun or used a knife or gun.</p> <p>61.6% of the parents reported the use of physical discipline 4.1% reported physical abuse</p>
<p>Xu et al (2000) – Sub-sample of the National Survey of Families and Households which used face-to-face interviews. Analysis involved 2,499 parents, 692 who had a child younger than 5 and 1,807 who had a child between 5 and 18 years of age.</p> <p>Sample size – 2499 Research Time Frame – lifetime</p>	<p>Definition/Measurement: spanking, slapping or grabbing</p> <p>67% had spanked or slapped their child 27% reported use as sometime or always 41% reported spanked or slapped seldom</p>

<p>(Regalado et al, 2004) – National Survey of Early Childhood Health, a nationally representative telephone survey of parents of children aged 4–35 months.</p> <p>Sample size – 2,068 Research Time Frame – lifetime</p>	<p>Definition/Measurement: spanking</p> <p>38% had spanked 6% spanked 4–9 month olds, 29% spanked 10–18 month olds 64% spanked 19–35 month olds.</p>
<p>Wissow, 2001 – Analysis data produced by the Commonwealth Fund Survey of Parents with Young Children which involved telephone interviews with 2,017 US parents with at least one child younger than three years living with them</p> <p>Sample size – 2017 Research Time Frame – lifetime</p>	<p>Definition/measurement: spanking and hitting</p> <p>40% of parents reported having spanked child (25% sometimes or often) 7% reported either hitting or slapping (2% sometimes or often.)</p>
<p>Dietz, 2000 – Telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 American parents conducted by the Gallop Organisation during August and Sept 1996.</p> <p>Sample size – 1,000 Research Time Frame – past year</p>	<p>Definition/Measurement: Parent–Child Conflict Tactics Scale</p> <p>57.1% ‘ordinary’ or ‘minor’ physical discipline – spanking (47%), slapping on hand arm or leg (37%)</p> <p>Of those who used physical discipline 61% did so at least 6 times during the year.</p> <p>25.7% reported using ‘severe’ physical discipline/ assault –shaking (9%), hitting with a hard object (21%), pinching (4%) and slapping on face, head or ears (5%).</p>
<p>Eamon (2001b, 2002) & Eamon & Zuehl (2001) – Analysis of various samples from the data set of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) The original study consisted of interviews with parents.</p> <p>Sample size – 878 4–9 yr olds in single mother families (Eamon and Zeuhl), 1,397 4–9 year olds in intact families (Eamon, 2001a), 963 10–12 year olds living with their mothers (Eamon, 2001b) Research Time Frame – past week</p>	<p>Definition/Measurement: spanking</p> <p>37.4% of single mothers of 4–9 year old spanked their children in the past week.</p> <p>19.2% of mothers in 10–12 year olds had spanked in the past week</p>

CANADA

Prevalence rates for physical discipline use in Canada have been cited as 51% (Ateah & Durrant, 2005), although it is not clear what definition was used. Higher rates have been found in other studies, with research exploring the childhood experiences of undergraduate students and community members (Ateah & Parkin 2002) reporting that, overall, 75% had received some form of physical discipline, defined as spanking; slapping on body; slapping on head; shaking; whipping or being hit with an object. Of those who had received physical discipline, 60% reported receiving it from both parents and almost two thirds said they had received it most between ages 6 and 10. Most were slapped on the body (63%), others were slapped on the head (37%), shaken (12% being shaken, 18% being whipped) or hit with an object (34%).

Further research by the same authors (Ateah & Durrant, 2005) also found that, when asked to describe two child transgressions which had elicited their strongest reactions, 50% of Canadian mothers of three year old children had used some kind of physical discipline in the past two weeks. The definition of physical discipline used and given to parents in this study was based on Straus (1995) and covered any physical means used in the management or discipline of children without resultant physical injury. In total, 59% reported an incident of physical discipline use in the past two weeks; 88% involved spanking or slapping while the remainder included grabbing their child's shoulders (6%) and single incidents of dragging, pushing and spraying the child's face with water.

While neither of these studies can be generalised to the wider population in Canada, again they point to variability in physical discipline rates depending on the reporting source. They also indicate that, as in America, physical discipline is commonly used. The more severe forms of physical discipline, such as being slapped on the head and hit with an object, are used on sizeable minorities of children.

SWEDEN

Jutengren and Palmerus (2002) cite a variety of prevalence figures for Sweden which highlight substantial decreases in physical discipline use in the past five decades. For example, a longitudinal study of 212 families with children born in the late 1950s found that 75% of children aged four were struck at least once by their fathers and 95% by their mothers during a 12 month period. More than 25% were struck on a weekly basis by their fathers and 60% by their mothers. However, in a national survey conducted in 1995 only 30% of Swedish intermediate school students stated that they had ever been struck by their father by the age of 13, with 1% being hit by them on a weekly basis (the rates were the same for mothers). This decline in physical discipline is often attributed to Swedish legislation outlawing the use of physical discipline, although this is sometimes contested. Comparisons between Sweden and the US using national probability samples are also reported as showing that 28% of Swedish parents had spanked or slapped their 0–18 year olds during a 12 month period, compared with twice as many in the US. Again this is thought to be related to differences in legal positions, with almost all American states retaining a physical discipline defence in comparison with Sweden, which has the oldest legislation banning the use of physical discipline.

Primary research within this review (Durrant et al, 2003) also compared lifetime and past week physical discipline use by Swedish and Canadian mothers. The study used Holden's (1993) Parental Responses to Misbehaviour Scale which includes spanking with a hand or object and slapping on the hand or face as measures of physical discipline. Overall, less than half of Swedish mothers (45%) reported having ever used using physical discipline compared with 70% of Canadian mothers (see Table 1.3). While similar numbers used it less than once a week (47 v 43%), 18% of Canadian mothers reported using physical discipline 1–2 times per week compared with only 2% of Swedish mums.

Table 1.3: Reported frequency of physical discipline use by Canadian and Swedish mothers

Frequency of use	Canada (n=104)	Sweden (n=99)
Never	29.6	55.1
Less than once/week	46.9	42.7
1 or 2 times/week	18.4	2.2
3 or 4 times/week	2.0	0.0
5 or 6 times/week	1.0	0.0
7 or 8 times/week	2.0	0.0
9 or more times/week	0.0	0.0

Although suggesting a substantial difference in physical discipline use between Sweden and Canada, the findings from this study can not be generalised to either population and do not provide specific information on the types of physical discipline used. It is also possible that the reports of Swedish parents were influenced by the fact that physical discipline is illegal in their country, although it is noted that the Swedish ban does not carry criminal penalties and is intended to provide a clear guideline rather than a threat of punishment. These notwithstanding, the findings, together with previous national survey results, do point toward much lower rates of physical discipline use in Sweden, in comparison with American and Canada.

ITALY

An Italian parent survey, using a random sample of children aged 3–12 attending school in the region of Tuscany (Bardi et al, 2001), identified an average incidence of ‘minor’ violence of 768 per 1,000 children, as well as a ‘severe’ violence rate of 83 per 1,000 children. Definitions of ‘minor’ and ‘severe’ physical discipline/assault were based on the original Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1973), although results for the individual types of physical discipline were not presented. Again these findings highlight that, as in Canada and the US, physical discipline is very common in Italy and ‘severe’ physical discipline/assault is used by a significant minority of parents.

GERMANY

Bussmann’s (2004) discussion paper draws on data from a variety of nationally representative surveys in order to evaluate the impact of the government decision to ban physical discipline in 2000. This includes: comparison of a survey of 2,000 German parents carried out in 1996 with a survey of 3,000 parents carried out in 2001; as well as a survey of 2,400 12–18 year olds carried out in 1992 and 2,000 in 2002. The results of both the parent and adolescent surveys showed the continued existence of relatively high degrees of various forms of discipline. Overall, 54% of parents were considered to display ‘conventional childrearing’ which entails frequent use of ‘minor’ physical discipline in addition to non-violent sanctions and rare use of more serious physical discipline such as spankings or beatings. Approximately 17% of parents belonged to a violence prone group, a group which frequently resorted to sanctions, psychological forms of discipline and serious physical discipline such as beatings or spankings. The third group, parents who rarely resorted to disciplinary sanctions and, as far as possible, never resorted to physical discipline, accounted for roughly 28% of all parents. Despite relatively high rates of physical discipline, the authors note some remarkable changes over the time periods measured. Among the parents there was a 10% decrease in slapping between 1996 and 2001 (72% v 59%) and in 2001, 26% of parents

Table 1.4: Changes in childrearing in Germany: adolescents surveys 1992 and 2002

Physical discipline type	1992 (%)	2002 (%)
Light slap across the face	81.2	68.9
Severe slap across the face	43.6	13.9
Beaten on the bottom with a rod	41.3	4.8
Beaten to the point of bruising	30.6	3.2

reported having spanked their children in comparison with 33% in 1996 (see Table 1.4).

There was also evidence of a decrease in the use of more serious violent sanctions, with only 14% of adolescents reporting having been (ever) slapped hard across the face in 2002 compared with 44% in 1992. Equally, only 4% of adolescents had experienced serious physical discipline such as being beaten on the bottom with a stick or beaten to the point of bruising, while in 1992 the rates of this were 14% and 31% respectively. While, overall, the violence prone group had not grown substantially smaller (16.3% in 2002 compared with 18.1% in 1992), even in these families the most serious forms of physical discipline were less frequent.

UK

Two large scale surveys carried out in England, Wales and Scotland (Ghate et al, 2003; Anderson et al, 2002) provide valuable information on physical discipline use in the UK. Ghate et al (2003) carried out the first ever nationally representative survey of mothers and fathers of children aged 0–12, across Britain. The survey used Computer Assisted Personal (and Self) Interviewing (CAPI/CASI) to ensure the fullest and frankest answers. Disciplinary acts were measured using the Misbehaviour Response Scale (MRS), an adaptation of the widely used parent-child version of the Conflict Tactics Scale. The results highlighted that 71% of parents had ever used 'minor' physical discipline, 16% had used

'severe' physical discipline/assault and 1% had used very 'severe' physical discipline/assault. In terms of annual incidence, 58% had used 'minor' physical discipline in the past year, 9% 'severe' physical discipline/assault and 1% very 'severe' physical discipline/assault. They also provided clear evidence that physical discipline use does not normally occur in isolation but is instead one element of a range of disciplinary tactics which include reasoning/explaining, using time out, shouting, yelling or screaming etc. The authors conclude that physical discipline tends to be used as an adjunct, not an alternative, to non-physical methods.

The Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) also used the same modified version of the Conflict Tactics Scale used in Ghate et al's (2003) study. As Table 1.5 shows, physical discipline use, particularly the more extreme behaviours, were less common than other forms of discipline. Nevertheless, two in five reported having smacked their child on the bottom and a third on the hand, arm or leg, while 14% reported smacking or slapping their child on the face or head, or cuffing them on the ear in the past year. The data was not broken down into 'minor' and 'severe' categories but instead included both 'minor' and 'severe' under the heading of any physical discipline use in the past year and physical discipline use in the past week. Overall, 51% of the sample had used some form of physical discipline in the past year and 10% in the past week. This is lower than Ghate et al's (2003) figure of 58% of

Table 1.5: Use of different forms of physical discipline by Scottish parents in the past year

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

Source: Anderson et al (2002)

parents having used 'minor' physical discipline in the past year and is likely to be related to the fact that the Scottish research focused on parents of all children while Ghate et al (2003) focused on parents of children aged 0–12, a parent group more likely to have administered physical discipline than parents of children in older age groups. Like the Ghate et al (2003) study, the Scottish survey also highlights that physical discipline usually occurs within the context of a broader disciplinary

repertoire, with other practices such as shouting and yelling and explaining why the behaviour was wrong being much more commonly used than physical discipline.

CONCLUSION

The review findings illustrate that physical discipline is commonly used by parents in a number of Western and European countries. Variation in rates between countries is apparent, although direct

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

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

Survey research with Scottish parents of children aged 0–15 showed somewhat lower rates than the British national survey, a discrepancy which may be accounted for by differences in the parent groups who participated in the research, as well as potential regional variation. Both surveys evidenced that, rather than being used in isolation, physical discipline tends to be used within a range of disciplinary tactics. Although physical discipline tended to be less commonly used than other forms of discipline, the findings from both surveys indicate that a majority of parents in the UK have used physical discipline, with high rates of 'severe' physical discipline/assault emerging as a concern.

