

# CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN PARENTING PRACTICES

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There is an increasing acceptance across the disciplines of psychology, sociology and health that an individual's development does not take place in a social vacuum (see for example Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model, e.g. Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). The development of infants, in particular, is influenced by their parents: relying on them for food, shelter, protection, health care and fostering development. Hence we might expect that those individuals and organisations which influence parents (grandparents, friends, the media) will also have an indirect, but important, influence on infants.

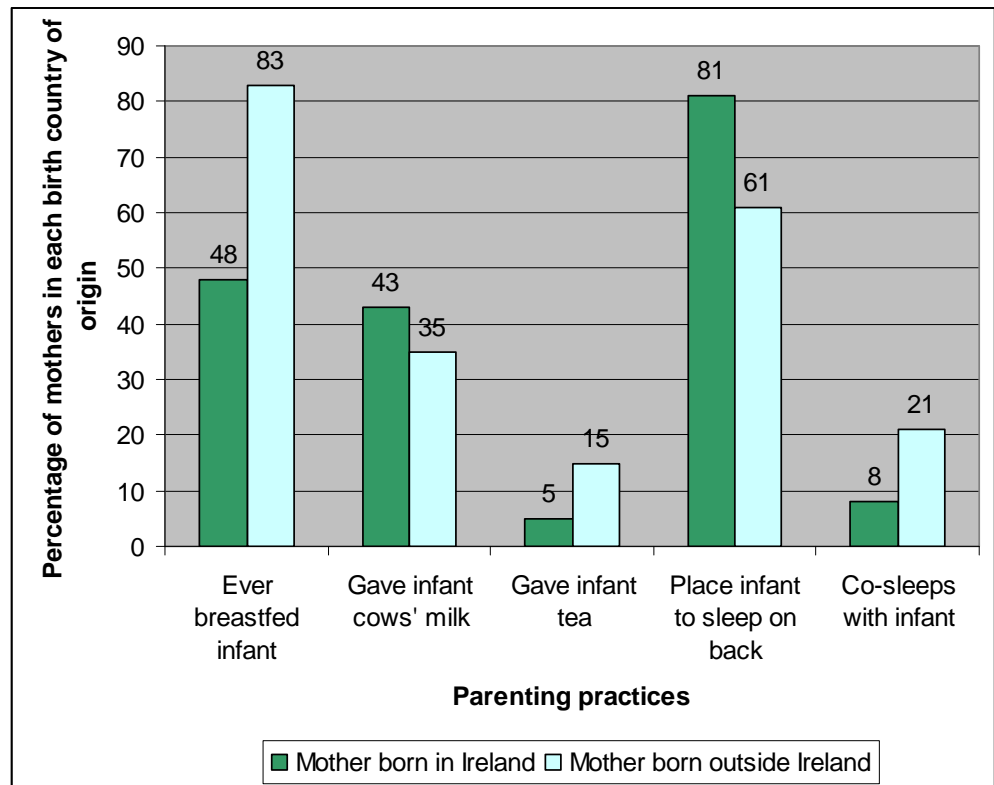
Variation across countries provide some useful evidence as to differences in the social and cultural contexts in which children are brought up. For example, one study noted that young children (aged 4-6 years) in the USA performed better on a task involving catching moving objects but their counterparts in Hong Kong did better on tasks requiring manual dexterity and balance. It was suggested by the authors that the differences in the manual dexterity could be related to early learning of writing and chopstick use (Chow, Henderson & Barnett, 2001). But cultural differences may also be observed among children born and living in the same country to parents whose country of origin differs. When comparing children within the same country influences such as climate, access to food, media and health or education policy might be expected to show less variation, allowing the role of differences in cultural child-rearing practices to be seen more clearly. The recent report\*\* on 9-month-olds in the Growing Up in Ireland study finds some interesting differences in parenting practices according to mother's country of birth for infants living in the same country. Growing Up in Ireland is a nationally representative study that included 11,100 families with infants aged 9-months. Even with a fairly rudimentary distinction of mother being born within or outside Ireland (73% and 27% respectively), several notable differences in parenting practices emerged as outlined in the following paragraphs.

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## FEEDING

Mothers born outside Ireland were much more likely to breastfeed than Irish mothers. This pattern applied when considering ever breastfeeding (83% to 48%), exclusive breastfeeding (64% to 38%) and duration of breastfeeding (14 weeks to 11 weeks). As might be expected from these figures, Irish-born mothers introduced formula milk earlier (28-days-old) than mothers born in other countries (59-days-old). In terms of other drinks, Irish-born mothers were more likely to have given their infants cows' milk (43% compared with 35%) but less likely to have given infants tea to drink (5% compared with 15%).

**Figure 1: Comparison of Parenting Practices According to Mother's Country of Birth**



## SLEEPING

Mothers born in Ireland were more likely to be following recommendations in regard to sleeping position for infants, which is placing them on their back to sleep in order to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (cot death). More than four-out-of-five Irish-born mothers (81%) usually placed their infants to sleep on their back compared to just 61% of mothers born elsewhere. Co-sleeping or bed-sharing, where the infant's usual place of sleep is in the parental bed rather than their own cot, was more common among mothers born outside Ireland (21% compared with 8%). Whether co-sleeping is beneficial or otherwise for infant development is still much debated in the literature with some arguing that it facilitates breastfeeding (McKenna, Mosko & Richard, 1997) while others point to the increased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome for some co-sleeping infants such as those whose mothers smoke (Fleming, Blair, Bacon et al, 1996).

### *Future Directions*

The Growing Up in Ireland dataset will allow further examination of cultural differences in parenting practices through disaggregation of country of origin; for example greater differences might be expected between Western and non-Western cultures than between the UK and Ireland. The data will also allow consideration of the length of time a mother has lived in Ireland and how this might affect variations in parenting practices. In terms of Government policy, it does not appear that one group (based on this simple classification) is more likely to follow recommendations than the other: non-Irish-born mothers were more likely to breastfeed but less likely to adapt the recommended sleeping position. What is clear, however, is that cultural differences in parenting practices and the reasons underlying those differences need to be considered both in the development of new child-related policies as well as the implementation of existing policies.

\*\*WILLIAMS, J., S. GREENE, S. MCNALLY, A. MURRAY and A. QUAIL (2010). [\*Growing Up in Ireland – The National Longitudinal Study of Children: The Infants and their Families\*](#). Dublin: The Stationery Office

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