1.3 FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE THE USE OF PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

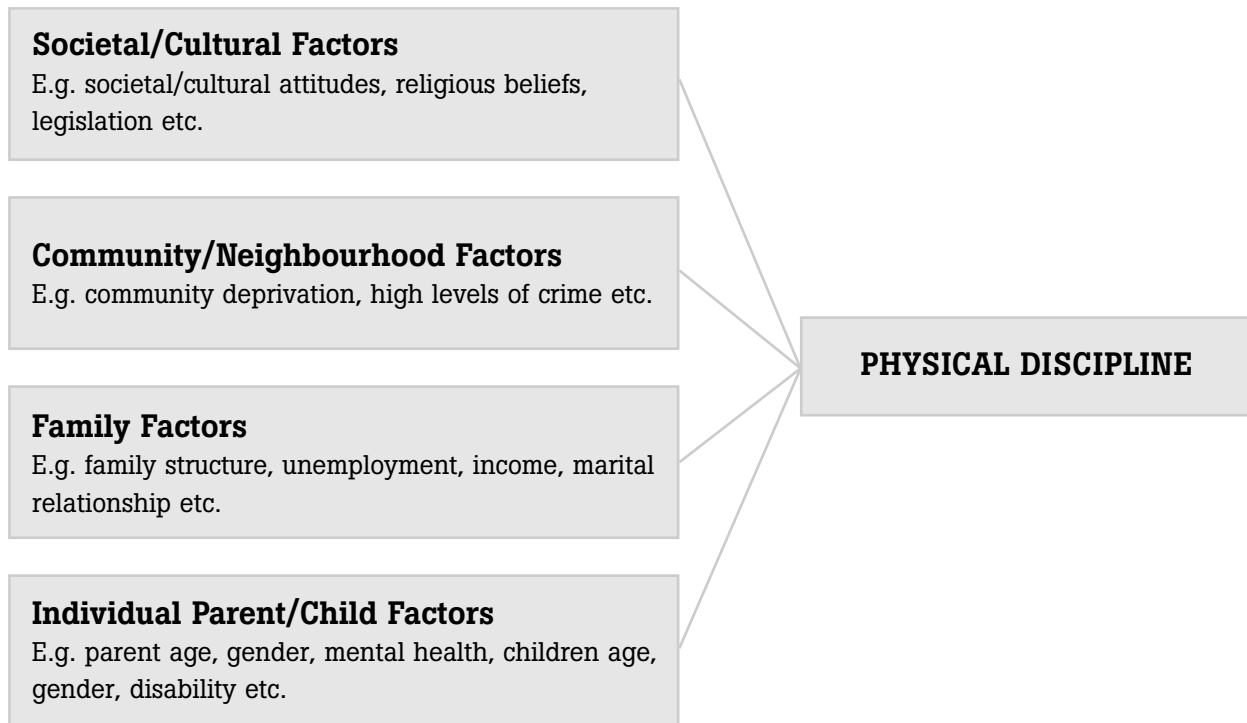
Key Points

- There is no one factor which is solely responsible for influencing parental physical discipline use.
- A complex range of inter-related parent, child, family, community and cultural factors have been found to be associated with physical discipline use.
- Parents who have used severe/abusive physical discipline are invariably a subset of the much larger group of parents who have used 'minor' physical discipline.
- Parents who have used 'minor' physical discipline and those who have used severe or abusive physical discipline share some but not all characteristics.
- There is a need for further investigation of the circumstances in which 'minor' physical discipline becomes transformed into abuse.

BACKGROUND

As we can see from the previous section, a more complex picture of physical discipline is starting to emerge: one in which the age of the child, the

Figure 1: Ecological framework for factors impacting on the use of physical discipline



nationality of the parent and the wider disciplinary context appear to play a role. Indeed, as with any other parenting practice, the use of physical discipline is influenced by a multiplicity of factors which interrelate in a variety of complex ways. The research literature stresses the importance of taking an ecological approach in which the family is seen as a system; children are studied in the context of the family environment and the family is understood in the context of its community and the larger society. Key levels of this model include the individual characteristics of the parent and child, family and neighbourhood factors, as well the broader context of societal and cultural beliefs and norms (see Figure 1).

Based on this ecological framework, this section outlines the various parent, child, family, community and societal and cultural factors which have been linked with, or are predictive of, the use of physical discipline. Appendix 4 provides a tabular overview

of the different factors identified in the primary research studies used in this section. As noted in previous sections, regression analysis is often used to control for potentially contributory or confounding factors. This section differentiates between those factors found, through regression analysis techniques, to make an independent contribution to physical discipline use (described as predictive) and those which have been merely linked to physical discipline use in some way (described as associated).

PARENT FACTORS

Age

Overall, there was a consistent link between parental age and physical discipline, with a large number of studies showing that age predicted physical discipline with younger parents being more likely to use physical discipline than older parents

(Tajima, 2000 & 2002; Regalado et al, 2004; Eamon & Zuehl, 2001; Eamon, 2001a; Xu et al, 2000; Bardi et al, 2001; 2001; Molnar et al, 2003). For example, a survey of American parents of 4–35 month olds found that adolescent parents were twice as likely to spank than older parents (Regalado et al, 2004). Similarly, Tajima's (2000) analysis of the 1985 American National Family Violence Survey, which covered a much wider range of behaviours, found that younger parental age was a risk factor for both physical discipline and physical abuse. These findings were generally attributed to younger parents having less experience, with older parents having had greater exposure to a range of alternative disciplinary practices.

However, there was also evidence that the influence of parental age varies within different parent sub-groups. For example, Nobes & Smith's (2002) UK research found that, after factoring in physical discipline use by partners, early motherhood was associated with increased frequency of physical discipline for partnered mothers but not for lone mothers. While it is not clear why this should be the case, it may be related

to the nature of the couple relationship between younger mothers and their partners. These relationships may be less stable and more prone to conflict than those of older mothers, resulting in higher levels of stress and more punitive parenting practices.

Gender

Increased physical discipline use by mothers in comparison with fathers was also a common finding with a number of studies indicating that gender predicted physical discipline use (Mahoney et al, 2000; Xu et al, 2000; Mammen et al, 2002; Dietz, 2000; Molnar et al, 2003). This was usually viewed as a consequence of mothers typically spending more time with children proportionate to fathers and thus having greater opportunities to be punitive. Although some studies found no link between gender and physical discipline use (Murphy Cowan et al, 2001; Wissow, 2001; Kerr, 2004), the weight of evidence suggests that a link exists but that, as with many other parent characteristics, the influence of gender is mediated by other factors such as the age of the child and the type of physical discipline used. For example, Xu et

Parent Factors Which Have Been Found To Be Associated With Increased Physical Discipline Use*

- **Younger parent/caregiver**
- **Female parents for minor/ordinary physical discipline and male parent for more severe forms**
- **Poor maternal physical health**
- **Maternal drug and alcohol use/abuse**
- **Highly emotionally aroused (angry, upset, frustrated)**
- **Mental health difficulties**
- **Personal experience of physical discipline/abuse, particularly parents who do not view their own childhood abuse as abusive**
- Inconsistent use of a variety of other discipline strategies
- Poor engagement with child
- **Positive attitude towards/endorsement of physical discipline use**

* Factors highlighted in bold denote those that have been found to make an independent contribution towards physical discipline use (predictive) in at least one study.

al's (2000) comparison of parents of under fives and parents of children aged 5–18 found that female parents were more likely to use physical discipline with younger children and fathers more likely to use physical discipline with older children. This was considered to be in keeping with parenting practices in America generally, with women tending to have responsibility for disciplining young children and fathers tending to assume a greater disciplinary role when children are older. Equally, while mothers may use 'minor' or 'ordinary' physical discipline more frequently than fathers, this does not appear to be the case for severe or abusive physical discipline (Bardi et al, 2001; Dietz, 2000).

Health and substance/alcohol abuse

Research exploring the connection between parental health and physical discipline and drug/alcohol abuse and physical discipline was limited and the results equivocal with an Italian study involving the parents of 6,250 children aged 3–12, of which the findings were that poor maternal health was predictive of both 'minor' physical discipline and 'severe' physical discipline/assault (Bardi, et al, 2001). However, analysis of a subset of the 1985 American National Family Violence Survey found no relationship with either physical discipline or physical abuse (Tajima, 2000; 2002). Similarly, Bardi et al (2001) showed a relationship between maternal alcohol and drug consumption and 'severe' physical discipline/assault, while Tajima (2000; 2002) showed no relationship between husbands' alcohol and drug use in the past year and either physical discipline or physical abuse. While this may be related to differences in the populations researched, it is possible that this is also linked to the gender of the parent. It may be that maternal rather than paternal physical health, alcohol and drug use are significant risk factors, a finding that may be hidden in analysis which does not specifically examine results for each group. A review of previous research (Smith et al, 2005) has also concluded that while drug and alcohol abuse present another risk

factor for the use of harsh or severe discipline, the relationship is not necessarily a causal one; instead substance abuse may be a symptom of wider family dysfunction which results in increased physical discipline use.

Emotional state and mental health

Not surprisingly, there appeared to be a strong connection between parent emotional state and physical discipline, with both maternal anger (Ateah & Durrant, 2005) and parental frustration/aggravation (Wissow, 2001; Regalado et al, 2004) having been found to be predictive of parental spanking. Likewise, Italian research (Bardi et al, 2001) has found an association between maternal stress and both 'minor' physical discipline and 'severe' physical discipline/assault, while Tajima (2000) has found parental stress generally to be predictive of physical abuse but not physical discipline.

There was also consensus in the literature that the mental health of parents, in particular maternal depression (Chung et al, 2005; Mammen et al, 2002; Wissow, 2001; Eamon, 2001a; Nobes & Smith, 2002), was predictive of physical discipline use, a factor which may be especially pertinent when children are young and mothers are at risk from post-partum depression. The irritability and hostility commonly accompanying depressive symptoms is likely to account for this relationship, with other factors such as poverty and marital conflict exacerbating depressive symptoms and increasing the likelihood of physical discipline use. UK research (Nobes & Smith, 2002) also indicated that mental health difficulties increased not only the frequency, but the severity of physical discipline for partnered but not single mothers. A potential explanation for this is that married/partnered women may experience relationship difficulties and subsequent stress which exacerbates the impact of mental health issues in a way not experienced by single parents.

Parent's own discipline/abuse history

Closely linked with parental experiences of depression, is the issue of parents' own experience of physical discipline or abuse during childhood. Indeed previous reviews have concluded that the experience of physical discipline as a child is one of the strongest predictors of parental use and approval of physical discipline with their own children (Smith et al, 2005). This was supported by Wissow's (2001) American survey of parents of children under three which found that a history of physical abuse or child sexual abuse was associated with an increased likelihood of spanking as a parent. Tajima (2000 & 2002) found that being hit as a teenager was predictive of physical discipline and physical abuse, while Banyard et al (2003) found a history of physical abuse was associated with but not predictive of 'severe' physical discipline/assault. While this supports the hypothesis of the trans-generational cycle of violence, the relationship between the two was not always clear cut. Other American research (Dietz, 2000) found that those who had experienced physical abuse as a child were 1.5 times less likely to use 'minor' physical discipline.

These conflicted findings may be related to the way in which parents' personal histories are measured, a theory which was tested and confirmed by the work of Bower-Russa et al (2001). This research found that a greater history of childhood physical discipline was not only predictive of physical discipline use but that it also predicted escalation from non-violent discipline to physical discipline. In this study, participants were categorised as those who did not experience physical discipline in childhood, those who experienced 'severe' physical discipline/assault and labelled themselves as abused and those who had been severely physically disciplined but did not label themselves as abused. The results showed that those who identified themselves as having been abused were less likely to select physical discipline as a response to child behaviour than those who had been severely

punished in childhood but did not consider themselves to have been abused. This suggests that parents who recognise their own experiences as abusive may make a conscious decision not to continue such practices in parenting their own children. Conversely, those who are labelled as abused by researchers rather than self labelling may consider their experiences to be normative and see nothing wrong with using these practices themselves. As such, parents who have experienced severe/abusive physical discipline, but who have failed to perceive this as abusive or inappropriate, may form a specific target group for intervention.

Quality of parent-child relationship

Ghate et al (2003) also highlighted the influence of the overall quality of the parent-child relationship, with higher levels of parental criticism and hostility and lower levels of warmth and involvement in the relationship with the child being associated with increased physical discipline use. Similarly, Wissow (2001) found that an increase in more nurturing interactions was associated with a decrease in physical discipline use. Other UK research (Nobes & Smith, 2002) did not specifically explore the nature of the relationship between parents and children, but found that lone mothers engaged in significantly more activities with their children in the home than partnered mothers, a finding which increased the frequency of hitting/smacking. This might be explained by an increased amount of time spent with children affording greater opportunities to use physical discipline or increased stresses due to a range of other factors.

Parental attitudes

A range of studies found a strong link between parental attitudes toward physical discipline and disciplinary behaviours. For example, a Canadian study found a positive attitude towards physical discipline to be the strongest predictive factor (Ateah & Durrant, 2005). These are discussed in greater detail later in the report.

Awareness/use of alternative disciplinary tactics

As we can see from the prevalence section, parents rarely rely on physical discipline as their sole disciplinary technique and instead use it as part of a wider repertoire of disciplinary practices. As such, a number of studies explored the relationship between alternative disciplinary tactics and physical discipline use. In addition to examining the relationship between attitudes towards physical discipline use and actual physical discipline use, Ateah & Durrant (2005) also looked at parent knowledge/awareness of alternative disciplinary tactics such as time out, explaining, discussing etc. They found that this did not predict actual physical discipline use by Canadian mothers, concluding that, for preventative programmes to be effective, it is not enough to simply provide parents with knowledge of the alternatives but that parental attitudes and attributions for child behaviour need to be targeted.

A number of studies also looked at the relationship between parental use of disciplinary alternatives and physical discipline use. The findings were often contradictory, with some studies finding associations between the use of more neutral, non-physical disciplinary techniques such as time out, explaining etc. with reduced rates of physical discipline use (Wissow, 2001; Thompson et al, 2002), while others found that this increased physical discipline use (Thompson & Pearce, 2001). Qualitative research with African American mothers (Isapa & Halgunseth, 2004) found that even when mothers learned a range of positive guidance techniques from trained professionals, instead of using them as a substitute for physical discipline, they simply adopted the new methods into their overall discipline strategy which still included physical discipline. The key reasons for this were identified as mothers believing physical discipline to be more effective; pressure from family and friends to continue using physical discipline; a feeling that this type of discipline was beneficial to children;

and the belief that disobedience among toddlers must be corrected at an early age or it will escalate.

Another study, which showed almost a complete lack of overlap between physical discipline use and reasoning, also highlighted that physical discipline use was accompanied by far greater levels of inconsistency in discipline generally (Thompson et al, 2002). It may be that parents who rely on a wide range of disciplinary strategies, including non-physical techniques, do so because they are not consistent in their approach and, as a result, resort to physical discipline when other methods fail. This is further supported by the UK national study of parents, 'Children and Discipline in Britain' (Ghate et al, 2003, as yet unpublished in journal format) which found that parents who used physical discipline tended to use a greater variety of non-physical discipline methods than those who had never used physical discipline. The authors echo the views of other researchers in concluding that:

"Physical discipline is used as an adjunct, not an alternative to, non-physical methods. Parent education needs to recognise this and work with parents to strengthen the effectiveness of the positive strategies that they already use" (p.4).

CHILD FACTORS

Child Factors Which Have Been Associated With Increased Physical Discipline Use

- Aged 1–5
- Male child
- **Seriousness of the behaviour** (children engaging in dangerous or destructive misbehaviour and rule violation more likely to receive physical discipline than those engaging in normative child behaviour)
- Repeated misbehaviour despite verbal warnings
- **Behaviour perceived as intentional**
- **Behavioural problems**
- **Poor health/developmental delay, disability**
- **Genetic make up – e.g. children who are temperamentally high in activity level, low in self regulation, high in aggressive tendencies or children described by parents as fussy or irritable**

* Factors highlighted in bold denote those that have been found to make an independent contribution towards physical discipline use (predictive) in at least one study.

Age and gender

A varied picture emerged in relation to child age with some studies finding that the increased age was predictive of physical discipline (Regalado et al, 2004; Nobes & Smith, 2002; Kanoy et al, 2003) and others that decreased child age was predictive (Mahoney et al, 2000; Wissow, 2001; Dietz, 2000; Tajima, 2000 and 2002; Bardi et al, 2001; Molnar et al, 2003; Nobes & Smith, 2002; Eamon 2001b). The reason for these differences is largely because the relationship between child age and physical discipline use is not a linear one and the various age groups used in the studies led to different results. This is in keeping with previous research, with Gershoff's review (2002) highlighting the same curvilinear relationship with very young children and older children being much less likely to receive physical discipline than those who are aged 1–5. It is generally assumed that very young children are considered too young on which to use physical discipline and older children and adolescents are considered too old on which to use physical discipline. However, age did not tend to be linked with physical abuse, indicating that this can occur

across a range of child age groups (Tajima, 2000 and 2002).

Child gender was also a relatively consistent factor, with a number of studies highlighting that it predicted parental physical discipline use with male children being more likely to be physically disciplined than female children (Nobes et al, 2002; Mahoney et al, 2000; Dietz, 2000; Tajima, 2000 and 2002; Molnar et al, 2003; Kanoy et al, 2003; Eamon, 2001b). This is likely to be related to parents having different expectations for the behaviour of boys and girls which result in different reactions depending on the gender of the child exhibiting the behaviour.

Child behaviour

Several studies indicated that parents' decisions to use physical discipline depend on the type and severity of the children's misbehaviours. Ateah & Durrant's (2005) research with Canadian mothers found that maternal perceptions of the seriousness of their child's misbehaviour, as well as perceptions that the misbehaviour was intentional, predicted

physical discipline use. This was further supported by research conducted with undergraduate students (Bower-Russa et al, 2001). While not directly measuring physical discipline use, the study used the 'Analog Parenting Task'³ as a means of identifying likely disciplinary responses to a number of misbehaviour scenarios. The researchers found that normative behaviours (e.g. playing with toys) were less likely to elicit a physical discipline response than destructive behaviours (e.g. tearing up a book), dangerous behaviours (e.g. hanging out of a moving car) or rule-violating behaviours (e.g. drinking or smoking). Destructive behaviours were also more likely to elicit physical discipline than rule violation.

Thompson & Pearce's (2001) UK study also found that parents advocated physical discipline use more often when children were engaged in annoying rather than unsafe behaviour. In keeping with other work in the field, responses were mediated by age, with respondents advocating increased physical discipline with older age groups. Likewise, the association between physical discipline and child behaviour in Bower-Russa et al's (2001) study was mediated by personal discipline history. Those participants who had experienced severe discipline as a child but did not label themselves as abused were more likely than those who did label themselves as abused to use physical discipline in response to dangerous and destructive behaviours.

Bower-Russa et al (2001) also explored escalation from a non-physical response to a physical response when the child repeated the misbehaviour. Results showed that escalation was more common in response to dangerous, destructive or rule-violating behaviour than normative behaviours. Additionally higher rates of escalation were associated more with responses to destructive rather than rule-violating behaviours. Similarly, a study of Swedish parents (Palmerus & Jutengren, 2004) concluded that:

"Swedish parents abandon the strategy of verbal control for more enforcing disciplining strategies when their children commit a second-time transgression, but only if they consider the issue of conflict to be important enough" (p.86).

The influence of the type of child misbehaviour and parental attributions of intentionality are supported in previous reviews (Gershoff, 2002; Smith et al's, 2005) that have also highlighted age as a significant factor, with parents attributing greater knowledge, capacity and responsibility for misbehaviour in younger children. While this clearly relates to parental perceptions of the child behaviour as much as the actual behaviour itself, it has been included as a child factor because the actions of the child, to varying degrees, are likely to be the primary trigger in a majority of cases.

In addition to type of misbehaviour and parental attribution, a wide variety of studies in this review also found a strong link between physical discipline use and children who display behaviour problems. Given the debate as to whether physical discipline is a response to child behavioural problems or a causal factor, this is discussed in much greater detail in the next section.

Health and disability status

Previous research has indicated that child health and disability status is related to the use of physical discipline, as parents are likely to experience greater stress parenting more 'problematic' children. While the findings from studies in this review were mixed, they also support the notion that poor child health is predictive of physical discipline use (Bardi et al, 2001) and that developmental risk is associated with increased physical discipline use (Regalado et al, 2004). Two studies also specifically examined physical discipline use by parents of deaf children, again producing mixed results, with one showing an association between parenting a deaf child and increased physical discipline (Knutson et al, 2004), the other, none (Brubaker & Szakowski,

³ Subjects viewed 28 slides depicting children engaged in a range of activities and were asked to select a disciplinary response. They were asked about their initial reaction and how many times they would allow the child to persist before changing their response.

2000). While the results from neither study can be generalised to the parents of all deaf children or, indeed, the general child population, it is worth noting that previous research cited in both studies appears to support the idea that parents of deaf children rely on a narrower range of discipline practices and are more likely to use physical discipline than parents of hearing children. The main reasons for this link are thought to be the increased stress experienced by parents of deaf children coupled with the limited range of communication options available to such parents.

Genetic factors

Previous reviews have also highlighted that children's heritable characteristics are thought to affect the type of parenting they receive (Gershoff, 2002). Children who are temperamentally high in

activity level, low in self regulation, high in aggressive tendencies or children described by parents as fussy or irritable, tend to be spanked more than those who are not. Two studies in this review examined the genetic contribution of the child to physical discipline use through research with twin samples (Jaffee et al, 2004; Wade & Kendler, 2000). Overall, they concluded that the genetic characteristics of children are predictive (Jaffee et al, 2004) or associated (Wade & Kendler, 2000), to a certain extent, with physical discipline use. However they also highlighted that other factors, in particular shared environmental factors (those experienced by siblings raised together) and non-shared environmental factors (i.e. unique experiences), also make a significant contribution to physical discipline use.

FAMILY FACTORS

Family Factors Which Have Been Associated With Increased Physical Discipline Use

- Higher numbers of children
- Single parent
- Marital conflict/violence
- Lower levels of support
- Lower socio-economic group
- Higher levels of work related stress

* Factors highlighted in bold denote those that have been found to make an independent contribution towards physical discipline use (predictive) in at least one study.

Number of children in family

A number of studies in this review found that greater numbers of children in the home was either predictive of physical discipline (Eamon & Zuehl, 2001; Xu et al, 2000; Nobes & Smith, 2002; Eamon, 2001b) or associated (Thompson & Pearce, 2001; Walsh 2002)). This is considered to play an important role through reducing parental time and

resources, increasing pressure and leading to more authoritarian, restrictive and punitive parenting practices. However, not all studies found an association (Koenig et al, 2002; Bardi et al, 2001; Dietz, 2000; Tajima, 2000) and it appears that the relationship between the number of children and physical discipline is linked to other factors such as the age of the other children in the family. It seems

plausible that families with a greater number of young children in the household might experience greater stress than those with older children.

Marital status, marital discord and domestic violence
Marital status was also found to be connected to physical discipline use, with some studies finding that being a lone mother was predictive of physical discipline use (Molnar et al, 2003; Eamon, 2001b) and others finding that it was associated (Mahoney et al, 2000; Regalado et al, 2004). However, these findings were contradicted by a UK study which specifically examined differences in physical discipline use between lone and partnered mothers (Nobes & Smith, 2002). Despite the fact that lone mothers in this study were found to be more disadvantaged than partnered mothers in almost every single way, comparison of self reports of mother's administration of physical discipline showed no difference between the two groups. However, when father's reported actions were taken into account, children from two-parent families were found to have been physically disciplined more frequently and severely than children of lone parents. The authors note that this is at odds with previous research findings and suggest that relationship stress experienced by partnered mothers may be a potential explanation:

"...In conditions of disadvantage, partners are more likely to exacerbate mothers' problems than ameliorate them. Poor partnered mothers also have poor partners and the partners of depressed anxious mothers are themselves likely to be depressed and anxious. It is therefore possible that in conditions of disadvantage, the presence of a partner is often detrimental because each partner becomes an additional stressor to the other in already difficult circumstance" (Nobes & Smith, 2002, p.369).

Indeed the link between marital discord and/or violence and increased physical discipline use was a common theme throughout the review articles,

with a number of studies indicating that these were predictive of physical discipline use (Tajima, 2000; Kanoy et al, 2003; Xu et al, 2000). Other analysis highlighted the relationship between poverty, marital conflict and maternal depression and physical discipline use (Eamon, 2001a; Eamon & Zuehl, 2001).

Social support

Previous research suggests an indirect link between physical discipline and social support through the reduction of parents' levels of stress and depression. Social support can be provided by a range of sources including partners, family members, friends, community organisations and formal support services (see also community level factors). However, research investigating this issue is scarce and only a small number of the studies in this review looked at the connection between social support and physical discipline use. These demonstrated that increased informal social support from families (Molnar et al, 2003) and assistance with housework (Xu et al, 2000) was predictive of reduced rates of physical discipline use. More surprisingly, one of these studies also found that increased assistance with childcare was predictive of increased rather than reduced physical discipline (Xu et al, 2000). The authors contend that this only makes sense by assuming that parents who actively seek and receive childcare assistance engage less in child rearing activities, therefore distance themselves from their children emotionally and attempt to use quicker or more punitive methods. In the UK, interviews with a community sample of almost 500 parents (Nobes & Smith's, 2002) found no relationship between social support and physical discipline use by either lone or partnered mothers. However, it is unclear from the paper what sources of social support were measured in the study.

While there was no examination of the link between formal social support and parental physical discipline use identified in the journal review, other literature sources suggest that an association does

exist. For example, the first national evaluation of the Sure Start⁴ scheme in England found that Sure Start mothers demonstrated 'warmer parenting' than those in the control group (families in deprived areas where Sure Start schemes do not yet operate) (NESS, 2005). While the findings were modest, mothers of 36 month olds were reported as being more accepting of their children's behaviour in that they slapped, scolded and physically restrained them less often.

Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status (SES), generally measured by income, employment status and/or educational attainment was strongly linked with physical discipline use with lower SES grouping tending to be predictive of increased physical discipline use (Molnar et al, 2003; Eamon & Zuehl, 2001; Xu et al, 2000; Dietz, 2000; Weinberg, 2001; Bardi et al, 2001; Xu et al, 2000; Eamon, 2001a and 2001b). It is hypothesised that this is due to a range of factors such as: parents with higher education being more likely to be exposed to information about parenting and child development (Smith, 2005); links between economic hardship and increases in parental psychological distress; and socialisation processes by which parents in low SES groups tend to foster values and skills such as conformity and obedience to authority in order to prepare children for the typical circumstances they will experience in adult life or because the consequences of disobedience in their often more dangerous neighbourhoods can be severe (Gershoff, 2002). Some analysis highlighted that the relationship between poverty and physical discipline use is mediated by links with maternal depression and marital conflict (Eamon, 2001a; Eamon & Zuehl, 2001). However, one study pointed toward a more practical reason, indicating that withdrawal of allowance increases with family income whereas physical discipline declines with family income (Weinberg, 2001). This suggests that parents' ability to mould their children's behaviour through monetary incentives is limited at low

incomes, leading to an increased reliance on non-monetary mechanisms such as physical discipline.

Nevertheless, the relationship between SES and physical discipline varied across different parenting groups, measures of SES and types of physical discipline, with the findings often being contradictory. This was particularly true in relation to employment status, in which several studies found that unemployment decreased, not increased, the likelihood of physical discipline (Regalado et al, 2004; Koenig et al, 2002; Wissow, 2001). While this might be explained by the use of different samples and methodologies it is also possible that conflict and competition between job commitments and child rearing commitments can increase parental stress levels and hence the risk of physical discipline.

This also fits with the findings of a non-linear relationship between income and physical discipline, with families in higher and lower wage brackets using more physical discipline than those in middle wage brackets. While the parental stress experienced in lower income families is likely to be related to financial concerns, those in higher wage brackets may be more likely to experience parental stress through balancing work and family commitments. Similarly some studies also found that lower paternal educational status was associated with decreased physical discipline (Eamon, 2001a; Bardi et al, 2001). In Eamon's (2001a) analysis, lower paternal education was linked with decreased maternal physical discipline through a reduction in marital conflict. This might be explained by reduced educational status resulting in reduced work-related stress which, in turn, decreases conflict within the marital relationship.

⁴ The government programme which was set up in 2001 to provide support for children in deprived areas and achieve better outcomes for children, parents and communities by providing a range of services, including parent classes.

COMMUNITY/NEIGHBOURHOOD AND CULTURAL/SOCIETAL FACTORS

Community/Cultural Factors Which Have Been Associated With Increased Physical Discipline Use

- Deprivation/disadvantage
- High murder rates and violence
- Lower levels of friends and family living in the neighbourhood (neighbourhood level social support)
- **Member of an ethnic group which is more likely to endorse physical discipline use**
- **Member of a religious group (most likely fundamentalist) which is more likely to endorse physical discipline use**
- **Resides in region, area of a country in which there tends to be greater support for physical discipline**
- Resides in a country where physical discipline is legal

* Factors highlighted in bold denote those that have been found to make an independent contribution towards physical discipline use (predictive) in at least one study.

Community neighbourhood factors

Individuals are influenced by a variety of contexts including not only family and peers, but the communities and neighbourhoods in which they live. Nevertheless, research examining the links between neighbourhood characteristics and physical discipline use was limited. Only one study in the review specifically investigated this (Molnar et al, 2003). This showed that neighbourhoods with higher levels of concentrated disadvantage and community violence significantly predicted higher rates of parent to child physical aggression (PCPA), findings which persisted for 'minor' PCPA and severe PCPA (physical abuse). Among Hispanic families, a high density of social networks (measured as the average number of friends and relatives living in the neighbourhood) seemed to be especially important, above and beyond social support received from families. These findings were also supported by a small scale qualitative project which highlighted how living in violent and dangerous neighbourhoods was perceived by mothers as influencing their physical discipline use (Ispa, & Halgunseth, 2004). This study very much conveyed discipline as a source of tension and confusion, with mothers trying to navigate the dual

worlds of mainstream professional child development experts and that of their family and neighbours who argued for the benefits of physical discipline within the dangerous environment in which they lived.

Cultural/societal characteristics

In addition to community factors there are larger, macro-level factors that influence parenting practices such as religious or cultural belief systems, societal norms and legislation and social policy. One study highlighted that living in the southern region of North America predicted increased physical discipline use (Dietz, 2000). The influence of region and physical discipline use is also supported by Gershoff's (2002) review which indicates that the region of a country in which a family lives constitutes a cultural context which supports or discourages physical discipline use. Gershoff (2002) also supports the findings of physical discipline being favoured in the southern region of the United States and suggests that this is consistent with findings on religious differences in physical discipline use, with strong support for physical discipline use being identified in the region of the South known as the 'Bible Belt'. In keeping with

this, one study in the review found that conservative or fundamentalist Protestantism was linked with increased physical discipline compared with other religious groups (Murphy-Cowan et al, 2001); another study found conservative or fundamentalist Protestantism to be a predictive factor (Xu et al, 2000). It is suggested that Christian 'spare the rod' religious ideology is particularly common among conservative or fundamentalist Protestants and is linked with authoritarian disciplinary practices.

The review also consistently highlighted ethnicity as a predictive factor, with a number of representative American surveys (Regalado et al, 2004; Wissow, 2001; Dietz, 2000; Xu et al, 2000) finding that non-White respondents were more likely to spank their children or use 'minor' physical discipline and 'severe' physical discipline/assault. Further analyses (Tajima, 2000 and 2002) also showed that Latino parents were less likely to use physical discipline than White parents. These findings may be linked to the poor and often dangerous environments many African Americans live in, rather than ethnic or cultural difference per se, although some have argued that reliance on physical discipline is an example of the long-term effects of slavery upon this community (Dietz, 2000).

As the previous section on the prevalence of physical discipline highlights, there are many variations between countries and changing rates of physical discipline use within countries. Ateah & Durrant (2005) stress that physical discipline is not universally practiced, citing a review of 90 societies which found it to be present in 74%. They argue that parenting behaviour develops within a cultural belief system that can either foster or discourage physical discipline. The social rules and hierarchies of any society are a key element and within this, legislation can be viewed as a means of reinforcing the belief system. This contention would appear to be supported by several studies in the review which demonstrate increased use of physical discipline use

in countries where it is legally permissible, in comparison with lower rates in countries in which physical discipline is illegal (Bussmann, 2004; Juengren & Palmerus, 2002; Ateah & Durrant, 2005).

COMPARING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

A number of studies in the review examined the risk factors which influence both 'minor' physical discipline and 'severe' physical discipline/abuse (Dietz, 2000; Bardi et al, 2001; Tajima, 2000; Mahoney et al, 2000; Mammen et al, 2002). All highlighted that parents who had used severe/abusive physical discipline were invariably a subset of those who have used 'minor' or 'ordinary' physical discipline. As such, it was not surprising that there was often overlap between the characteristics of families which use physical discipline and families in which 'severe' physical discipline/abuse occurs. However, many of the studies also identified factors that were linked with 'severe' physical discipline/abuse but not 'minor' physical discipline. As is common in the physical discipline literature, authors often reached differing conclusions. For example, Bardi et al (2001) concluded that differences in associated factors between the two groups point to the intrinsic difference between 'minor' and 'severe' physical discipline/abuse. Tajima (2000) however, analysed the risk factors for 'minor' physical discipline and physical abuse separately, but also analysed the risk factors of both physical discipline and physical abuse together, arguing that it is too limiting to analyse risk factors for less severe types of violence without considering if the parent engaged in abuse also. The risk factors for the combined analysis were nearly identical to those in the physical discipline model; an unsurprising finding given that almost all who engaged in physical abuse also used physical discipline.

CONCLUSION

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

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

Child factors which were found to predict the use of physical discipline included: age, gender, poor child health/developmental delay, disability, genetic factors and behavioural problems. A number of studies also highlighted that the type of misbehaviour children engaged in, repetition of the misbehaviour and parental perceptions of the behaviour as intentional, all influenced the likelihood of physical discipline use. Family factors

which appeared a significant influence included the number of children living in the household, socio-economic status and poverty, marital conflict and domestic violence. The influence of violence also extended to community/neighbourhood characteristics with the limited research in this area showing a link between violent and high crime neighbourhoods and increased 'minor' physical discipline and severe parent-to-child physical aggression. Cultural/societal factors in the form of ethnic and/or religious practices which support physical discipline use and the legal acceptability of physical discipline in a number of Western and European countries also appeared to have an important role to play.

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

1.4 THE OUTCOMES OF PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE USE

Key Points

Anti Physical Discipline Perspective – Physical discipline has been associated with a range of negative child and adult outcomes including:

- Increased aggression and anti-social behaviour
- Increased mental health and emotional problems
- Being a victim of physical abuse

- Poorer quality parent child relationships
- Decreased moral internalization
- Increased risk of abusing own spouse or child in adulthood.

Conditional Physical Discipline Perspective -

Some researchers argue that the evidence does not warrant an outright ban. They highlight that child outcomes vary, depending on the age of the child, family ethnicity and religion, as well as the nature and frequency of the physical discipline used. Based on this they support the use of physical discipline in limited circumstances (conditional spanking): spanking children aged 2-6 with an open hand, less than once a week and in conjunction with other disciplinary tactics. They also present evidence that this form of physical discipline, conditional spanking, compares well with other disciplinary tactics but is limited in its ability to develop pro-social behaviour.

Conclusion – There is a significant body of research which highlights the negative outcomes of physical discipline. Whilst there is disagreement about the conclusions which can be drawn from research, both the anti and conditional perspective are in agreement that harsh and frequent use of physical discipline is damaging to children. The highly prescriptive nature of physical discipline endorsed by the conditional perspective illustrates the difficulty in trying to draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable physical discipline and does not lend itself to practical guidance for parents which addresses real life situations.

As outlined in Section 1.3, the physical discipline debate incorporates a range of perspectives which have been defined as anti-physical discipline, conditional physical discipline and pro-physical discipline use. Whilst literature supporting the pro-

physical discipline position is rare, research investigating the outcomes of physical discipline use can be categorised as falling into two broad groups: that which concludes that physical discipline should never be used and that which recommends the use of certain types of physical discipline under certain circumstances. Both perspectives cite various research studies to support their views, sometimes drawing different interpretations and conclusions from the same research studies. This section provides an overview of the range of negative outcomes highlighted in the literature, as well as outlining key elements of the conditional physical discipline perspective. The key points and arguments covered in this section are based on: the findings from three meta-analyses, one systematic review and two literature reviews identified in the journal search; the findings from one comprehensive review identified from the 'grey' literature; and the findings from a number of primary research studies assessed as relevant to this section of the review (see Appendix 5 for details).

NEGATIVE OUTCOMES FROM PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Gershoff's (2002) systematic review provides one of the most comprehensive and widely referenced overviews of physical discipline research available. In her meta-analysis of 92 studies, she found that physical discipline was only associated with one outcome that can be construed as positive, that of immediate compliance. Gershoff (2002) acknowledges that, due to the research designs used in her analysis, a causal link between physical discipline and the detrimental outcomes identified cannot be established. Nevertheless, her study does highlight the serious risks posed to some children from physical discipline which lead her to conclude that physical discipline use by parents should be outlawed. These risks include:

Aggression and anti-social behaviour

Aggression is one of the most hotly debated child outcomes associated with physical discipline and this was reflected by the volume of studies within Gershoff's (2002) systematic review taking this as a focus. Aggression is one of a range of behaviours included within what is broadly known as 'anti-social' behaviour. Generally speaking, when used in the research literature, anti-social behaviour refers to actions that violate social norms and laws and can include behaviours such as lying, cheating and destructiveness. Gershoff (2002) concluded that physical discipline use was not only associated with aggression and anti-social behaviour in childhood, but in adulthood also.

Equally, several primary research studies in this review focused on child aggression and demonstrated a clear association between experience of physical discipline and increased levels of aggression. For example, Lansford et al (2004) found that the experience of physical discipline in the first five years of life and during early adolescence were associated with higher levels of externalising problems (this included disruptive behaviours, aggression and social problems) for European American children. Using a sample of 390 families of young people (aged 2-17) referred to a clinic for mental health problems, Mahoney et al (2000) found evidence of coercive interactions between children and parents. The more parents perceived their child as being anti-social or defiant, the more likely they were to rely on physical discipline, with punishment levels increasing in line with perceived oppositional behaviour. Although the nature of these findings cannot determine whether parental use of physical aggression exacerbates the child's anti-social behaviour, or the child's behaviour provokes the use of physical discipline, the authors conclude that an association exists and requires further research.

Research focusing on younger children has also concluded that the severity of physical discipline

use at school age is associated with aggression at school age (Herrenkohl & Russo, 2001) and that White non-Hispanic children who are spanked more frequently are substantially more likely to have behaviour problems than Black or Hispanic children (Slade & Wissow, 2005). Fine et al (2004) assessed children's experience of discipline in 3rd Grade and teacher-reports of aggressive behaviour in both 3rd and 5th Grade, finding that children who experienced more physical discipline than their peers were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviours over time. Similarly, Eamon (2001b) and Grogan-Taylor (2004) found that increases in physical discipline were clearly associated with increased levels of children's anti-social behaviour whilst Espelage et al (2000) found that physical discipline use was significantly associated with bullying behaviour, with children who were more frequently spanked, slapped or hit being more likely to bully other students.

It is thought that physical discipline predicts increases in child aggression because it models aggression, promotes hostility and initiates coercive cycles of abusive behaviours between parent and child. Similarly, for decades, research has also implicated physical discipline in the aetiology of criminal and anti-social behaviours. The theoretical basis for much of this research is attribution theory in which associations between physical discipline and anti-social behaviour are believed to result from the child's inability to internalise morals and values. It is also supported by social control theory which suggests that physical discipline erodes the parent-child relationship which, in turn, decreases the child's motivation to internalise parent's values. These processes may also help explain the link between physical discipline and criminality.

Mental health and socio-emotional problems

Gershoff's (2002) review highlighted an association between physical discipline use and decreased mental well-being in both children and adults, an association supported by a range of primary

research studies identified in this review. Bugental et al (2003) assessed toddler reactions to stressful situations, finding that infants who received frequent physical discipline showed high reactivity to stress. The authors concluded that early use of physical discipline leaves children more susceptible to the effects of stressful events which may have a negative impact on their ability to cope with future life events. Using both internalising and externalising behaviour measures, Eamon (2001a) and Eamon & Zuehl (2001) found that frequent use of physical discipline was directly related to children's socio-emotional problems. However, both articles highlight that the effect is not exclusive to physical discipline and the degree of association is dependent on a range of other factors such as marital conflict and maternal depression.

In relation to adult mental health, Koenig et al's (2002) follow up study of young African-American adults examined the links between child aggression in 1st Grade as reported by teachers, the mental health of these children now aged 18 and their reports of negative caregiver strategies in childhood. The study found that teacher ratings of aggressive/disruptive behaviour were significantly higher for children reporting high use of negative caregiver strategies⁵, although it should be noted that the measurement of caregiver strategies included forms of physical discipline which could be viewed as abusive. The results also showed that increased reports of exposure to negative caregiver strategies were linked with significant increases in adult psychopathology, suicide ideation and suicide attempts. Overall, 63% of the high exposure group had a lifetime diagnosis of at least one mental illness, compared with 33% in the moderate exposure group and 28% in the low exposure group.

Similarly, Turner & Muller's (2004) study examining the long-term effects of childhood physical discipline on depressive symptoms of young adults also categorised participants into groups who experienced high, moderate and low exposure to

physical discipline. This was based on students' recollections of being spanked/slapped on the bottom, hit on the bottom with an object, slapped on the hand, arm or leg with a hand, slapped on the face/head/ears with a hand and shaken, when they were aged 13. Levels of physical discipline were positively related to depressive symptoms, independent of a history of abuse and the frequency of other forms of punishment. Interestingly, the level of parental anger during discipline was the strongest predictor of depression, even during moderate exposure. The effect of parental anger was even higher than the effect for high versus moderate levels of physical discipline. The authors suggest that physical discipline administered by an angry parent may cause the child to connect the punishment with the parent's feelings about them, rather than their behaviour.

Quality of parent-child relationship and moral internalisation

The potential for physical discipline to disrupt the parent-child relationship is thought to be one of the main disadvantages of its use as it evokes anxiety and anger in children and can erode trust and closeness. This view is supported by Gershoff's (2002) review which showed an association between physical discipline use and decreased quality in the relationship between parents and children in the included studies. Gershoff (2002) also found an association between physical discipline use and decreased moral internalisation in children, a process which is thought to underlie the development of children's social and emotional competence. Moral internalisation has been defined as:

"Taking over the values and attitudes of society as one's own so that socially acceptable behaviour is motivated not by anticipation of external consequences but by intrinsic or internal factors" (Grusec & Goodnow, 1994: 4).

It is believed that moral internalisation is enhanced by parental discipline choices that use minimal

⁵ Based on the eight caregiver strategies, some of which were adapted from the Conflict Tactics Scale – these were: avoiding talking about the issue; insulting; swearing or yelling; threatening to end the relationship; threatening to hit; pushing; grabbing, shoving or slapping; threatening with a weapon; hitting hard enough to bruise and hitting hard enough to cause bleeding.

parental power, promote choice and autonomy and provide explanations for desirable behaviours.

Being physically abused as a child

Straus (2000) states that the link between physical discipline and child abuse is as strong or stronger than the evidence on other causes of physical abuse and is also a more prevalent risk than other child abuse risk factors such as poverty. He writes:

"It is a well established principle in epidemiology that a widely prevalent risk factor with a large effect size, that is spanking, can have a much greater impact on public health than a risk factor with a large effect size, but a low prevalence such as genetic abnormalities predisposing to violence" (2000: 1112).

Whilst maltreatment leading to serious physical injury and even death is uncommon and rightly deserving of much attention, findings from previous research indicate that many more children are exposed to levels of maltreatment and discipline practices serious enough to lead to physical injury. Some abusive discipline can be conceptualised as normative discipline that has escalated to an injurious level and research has recorded it as such. For example, Straus (2000) cites findings from Gil's (1970) study which found that 63% of abuse incidents were in response to the child's behaviour. Also cited by Straus (2000) are research findings which highlight that, of 66 physical abuse cases, two thirds were physical discipline which had escalated out of control (Kadushin & Martin, 1981).

More recently Ateah & Durrant (2005) support this contention, citing the example of a Canadian study of 7,672 child maltreatment investigations in which a majority of substantiated cases of child physical abuse were found to have occurred in the context of discipline (Trocme & Durrant, 2003). This is in keeping with the findings from the previous section which highlight that the parents who use severe or abusive physical discipline are invariably a subset of

parents who use 'minor' physical discipline. Gershoff's (2002) review also concurs with this perspective, highlighting a high association between physical discipline and physical abuse in her meta-analysis. She writes:

"Child abuse in any form is a tragedy and deserves our best prevention efforts and thus the potential for corporal punishment to escalate into physical abuse must be seriously considered at the levels of scientific research and public policy" (2002: 550).

Whilst this review did not highlight many primary studies making specific links between physical discipline and physical abuse, a few articles did draw attention to the issue. Mahoney et al (2000) examined the relationship between parental use of physical discipline and severe physical aggression toward clinic-referred youth. They found that parents of clinic-referred youth were more likely to use physical discipline and twice as likely to use it with children aged 13–17 than the rest of the population. Furthermore, whilst parental use of physical discipline declined as children got older, their use of severe physical aggression did not, suggesting that clinic-referred youth may be at particular risk from physical abuse. Physical discipline use after the age of puberty is generally accepted to be inappropriate and damaging for young people and the continued use within this sample is concerning. In terms of severe aggression, the authors highlight stark differences between the clinic-referred parents and the community sample. For example, 32% of clinic-referred mothers and 24% of fathers reported slapping their child on the face, head or ears compared with 7% and 1% within the community sample. The authors suggest that use of physical discipline and severe physical aggression should be used as part of a routine, comprehensive intake procedure.

A study by Herrenkohl & Russo (2001) included a focus on the links between more abusive forms of

physical discipline and early childhood aggression amongst very different groups of children. The sample included children from abusive families, children from neglectful families, families enrolled in Head Start⁶, those in regular day care and middle-income families in private nursery provision. Upon examining maternal reports of physical discipline, the authors unexpectedly found evidence of severe discipline in a number of families from each group. This led the authors to re-categorise their original groupings to reflect the levels of severe physical discipline experienced. As with Mahoney et al's (2000) work, this highlights the prevalence of severe forms of physical discipline which are not picked up by protective services and deemed 'normal' enough by parents to be disclosed to a researcher.

Adult abuse of own spouse or child

Given that physical discipline tends to be associated with increased aggression generally, as an adult this may take the form of aggression towards other family members. Evidence supporting the intergenerational transmission of aggression shows that parents who experienced physical discipline as children also have a strong tendency to use it with their own children (Gershoff, 2002). The experience of average and extreme physical discipline (kicking, biting, beating up) by parents has also been found to be associated with an increase in the likelihood of acting violently with an adult romantic partner.

As we have seen in the previous section, a number of studies have linked parents' own experience of abuse during childhood with physical discipline use and/or physical abuse of their own children (Wissow 2001; Tajima 2000 & 2002; Banyard et al, 2003). Similarly de Paul & Dommenech (2000) found that a maternal history of 'severe' physical discipline/assault which resulted in physical damage was associated with a high risk of child abuse potential (as measured by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory). Rodriguez & Price (2004) also found that harsh or abusive experiences of

discipline in childhood increased participants' child abuse potential. However, whilst much of the available research has focused on abuse of one's own children as a potential outcome of severe or abusive discipline experiences in childhood, Rodriguez & Price's (2004) work differs in that it also attempts to better understand why children who have not been abused might perpetrate abuse as adults. Their results showed that the more a participant considered themselves to have deserved the discipline they received as a child, regardless of whether this was abusive or not, the more likely they were to indicate an intention to implement harsher, more abusive discipline with their own children.

CONDITIONAL PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE PERSPECTIVE

As we can see, a substantial body of research literature identifies a wide range of potentially negative outcomes resulting from physical discipline use which has led many to call for a complete legislative ban. Nevertheless, there are a group of researchers who argue that the research evidence does not warrant an outright ban of physical discipline.

As discussed in previous sections, study design is critical to establishing a causal link between physical discipline and child outcomes. In responding to Gershoff's (2002) paper, Baumrind et al (2002) point out that a majority of studies in Gershoff's meta analysis were cross sectional in nature and included overly 'severe' physical discipline/assault together with milder physical discipline. Many also relied on retrospective recall and were hampered by a lack of independent data sources. Taking into account these perceived methodological flaws, Baumrind et al (2002) conducted their own re-analysis. This showed that the review results varied significantly depending on the physical discipline severity, research design and

⁶ Head Start is comprised of comprehensive child development programs that serve children from birth to age 5, pregnant women and their families. They are child-focused programs which have the overall goal of increasing the school readiness of young children in low-income families across America.

independence of data sources, with well designed studies supporting smaller negative effects for physical discipline and child aggression than less well designed studies. Overall however, the re-analyses still pointed towards increased child aggression,

Similarly, in an earlier literature review, Larzelere (2000) reviewed 38 studies using robust research designs. The inclusion criteria adopted for this review were:

- Publication in a peer reviewed journal
- Having a child outcome variable for which beneficial versus detrimental outcomes were reasonably unambiguous
- Having at least one measure of non-abusive or customary physical discipline by parents
- Having a referent period for parental physical discipline which preceded the time period for parental physical discipline
- The average age of the child when spanked being younger than 13 years.

Of these 38 studies, 32% reported improved compliance as a beneficial outcome, 34% reported predominantly detrimental outcomes such as lower self esteem and increased delinquency and 34% reported neutral or mixed outcomes, a fairly balanced result. However, after considering the quality of the methodologies used, Larzelere tentatively concluded that "*the stronger the causal conclusiveness of the design, the more likely the study was to find beneficial outcomes*" (2000: p201).

His subsequent analysis of seventeen of the most causally relevant studies highlighted a range of variations in study findings which form the basis for the conditional perspective. Key aspects of this are outlined below and, where appropriate, are supplemented with the findings from other reviews.

Beneficial versus detrimental outcomes

Larzelere's (2000) review noted that physical discipline was generally beneficial in reducing non-

compliance and fighting and, to a lesser degree, in enhancing the effectiveness of alternative disciplinary tactics and parental warmth (only one case study showed an increase in maternal affection. Gershoff's (2002) review found that immediate compliance was the only potentially positive outcome of physical discipline use. However, she went on to acknowledge that this is often viewed as a limited beneficial outcome because it does not necessarily facilitate moral internalisation of societal rules and norms. It is also worth noting that the six studies in Larzelere's review with the strongest causally conclusive research designs (randomised control trials and clinical trials), all focused on compliance as the predominant child outcome and did not include other more, longer term outcomes.

In terms of detrimental outcomes, Larzelere's (2000) review also noted that physical discipline was generally found to increase externalising behaviour problems and mental health problems and reduce competencies. Whilst Paolucci and Violato's (2004) meta-analysis found an association between exposure to 'non-abusive or customary physical discipline' and increased risk of emotional or behaviours problems, the association was so small as to be considered negligible by the authors. Nevertheless, they highlight the weakness of single risk factors (such as physical discipline) as a predictor of negative outcomes, instead emphasising that it is the accumulation of multiple risk factors over time that causes the most damage.

Child age and other characteristics

Generally, studies in Larzelere's (2000) review with children averaging age 6 or younger tended to show more beneficial outcomes with those in older age groups tending to show more detrimental outcomes. Results also varied by whether the child had clinical levels of disruptive behaviour, with all six clinical studies showing predominantly beneficial outcomes for this group, although, again the outcome measures were largely limited to that

of compliance. In contrast, the remaining child samples showed much more mixed results with 54% showing predominantly detrimental findings and 46% showing predominantly beneficial findings.

Detrimental outcomes such as externalising behaviour problems also tended to be neutralised or reversed in African American and conservative Protestants families. Larzelere concluded that:

"These ethnic and religious sub-cultural differences in the outcomes of spanking probably depend on how spanking is used and its normative acceptance in those subcultures" (p210).

The differential impact of physical discipline depending on the ethnicity of the child is further supported by Whaley's (2000) literature review which found that the association between physical discipline and increased disruptive disorders found in research with European American children did not appear to be generalisable to African American children. Similarly, a systematic review by Horn et al (2004) suggested that non-abusive physical discipline may have a positive impact on the behaviour of African American children. Horn et al (2004) emphasise the different cultural meanings attached to physical discipline and the influence of cultural and contextual factors on outcomes for children but conclude that, given the range of possible confounding variables (SES, parent education and exposure to other violence), further longitudinal research is needed.

Nature of physical discipline used

Whilst Baumrind et al (2002) agree that an association between physical discipline and physical abuse exists, they stress that the two issues are quite distinct, arguing that the negative outcomes outlined in Gershoff's (2002) work partially result from her inclusion of overly severe forms of discipline which are associated with more

detrimental outcomes. Baumrind et al (2002) take the view that the risk of some parents punishing unwisely or excessively is not an argument for advising all parents not to punish at all. Nevertheless, they do acknowledge that the use of physical discipline can be a symptom of problems (if not in fact a problem in itself) before the use of physical discipline reaches a stage where it would be defined as abusive.

Larzelere's (2000) review indicated that once overly 'severe' physical discipline/assault was excluded from analysis, child outcomes tended to be beneficial. Types of physical discipline associated with negative outcomes were whipping, punching, kicking, beating up, throwing things or attempting to injure someone when frustrated and annoyed. Studies which analysed the impact of various spanking frequencies also showed that, as well as overly 'severe' physical discipline use, overly frequent physical discipline use was also associated with detrimental outcomes. The difference in outcome became statistically different when spanking reached the frequency of 1-3 times per week. Spanking was found to have predominantly beneficial outcomes when it was used conditionally and primarily as a back up to milder disciplinary tactics such as reasoning and time out. However, again the predominant outcomes measured were those of compliance and delay until the next reoccurrence of the misbehaviour. In a more recent meta-analysis comparing physical discipline with other disciplinary tactics, Larzelere & Kuhn (2005) also found that the severity and regularity of the physical discipline influenced child outcomes. In this meta-analysis the authors sought to analyse the strongest available evidence for differences between physical discipline and alternative disciplinary tactics, using studies which had been previously included in both Larzelere's (2000) earlier review as well as Gershoff's (2002) work. To facilitate this they identified four different types of physical discipline:

- 1] Conditional spanking (spanking under limited conditions which have been associated with better child outcomes).
- 2] Customary physical discipline (described as the way in which most parents 'typically' use physical discipline).
- 3] Overly 'severe' physical discipline which includes excessive tactics such as slapping, hitting with an object or out of control actions).
- 4] Predominant usage (which is when physical discipline is the parent's preferred disciplinary method).

Outcomes were grouped into four main categories – compliance; anti-social behaviour; conscience or resistance to temptation; and positive behaviours, competencies or emotions. Two age groups were also created: children with an average age greater than 7 years and children with an average age less than 7 years at the time of the discipline.

The findings showed that conditional spanking and customary physical discipline both showed mainly positive outcomes whilst overly severe or predominant physical discipline use was associated with predominantly detrimental outcomes. On the whole, conditional spanking showed a stronger association with positive outcomes than any other form of physical discipline measured. However, whilst supporting the view that detrimental outcomes are associated more with 'severe' and more abusive physical discipline, the authors also highlight the possibility of escalation from mild spanking to severe forms of physical discipline as a concern.

Key elements of the conditional spanking perspective

Based on the research evidence, the conditional perspective supports the limited use of physical discipline in the form of spanking when used non-abusively, flexibly, not too frequently and primarily as a backup to milder disciplinary tactics with children aged 2-6 years. Key elements of this

perspective as set out by Larzelere (2000) are outlined below.

Key Elements of the Conditional Perspective

1. Not overly severe
2. Under control, parent not in danger of 'losing it'
3. During ages 2-6, not during teenage years and, although evidence is inconclusive, should be phased out as soon as possible between 7-12 years
4. Used with reasoning, preferably eliciting an intermediate rather than high level of child distress
5. Used privately
6. Motivated by concern for the child, not by parent orientated concerns (e.g. from frustration, to show who is boss)
7. Used after a single warning
8. Used flexibly – if spanking does not work parents should try other approaches and tactics rather than increasing the intensity of spanking

Source: Larzelere (2000)

Comparing spanking with disciplinary alternatives

Larzelere's (2000) review also included some comparison with child outcomes in relation to whether spanking or alternative disciplinary tactics were used. Alternative disciplinary tactics included time-out, verbal reprimand, reasoning, deprivation of privileges, diverting attention or combinations of these with and without physical discipline. He found mixed results with non-abusive spanking comparing favourably with six alternatives in 2-6 year olds, having equivalent outcomes compared with four alternatives in children aged 6-9 and being less effective than grounding in teenagers. On this basis he concluded that detrimental or beneficial outcomes were largely a result of the child's age.

Similarly, Larzelere & Kuhn's (2005) meta-analysis concluded that physical discipline was associated with better outcomes than most alternative tactics but only when limited to controlled spanking for defiant responses to milder disciplinary tactics. The analysis also showed that physical discipline was only associated with better outcomes for reductions in non-compliance and anti-social behaviour. Compared to alternatives, no type of physical discipline, conditional or otherwise, was associated with positive outcomes such as conscience development and positive behaviours and feelings. When reasoning and non physical disciplines (e.g. time out, privilege withdrawal) were both compared with physical disciplines, reasoning was found to be more effective for enhancing positive child characteristics, but non-physical disciplines were better for inhibiting misbehaviour.

Based on these findings, Larzelere & Kuhn (2005) identify the need for further investigation of how parents can use disciplinary skills more effectively:

"Helping parents to skilfully encourage appropriate behaviour and prevent discipline problems and respond to them with effective verbal correction should reduce the need for punishment of any kind. Further, more skilful use of non-physical punishment should reduce the need for physical punishment" (p30).

They also highlight that parent training covering a range of disciplinary skills has achieved the most impressive reduction in physical discipline use, arguing that these interventions have been far more effective in achieving reductions in the frequency of physical discipline use than legislative change.

CONCLUSION

Clearly there is a substantial body of research linking physical discipline with a variety of negative outcomes for children, the most common of which

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

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

So how might these two positions be reconciled? It is worth noting that there are many similarities

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

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

1.5 ATTITUDES TOWARDS PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE USE

Key Points

Views/attitudes of parents/public

- Parents/members of the public in a range of Western and European countries tend to have a negative attitude towards physical discipline.
- Although there is a strong association between attitudes and behaviour the link is not always straightforward and many parents who have negative attitudes still use physical discipline.
- As with behaviour, a range of individual, family and cultural factors influence parental attitudes toward physical discipline. These include child age, parental stress, levels of social support and legislative reform.

Views/attitudes of children and young people

- Young people/adults who have experienced physical discipline are more likely to support its use, although this is influenced by the gender of the young person, the socio-economic status of their family, the type and severity of discipline received, as well as the young person's perception of discipline as abusive and how much they deserved it.
- Qualitative research within the UK shows a more definitive negative attitude toward physical discipline among younger children, with most defining smacking as being hit hard or very hard.

Views of professionals

- There appears to be a lack of consistency among professionals about how to address the issue of physical discipline, with some advocating its use and others overlooking it or not supporting it.
- Professional attitudes vary by professional discipline, age, personal use and childhood experiences.

- Professional recommendations to use physical discipline vary by child age and whether or not they have a behavioural problem or developmental delay.
- Professional beliefs and attitudes toward physical discipline have been shown to potentially impact upon perceptions of child maltreatment and reporting intentions.

This review set out to examine the attitudes and beliefs the public, parents, professionals, children and young people hold towards the use of physical discipline with children. This section discusses the positive and negative aspects of the views held by these various groups, the links that attitudes have with actual behaviour and the factors which have been shown to influence them.

PARENTAL AND PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

The review identified a number of articles which examined parental and public attitudes toward physical discipline in a range of countries. For example, research within the Chinese-American community (Yick, 2000), while focusing specifically on attitudes towards domestic violence, also included some questions on physical discipline. Overall, 43.5% agreed that spanking is an effective way to discipline children, 30.5% agreed that the use of physical discipline teaches children self-control and 3.4% agreed that hitting a child with a belt is an appropriate form of discipline.

Durrant et al's (2003) comparison of the views of Canadian and Swedish mothers found that half of Canadian mothers in the study believed it was a parent's right to physically discipline their children, whereas among the Swedish mothers, only one fifth agreed that this is the case. Nevertheless, the majority of mothers from both countries indicated a generally negative attitude towards physical

discipline, indicating a strong belief that smacking is harmful to children and is not a necessary or an effective way to instil good behaviour or change behaviour in the long-term.

In the UK, Ghate et al's (2003) nationally representative survey of parents of children aged 0-12 not only looked at the prevalence and incidence of various disciplinary tactics, but parental attitudes to physical discipline as well. It found that 40% of parents did not support the use of physical discipline, half thought it was 'sometimes' acceptable, with only one in ten parents believing that it is 'always' acceptable in any circumstances. A substantial number of parents (63%) cited preventing a child doing something dangerous as an acceptable reason for administering physical discipline. Additionally, almost all parents rejected harsher methods of physical discipline such as hitting a child with an implement like a belt.

Likewise, the Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) found that, although 29% believed smacking was an acceptable way of teaching children right from wrong, the majority (58%) agreed that it wasn't a good thing to do. Nonetheless, it was believed that sometimes parents had no other choice and had to use it as a last resort. However, eight out of ten parents were of the view that children of a certain age should not be physically disciplined, in particular neither very young children, because they would not understand, nor older children, mainly because it was felt that by a certain age parents should be able to reason or talk with them and they should know right from wrong. Some parents (17%) also believed that smacking older children would be an embarrassing or humiliating experience for the child. Smaller scale research carried out with parents of 3-5 year olds residing in Nottingham (Thompson & Pearce, 2001) also found that parental attitudes varied depending on the type of child behaviour, the age of the child and the nature or severity of the physical discipline. For example, 24% said that 3 year olds should be

smacked for unsafe behaviour, 15% for annoying behaviour, while 13% felt that 2 year olds should be smacked for unsafe behaviour and 4% for annoying behaviour. None of the sample endorsed hitting children with anything other than a hand and no-one endorsed smacking as a usual discipline method for children under 1. In response to the question on general beliefs, 39% said it was acceptable to smack children between the ages of 1-3 if their behaviour was unsafe and 26% said it was acceptable to smack a child elsewhere on their bodies besides their buttocks or hands. Similarly, Bensley et al (2004) found that the tendency to view spanking as abusive increased with the increasing severity of the discipline, from 24% for spanking a child with a hand to 95% for spanking with a belt, stick or other object so that it leaves a bruise. The author concludes that "in dealing with abusive or potentially abusive parents, it may be helpful to determine whether the individual's beliefs about what constitutes abuse are consistent with general social views" (p.1334).

In addition to exploring discipline practices and attitudes, the Nottingham study (Thompson & Pearce, 2001) also asked parents their beliefs about social services responses to children who have been smacked. The results indicated that 63% of participants believed that parents who smacked their child a lot may be taken into care by social workers. A further 50% believed that social workers say that parents aren't allowed to smack children while 46% believed that children who are smacked can get their parents into trouble by reporting this, with 39% believing that parents who smack could be reported to social services.

Links between attitudes and behaviour

Unsurprisingly, a number of research studies found evidence of a strong association between positive attitudes towards physical discipline and actual physical discipline use. For example, Ghate et al's (2003) UK research found that parents who thought physical discipline was acceptable were five times

more likely to have used it in the past year. Durrant et al (2003) also found that parents who tended to have positive attitudes towards physical discipline were more likely to use it, while the parents in Thompson & Pearce's (2001) study who endorsed the use of smacking were also found to be more likely to endorse other harsh means of discipline and to have smacked their children more in the last week.

However, the link between attitudes and behaviour is not always a straightforward one, as demonstrated by the fact that one in seven parents in Ghate et al's (2003) national survey who had used physical discipline did not support its use. Likewise, although Canadian mothers generally expressed a negative attitude towards physical discipline, two thirds still reported that they had used it as a method of discipline (Durant et al, 2003). Similarly, Thompson & Pearce (2001) found that many participants endorsed the use of non-coercive strategies for controlling children's behaviour such as getting the child's attention (93%), diversion to a different activity (90%), praise (85%), setting an example (65%), time out (58%) and giving the child something they wanted (30%). Despite this and the fact that only a minority supported smacking as a way of disciplining young children, two thirds of participants had actually smacked their child in the past week. Equally, believing that social services had the power to intervene did not seem to act as a deterrent to smacking. On the contrary, the results suggested a trend towards a positive relationship between belief in potentially adverse consequences of smacking and actual smacking behaviour.

Factors which influence public/parental attitudes towards physical discipline

The literature on attitudes towards physical discipline identified a similar range of individual, family/community and societal/cultural factors which have been shown as being related to disciplinary practices.

Individual factors

At the individual level, the Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) highlighted variation in the acceptability of smacking depending on the age of the child. Of those parents who viewed smacking as a justifiable method of disciplining children (i.e. 87% of the parents interviewed), opinions varied on the appropriateness of its use for children of different ages. In general however, there was relatively little support for smacking either very young or older children.

Paquette et al's (2000) large study of fathers in two-parent families of children aged 0–6 found that parent factors such as greater parental stress combined with more favourable attitudes towards the use of physical discipline increased the risk of child maltreatment (as evaluated by the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI)). Fathers who favoured physical discipline showed less parental empathy towards their children and were less likely to be involved in emotional support, physical play and basic care. Similarly, Crouch & Behl's (2000) smaller study also used the AAPI as well as the Child Potential Inventory (CAPI) to screen for parents at risk of committing child physical abuse in a sample of both general population and at-risk parents. In keeping with the maltreatment literature the results showed that levels of parent stress were significantly related to a parent's physical child abuse potential. However, they also indicated that parental beliefs in the value of physical discipline is an important moderating factor, with levels of stress being positively associated with the potential for child physical abuse among parents who have high levels of belief in the value of physical discipline, but not with parents who have low belief in its value. The authors conclude that this pattern of results is consistent with the theory suggesting that under conditions of high stress, the underlying belief structure of the parent may significantly impact upon parenting behaviour.

Family/community factors

Family factors such as socio-economic status and access to social support were also found to play a major role in influencing attitudes. Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) found that those parents in lower SES groups were significantly more likely than those in higher SES groups to endorse the view that there is nothing wrong with using smacking to teach children right from wrong. The parents in the lower SES groups were also less likely to say that one should not smack in any circumstances.

McCurdy's (2005) longitudinal study of young mothers of newborns, the majority of whom were single and unemployed, suggested that changes in the immediate family environment during the first year of a child's life can directly impact on mothers' punitive parenting attitudes. Maternal attitudes regarding physical discipline can be affected by increased stress levels related to changes in welfare assistance and lack of a sufficient informal support network, particularly from a partner. The findings suggest that weekly home visitation services for the first year of an infant's life that include a focus on appropriate parent-child interactions may moderate the impacts of stress and support on maternal attitudes. It was also found that an increase in informal support from partners, family or friends helped to reduce punitive attitudes and therefore child physical abuse potential. McCurdy's research concluded that in order to strengthen families and moderate multiple stress factors, an integration of holistic intervention approaches is required, such as formal social support resources on parenting and training and employment services.

Equally, some of those parents who suffered from stress in Garvey et al's (2000) study felt that support from others was essential to prevent the intergenerational transmission of physical discipline. Nevertheless, some parents who were physically disciplined as children indicated they did not use it on their own children because they had learned

other methods to ensure that their children did not experience what they had, or because they believed the physical discipline to be ineffective and realised their children might get hurt. Findings from Ateah (2003) also indicated that parents wanted more access to parenting resources and programmes in respect of age-appropriate and effective non-physical alternatives to disciplining their children. Over 90% of respondents in the study identified age-appropriate disciplinary responses and expected child development and behaviours as key areas of information that should be made available to parents of young children on a widespread basis. Ateah's research also found that parents who had learned non-physical disciplinary responses to child misbehaviour at parenting classes were less likely to support the use of physical discipline than those who had not.

An examination of a large sample of American mothers of children aged 2–14 and the messages they received about physical discipline from a variety of sources found that information received from informal sources such as family or friends was not regarded as important as that received from professionals, parenting courses and parenting books (Walsh, 2002). Conversely, findings from the Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) highlight that help and advice about parenting is not routinely sought from professionals with expertise in managing child behaviour. For example, although parents were concerned about their own parental abilities and were conscious of being held accountable for their children's behaviour, most indicated a reluctance to discuss related issues with anyone outside their circle of family or friends. When outside professional help was sought it was more likely to be in relation to younger children, with 28% of those with a child under 5 stating they would seek advice from a health visitor.

Apart from structured parenting programmes from voluntary sector organisations, the Scottish research (Anderson et al, 2002) acknowledged that in terms

of alternative, positive ways of disciplining children, little support had been provided by statutory agencies. Although advice on their children's behaviour had been provided to all respondents by health visitors, the level and quality of support varied and also ended when children became 4 years old. Parents in this study emphasised the usefulness of structured parenting programmes, particularly the alternatives learned such as rewarding positive behaviour, being consistent, coping strategies, time outs and helping children to make choices.

Societal/cultural factors

Durrant (2003) makes a strong argument for the link between attitudes and social factors such as legal reform, presenting figures which demonstrate a dramatic decline in public support for physical discipline in Sweden over the past three decades. However, this assertion is contested in some quarters with Roberts (2000) arguing that a decline in public support for physical discipline was evident a number of years prior to the adoption of the legislation and that public support for physical discipline has increased somewhat since 1981. Nonetheless, Durrant (2003) staunchly defends the link between legislative reform and attitudinal change, arguing that Roberts' (2000) paper demonstrates a lack of understanding about the history and context of Swedish legislative reform and presents an overly simplistic analysis.

In her critique she points out that it was actually 1928 which saw the beginning of legal reform when corporal punishment was outlawed in schools. This was followed by major reform in 1957, when the legal defence for physical discipline of children was withdrawn from the Penal Code and then the removal of the chastisement exemption from the Civil Code in 1966. Durrant argues that analysis of the survey data presented by Roberts' (2000) clearly shows that after each reform public attitudes changed and support for further reform increased: in 1965, 53% of the public endorsed the

statement 'A child has to be given corporal punishment from time to time', compared with 42% in 1968, 35% in 1979, 29% in 1980 and 26% in 1981. In relation to more recent attitudinal surveys, she further argues that Roberts' (2000) has not adequately taken account of the age groups of people participating and goes on to refer to data from a longitudinal study of a representative group of children from birth to adulthood which supports a decline in physical discipline use.

Findings from Durant's (2003) own research also indicate that today's Swedish mothers of young children do not support the use of physical discipline while another survey (Jutengren & Palmerus, 2002) found that Swedish fathers very rarely suggested physical discipline as a behaviour management strategy. Similarly and as already discussed, Durrant et al's (2003) comparison of Canadian and Swedish maternal attitudes shows that Canadian mothers are more likely than Swedish mothers to have positive attitudes towards the use of physical discipline. This is of some significance considering the right of Canadian parents to use 'reasonable force' and would seem to provide some support for the link between legislative reform and a change in cultural beliefs about the acceptability of physical discipline.

However, in relation to Germany, surveys covering a ten year time period have shown very little difference in public attitudes toward physical discipline (Bussmann, 2004). At both time points measured, only a minority of German parents were of the opinion that there were positive advantages in using physical discipline with children, the preference being to talk with children rather than hitting them. Equally, the majority of parents believed that beating children indicated an overreaction or a loss of control on the behalf of parents. While it might appear that parents' attitudes to physical discipline in Germany have not altered dramatically since the law was passed prohibiting physical discipline in the family,

Bussmann (2004) argues that legal prohibitions can impact on parental attitudes to both the law and the use of physical discipline through influencing discussion around non-violent alternatives. His research found that parents who knew about the legislation demonstrated greater legal awareness about physical discipline and were more likely to view the use of violent methods of discipline as unlawful. He concludes that as a result of the legal ban in Germany, there has been an:

"Increase of legal sensibility and consciousness; sensitised perception and definition of physical discipline as violence; stimulation of family discussions on sanctioning styles and on the legal limits of physical discipline" (p.309).

Durrant (2003) makes the point that regardless of whether the Swedish ban resulted in changes in parents' use of physical discipline, it acts as a symbolic indication of Sweden's commitment to respecting children's rights. She states that "the overarching reason for the ban was the recognition that children are full human beings with inherent rights to physical integrity and dignity" (p.147).

THE ATTITUDES OF CHILDREN, ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS TOWARD PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Research exploring the attitudes of children, adolescents and young adults towards physical discipline is scarce in comparison with other types of physical discipline research and the limited number of journal articles available have tended to focus on the links between receiving physical discipline as a child and attitudes toward it.

For example, a unique eight year longitudinal study (Deater-Deckard et al, 2003) carried out in an ethnically and socio-economically diverse community, sought young people's attitudes to physical discipline when they were in eighth grade

(13 years old). Although the results of the study indicated strong support both for and against parental use of physical discipline, which included slapping or hitting with a hand, spanking or using a belt, on average there was a slightly more negative view about its use among the young adolescents. The study also found that, as with adults, those young people who had experienced physical discipline were more likely to endorse it than those who had never experienced it. A similar more recent study of young adults in post secondary education (Bower-Russa et al, 2001) showed that only 28% of those categorised as having been severely physically disciplined in childhood were of the opinion that they had been physically abused and their views suggested a willingness to use physical discipline. The authors suggest that there is a tendency to "normalise" abusive behaviour which may lead some individuals to the "development of disciplinary norms and attitudes that increase risk for adult perpetration and transgenerational persistence" (p.235).

Nevertheless, receiving physical discipline as a child does not automatically equate with the development of a positive attitude towards it and the type of physical discipline received appears to influence support for its use (Ateah & Parkin 2002). In research with university students in Canada, 75% reported being physically punished as children (half first received it before they were 6 years old) and while 43.8% disagreed, 40% believed that physical discipline is a necessary means of discipline and 15.1% were neutral. The study found that those who had received what might be perceived as more harsh discipline than spanking had a more negative attitude to the use of physical discipline than those who said they were spanked as a means of discipline. However, there was no difference in attitudes towards physical discipline among those who had experienced more severe forms of physical discipline such as being whipped or hit with an implement.

It has also been demonstrated that attributions of self blame held by young adults about the discipline they received as a child have a significant role to play in attitudes about physical discipline and particularly for increasing physical abuse potential. In Rodriguez & Price's (2004) study of college students, the more a participant considered themselves as deserving of the discipline they received as a child, the more likely they were to indicate that when they had their own children they would implement harsher, more abusive discipline. Other American research with college students (Owen, 2004) explored perceptions of the outcomes of physical discipline and how these were associated with the statement 'I believe that the corporal punishment I received as a child was beneficial to me'. Those who believed that spanking had increased their compliance prevented them from misbehaving in the future and had taught them that a behaviour was wrong, were more likely to hold positive attitudes toward physical discipline.

Furthermore, research has shown that boys are slightly more likely to be accepting of physical discipline than girls (Deater-Deckard et al, 2003). Given that a significant body of research indicates that boys are more likely to be physically punished than girls, this may also impact on attitudes to physical discipline between the sexes. Indeed, findings from a Swedish study (Sorbring et al 2003) of 8 year old children's perceptions of parental discipline indicate that children are aware of gender differences, with both boys and girls perceiving boys to be more likely to receive physical discipline than girls.

However, it is interesting to note that the gender of the sibling a child has can have some impact on their beliefs about the importance of gender in discipline situations (Sorbring et al, 2003; Sorbring & Palermus, 2004). In families with siblings of the other sex, children did not perceive any significant gender differences in their parent's choice of discipline method (Sorbring et al 2003). In contrast, children with a sibling of the same sex as

themselves were more likely to perceive gender differences in parenting than children who had both brothers and sisters and children with a sibling of the opposite sex (Sorbring & Palermus, 2004). The authors suggest that without evidence showing that boys are treated more severely than girls for the same transgressions, children may respond according to gender stereotypes. Corresponding with other research showing fathers are more punitive than mothers, children, particularly boys, also perceive that their fathers use more severe discipline methods than their mothers, including physical discipline (Sorbring et al, 2003; Sorbring & Palermus, 2004).

Equally, gender has been shown to be more important to children from lower than higher SES families, possibly because gender-stereotypical discipline methods are more common in families with lower SES (Sorbring & Palermus, 2004). Young people from lower SES households are also more likely to endorse the use of physical discipline, as are African American adolescents compared with European Americans who are more disapproving (Deater-Deckard et al, 2003). This would appear to link with the findings from the characteristics section which highlighted that physical discipline was more common in lower SES and African American families. Given the link between physical discipline experiences and attitudes, it is perhaps not surprising that children in these groups are more approving of physical discipline use.

With regards to the United Kingdom, very little research has been carried out in relation to children's perspectives on physical discipline. Nevertheless, the 'grey' literature search highlighted a number of publications which provide valuable accounts of physical discipline from the child's perspective. In 1998 the National Children's Bureau and Save the Children UK conducted a unique exercise in surveying the views of young children on smacking (Willow & Hyder, 1998). This project involved 16 small group discussions with 76 5-7

year olds in six schools and two summer play schemes. Each of the school groups were divided according to age so that 5, 6 and 7 year olds were questioned separately. This exercise revealed that children themselves defined smacking as hitting, with most describing it as a hard or very hard hit and as something that hurt them. The vast majority of the children who took part thought smacking was wrong, that children respond negatively to being smacked and that adults regret smacking. The children reported normally being smacked on the bottom, arm or head, usually because they had either been violent themselves, naughty or mischievous, because they had spoiled things or because they have disobeyed or failed to listen to their parents. Half the children involved in this consultation exercise said they would not smack children when they are adults; 5 year olds most often said they would not smack children when they are big.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE AMONG PROFESSIONALS

Professional views and practices

There is little empirical evidence with regard to professional attitudes towards parental physical discipline and the degree to which this impacts on professional practices. Nevertheless, that which exists suggests considerable variability of views. For example, a US survey (Schenk et al, 2000) of the ethical beliefs and professional practices of psychologists found that, although positive recommendations for physical discipline were not mainstream, 30% reported rarely or sometimes, suggesting that parents use spanking. Additionally, just over half reported that suggesting spanking is definitely unethical, while 52% thought it was unethical under rare circumstances and 6% that it is either definitely ethical or ethical in many situations.

In a study (Kenny, 2004) of 200 teachers' attitudes towards child maltreatment, 61% agreed or strongly

agreed that all parents have the right to "discipline their children in whatever manner they see fit". From a nursing perspective, Taylor & Redman's (2003) UK survey of 200 health professionals, including health visitors, general practitioners, social workers, midwives and school nurses, found that a significant majority of those questioned felt that it was acceptable for parents to administer a 'gentle' smack to a child, either as a form of discipline or as a means of correction or warning. While not a rigorous empirical study, the paper illustrates the opposing viewpoints on smacking that exists between professional bodies and the lack of explicit positional directives available to guide professionals.

Kenny's (2004) survey also found that younger professionals were more likely to approve physical discipline, although older professionals who had smacked their own children generally appeared more inclined to refute this as an acceptable form of discipline. Psychologists in Schenk et al's (2000) study who held the belief that the existing research literature supported negative outcomes to physical discipline or who considered that they had been physically abused as children, were less likely to recommend the use of physical discipline. Furthermore, those psychologists more likely to recommend parental use of physical discipline had used it as a method of discipline with their own children. Together with Kenny's (2004) findings, they suggest a relationship between personal history and experience and professional practice.

When suggesting the use of physical discipline, the respondents in Schenk et al's (2000) study were also more likely to recommend that parents use it on younger children than older children and also significantly so on children with extreme behavioural problems than with developmental delays or medical disabilities. In turn, it was also more likely to be recommended with developmentally delayed children than those with a medical disability, again supporting those research findings which indicate that certain 'types' of

children may be more likely to be physically disciplined.

As previously discussed, a variety of terms are used to discuss physical discipline practices with terms such as smacking, beating or hitting appearing to be accepted as having a common meaning. However, in Clayman & Wissow's (2004) study of conversations about child discipline and behaviour held between paediatricians and parents, only 11% of the physicians actively sought to clarify the terms used with regards to discipline. Research also suggests that parents tend to interpret discipline messages in different ways depending on whether they smack or don't smack. For example, in Walsh's (2002) study of almost 1,000 mothers, although 63% of them regarded paediatricians as important sources of discipline information, only 37% perceived that they were opposed to the use of physical discipline.

The impact of professional attitudes on child protection

Although research exploring the impact of personal beliefs and values on professional practice was scarce, two studies did suggest a link between the two. Ashton's (2000) American study on the attitudes of 325 potential entry-level social service workers toward physical discipline found that those respondents with a higher approval of physical discipline were less likely to rate the various child protection scenarios presented to them as maltreatment and, in turn, advocate the reporting of abuse. Similarly, a more recent study by the same author (Ashton, 2004) using 276 potential entry-level social service workers, also showed that, whether together or independent of each other, personal characteristics such as ethnicity and immigrant status had a substantial effect on reporting intentions. The results highlighted a variation in the likelihood of reporting between a range of ethnic groups, with Whites most likely and Asians least likely to report. Additionally, the study found that respondents born outside the United

States were less likely to report child maltreatment than those born in the US. While arguably not reflective of the views and behaviours of practising social workers, these findings would suggest that professionals, as with other groups, are influenced by their own personal history as well as a range of other factors. This is in keeping with the research on the factors which influence physical discipline use which highlights considerable cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

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

Parents themselves have indicated that they would like more support, highlighting the need for structured parent education programmes and information on child development and disciplinary alternatives. There is also some evidence to suggest that a legal ban on physical discipline can have a positive impact on public attitudes, although the relationship between the two is unlikely to be a

simple case of cause and effect, with the ensuing debate surrounding public consultations and various legislative changes likely to contribute to attitudinal change prior to full legal reform, as well as impact on pressure for legislative change.

Attitudes towards physical discipline vary among children, young people and young adults with more supportive attitudes apparent in older age groups. Research studies have found a positive association between being exposed to physical discipline as a child and subsequent approval of its use as a discipline strategy in later life. Thus, it would appear that attitudes towards the appropriateness of physical discipline are promoted and instilled from early childhood. The normalising of physical discipline, particularly severe instances, among some young adults creates concern about the risk of perpetrating potentially injurious acts of discipline in a parenting context. Boys have been found to be more likely to be accepting of physical discipline while fathers are perceived as being more punitive than mothers by children of both gender. UK research with younger groups of children has also provided a unique insight into how this group perceive physical discipline, indicating that for them, smacking is equated with being hit hard or very hard and in a way that hurts them.

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

SECTION TWO

Physical Discipline in Northern Ireland

2.1 NORTHERN IRELAND LITERATURE

In comparison with research carried out in other countries, research into physical discipline use by parents in Northern Ireland is relatively limited. Nevertheless, there are a number of attitudinal surveys and smaller research studies which provide useful information on general prevalence, the characteristics of those who use physical discipline and their attitudes towards it. (See Appendix 6 for an overview of the surveys described in this section).

Key Points

- Approximately 50% of parents have hit or smacked their children.
- There is limited information on the factors which influence physical discipline use in Northern Ireland, although child parent factors such as age, gender and religion have been associated.
- 33–55% of parents think it is acceptable to use physical discipline, although this varies with age of the child.
- Three in ten parents would support a ban if it would not result in trivial prosecutions and three quarters would support a ban on smacking with implements.
- There is some suggestion that parent education can change parental attitudes.
- Children in Northern Ireland described a smack as a “whack”, “wallop” or a “hit”, reporting that it also resulted in emotional hurt, causing them to feel “upset, unhappy, unloved, heartbroken”.
- Both children and parents highlighted a need for increased support services for parents such

as, one-to-one work, family support and structured education programmes.

- Most childcare professionals do not consider physical discipline to be appropriate or acceptable and think it is potentially harmful.
- Provision of parent education across Northern Ireland is patchy.

PREVALENCE OF PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Several general population surveys have asked parents about their use of different forms of discipline, including physical discipline (NSPCC, 2000; OLR, 2001; Devine & Lloyd, 2005). Both the NSPCC (2000) and OLR (2001) surveys (commissioned by the Office of Law Reform as part of their consultation on physical discipline and legislative reform in Northern Ireland) were face-to-face and included 1,000 adults each. They also asked parents about discipline they had used in the past using identical wording and produced broadly similar results across many of the categories, particularly in relation to physical discipline (see Table 2.1), revealing that just under half of parents had used physical discipline. While the NSPCC (2000) survey showed other forms of discipline such as shouting, withdrawal of treats and negotiation had been used by a greater majority of parents, the OLR (2001) findings were more equivocal and showed smaller differences between physical discipline and the same categories.

Recent analysis of the data produced by the 2003 Northern Ireland Household Survey (NIHPS) (Devine & Lloyd, 2005), an annual face-to-face survey, showed slightly lower rates of physical discipline use with three out of five parents (61%) reporting

Table 2.1: A comparison of the types of discipline used by parents in NSPCC (2000) and OLR (2001) surveys

Type of physical discipline	NSPCC 2000 (n=685)	OLR 2001 (n=735)
Time out	30	23
Withdrawal of treats	62	58
Physical discipline (smacking , hitting etc)	48	45
Shouting	67	48
Negotiation/discussion	58	52
Grounding	56	58
Walking away/ignoring	23	23

that they had never spanked or slapped their child. This may be related to the differences between the wording used in NIHPS than that used in either the OLR (2001) or NSPCC (2000) surveys discussed above. Conversely, research involving parents of 4–6 year olds selected from a cross section of schools covering each of the five Education and Library Boards in Northern Ireland (Murphy-Cowan & Stringer, 2001), found much higher rates of physical discipline with 91% reporting that they had smacked their children. Given that child age has been demonstrated to be a key factor in physical discipline, the focus on a narrow age group of children is likely to have produced much higher figures than the general population surveys.

CHARACTERISTICS OF FAMILIES WHO USE PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

In keeping with the findings from the international research literature, parents in Northern Ireland are more likely to use physical discipline with younger children and male children (Murphy-Cowan & Stringer, 2001; Devine & Lloyd, 2005). Equally, Murphy-Cowan & Stringer (2001) also highlighted parent religion as a factor in physical discipline use with fundamentalist Protestants reporting more use of physical discipline and greater severity in physical discipline use than either Catholics or

mainstream Protestants. The OLR (2001) survey also demonstrated people over 50 years of age were more likely to have used physical discipline than younger parents. Similarly, of parents with no children living in the household (most likely because their children had grown up), 59% had used physical discipline, compared with 33% who had children living at home.

VIEWS/ATTITUDES TOWARD PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE

Public/parental views on the effectiveness of physical discipline

The NSPCC (2000) survey examined parents' views on the effectiveness of physical discipline and, while there was no broad agreement (see Table 2.2), it is worth noting that physical discipline was the third most commonly cited effective form of discipline. Nevertheless, the percentage itself was small and almost the same number 'didn't know', suggesting that parents themselves are sometimes at a loss to know the most effective way of disciplining children.

Public/parental views on the acceptability of physical discipline

Both the NSPCC (2000) and OLR (2001) surveys asked parents about the acceptability of different

Table 2.2: Forms of discipline reported as most effective in NSPCC (2000) survey

Type of physical discipline	%
Negotiation/discussion	19
Grounding	17
Physical discipline (smacking , hitting etc)	16
Don't know	15
Shouting	15
Withdrawal of treats	8
Time out	6
Walking away/ignoring	2
Other	2

forms of discipline, using almost identical wording. As Table 2.3 shows, there is considerable variation across the categories, particularly in relation to shouting, the use of time out and walking away. However, taken together, the findings indicate that between one third and half of parents perceive physical discipline as an acceptable form of discipline.

Not surprisingly, those who reported using physical discipline tended to view it as an acceptable form of discipline (OLR, 2001). However, there also appeared to be exceptions within younger age

groups, for example, in the 25–34 age group more people approved of physical discipline than used it. In addition, the NSPCC (2000) survey reported that almost two in five adults (37%) perceived physical discipline as being unacceptable while a further 13% used the 'don't know' response, indicating that there is a small, but significant, proportion of people who are unsure or undecided when it comes to this type of discipline. Further analysis within the OLR (2001) survey also indicated that more parents (36%) than non parents (29%) said that physical discipline was acceptable. Similar analysis within the NSPCC (2000) survey found no significant

Table 2.3: A comparison of the acceptability of different forms of discipline in NSPCC (2000) and OLR (2001) surveys

Type of physical discipline	% NSPCC 2000 parents who think it is acceptable (n=685)	% OLR 2001 parents who think it is acceptable (n= 735)
Time out	62	34
Withdrawal of treats	85	75
Physical discipline (smacking , hitting etc)	50	34
Shouting	68	29
Negotiation/discussion	88	66
Grounding	84	71
Walking away/ignoring	43	20

Table 2.4: Respondents' views on the physical discipline of children in different age groups

Views on smacking	% 0-2 years	% 3-5 years	% 6-10 years	% 11-15 years
Never justified	67	32	33	58
Maybe necessary on some occasions	30	63	62	35
Routinely necessary	2	4	3	2
Other	2	1	3	6

relationship between views on the acceptability of physical discipline and respondent income.

In the more recent NSPCC survey (2003), 1,000 respondents were asked about their views on the acceptability of the physical discipline of children within different age categories (see Table 2.4). The responses indicate that two thirds thought that smacking children under the age of 3 was never justified while almost one third thought that smacking would either be necessary on some occasions or routinely necessary. In the 3–5 and 6–10 age groups three in ten thought that smacking children of this age was never justified while almost two thirds thought that smacking might be either necessary on some occasions or routinely necessary. In the 11–15 age group three in five thought that smacking children of this age was never justified while almost two in five thought that it might be either necessary on some occasions or routinely necessary.

Changes in parental/public attitudes toward physical discipline

In their response to the Office of Law Reform consultation, Save the Children (Save the Children NI, 2001) provided information on the views of parents, children and young people and professionals toward physical discipline. As part of a wider audit of parenting education in Northern

Ireland, focus groups were carried out with over 60 parents who, for the most part, had participated in some form of parent education programme. Most of these parents viewed effective discipline as being achieved through a range of strategies which did not include hitting or smacking. Many had smacked their own children at some time but had sought out parent education in order to learn more positive ways of managing unacceptable child behaviour. While this clearly represents the views of a highly motivated group of parents, it does suggest that parent education can facilitate attitudinal change.

Views on legal reform

When asked if they thought that children should have the same basic rights and protection from assault as adults, 91% of the NSPCC (2000) sample agreed or strongly agreed. However, when asked if they would support a change in the law to make physical discipline illegal, only 32% of the sample said they would. In the 2003 NSPCC survey respondents were asked if they would support making smacking illegal if they were assured that it would not result in trivial prosecutions. However in this case, only 29% of parents indicated their support. This would suggest that, despite assurances that parents will not be prosecuted for trivial incidents, the percentage supporting a ban has dropped since 2000. This is likely however to be related to differences in the terminology used

with individual surveys with the term 'physical punishment' used in the 2000 survey potentially invoking images of harsh physical discipline in comparison with the softer term 'smacking' used in the 2003 survey.

Further analysis of the 2003 results indicated that there were no significant differences within age, gender, parental status, income and education grouping and respondents' views on changing the law. However, there were significant differences according to religious affiliation with 37% of those who affiliated themselves with the Catholic religion supporting a ban compared with 24% of those who affiliated themselves with the Protestant religion.

In addition, 64% of respondents who responded 'no' to a blanket ban on smacking were then asked additional questions about their support for a change in the law to outlaw the smacking of children of any age with implements (e.g., wooden spoon, ruler, belt). Just under two thirds indicated that they would support a ban regarding children of any age, 3% indicated that they would support this in relation to children under 5, while 8% would support it in relation to children under the age of 3.

Parental views on advice/support for parents

The Save the Children response (2001) to the Office of Law Reform consultation provided quite detailed information on parental views on advice and support available with regards to child discipline. Structured education programmes provided by the voluntary sector appeared to be the most common source of support. While all could recall receiving some advice, information or support from health visitors on behaviour management issues, statutory provision, on the whole, was reported as being very poor. The quality and extent of support from health visitors also appeared to vary greatly and it was noted that the health visiting remit stopped when children reach the age of 4. Reports of support from teachers were minimal.

In relation to the education programmes the parents had attended, all mentioned encouragement from a childcare or community worker as being a key factor in influencing them to participate. The parents also identified a range of services they considered would be useful in helping them with discipline issues, including one to one support, family support programmes and structured education programmes. Parents reported getting the most out of education programmes which created a listening and sharing environment, enabling them to explore their own feelings and attitudes together with other parents and offering them realistic and practical advice and support. Flexible programmes which recognised the reality of the pressures of day-to-day life and used appropriate language and examples were considered to be best.

Together with the parent focus groups, the parent education audit also involved obtaining information from all four Health and Social Services Boards in Northern Ireland on the provision of parenting programmes in their area. The picture which emerged appeared to support the findings from the focus groups, highlighting extremely patchy service provision with large geographical areas having no provision, as well as some relatively large towns. Where programmes were available, they were mainly carried out by health visitors with extensive caseloads, therefore as a result group work was limited. There was little evidence of the education sector playing a role and some of the statutory based programmes appeared to be too structured and lacking in flexibility.

Other major gaps in current provision identified in this audit also included:

- A lack of culturally appropriate materials/resources for the travelling community
- No materials or courses targeted towards the needs of fathers
- Inadequate parent education provision for parents with disabilities and a lack of material

which addresses the specific discipline they are likely to encounter

- Lack of support for and isolation of middle class parents
- Limited provision for families with a parent in prison.

Views of children and young people

The Save the Children response to the OLR consultation (2001) included the views of almost 200 children aged 4–11. One hundred and twenty one were surveyed using questionnaires distributed through after school clubs while a further 68 were talked to about their experiences and views on physical discipline. Another 50 young people aged 11–18 were also consulted in day workshops. Of the children who replied to the questionnaire (121), only 5 said that adults hit children to punish them while 32 said it was because the adult was angry, had lost their temper or was taking things out on the child. Furthermore, it was clear from the various definitions of smacking that children can experience significant pain and distress. Many described a smack as a “whack”, “wallop” or a “hit” but also reported the emotional hurt caused, for example, it made them feel “upset, unhappy, unloved, heartbroken”.

Of 11–18 year olds who took part in the consultation, some highlighted the lack of power equated with physical discipline and associated feelings of “hurt, fear and humiliation”. While there was a great deal of understanding among this age group of the difficulties experienced by parents which caused them to use physical discipline, such as stress or frustration, there was also a feeling that it was difficult for parents to build trust with their children when they used this type of discipline. They acknowledged that children and young people need discipline and boundaries, but rather than use physical discipline this should be achieved through positive discipline strategies. In addition, they emphasised the need for more services to support

parents, especially first time parents and parents who work outside the home.

Views of professionals

The Save the Children response to the OLR consultation (2001) reported on the findings from a survey of over 400 professionals working in the childcare field, including GPs, teachers and childcare workers in the voluntary sector. Their views were collected via postal questionnaire and supplemented by interviews with key educators about child rearing, including health visitors, social workers, family support workers and facilitators of parenting courses. Most of those surveyed believed that physical discipline is not an appropriate or acceptable way of disciplining children and would strongly encourage parents to use alternative discipline strategies. In addition, 90% of respondents also believed that children should have the same legal right as adults to protection from assault, while almost three out of four disagreed that smacking or hitting children was not harmful to children.

A recent evaluation of the 'Alternatives to Physical Punishment Training Project', an initiative developed by the Parents' Advice Centre (PAC) and Save the Children UK, has also pointed towards the positive impact of such training programmes for professionals (Monteith, 2006). The training package was designed to provide those working with children with an understanding and awareness of children's rights, with guidance and knowledge of best practice methods in dealing with children's behaviour and also to enhance their ability and confidence in sharing that information with others, particularly parents. Prior to taking part in the training programme, participants identified a number of gaps in their ability to manage children's behaviour. Four months on from completing the training, all participants reported gaining knowledge and/or skills in managing children's behaviour from the course with a majority (85%) indicating that it had helped them in their work

with children. Overall, 71% of participants stated that they had developed knowledge they could share with parents about alternatives to physical discipline and more than half of participants stated that the training had changed their opinion on how children should be disciplined.

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

children with implements with three quarters of respondents (76%) indicating support for some form of legislative change.

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

2.2 SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Key Points

- The Northern Ireland Physical Discipline Prevalence Study entailed a telephone survey of 1,000 parents of 0–10 year olds across Northern Ireland.
- The primary aim of the survey was to examine the prevalence and incidence of a range of parental disciplinary practices and attitudes towards physical discipline use.
- A secondary aim was to explore parents' perceptions of their own emotional state and that of their child, when they administer physical discipline.
- The survey used the Conflict Tactics Scale to measure the prevalence of physical discipline and the Perceived Outcomes of Physical Discipline scale to measure parental attitudes.