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# Attitudes to parenting practices and child discipline



# **Attitudes to parenting practices and child discipline**

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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# **Executive Summary**

## **Introduction**

The University of South Wales was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake focus groups to explore parents' views about parenting practices and approaches to child discipline. The purpose of the focus group research was to inform the development of questions for use in future quantitative work around this issue. The findings from this research and the quantitative work that follows will be used to inform the development of Welsh Government policy in relation to the Programme for Government commitment to work to make physical punishment of children and young people unacceptable through the promotion of alternative, positive approaches to parenting.

## **Method**

Fourteen focus groups were conducted in eight local authority areas around Wales with mothers and fathers of children and young people aged between birth and 18 years. Each focus group was semi-structured in nature. Hypothetical scenarios and possible approaches to discipline were presented to all of the focus groups and participants were asked to think about their attitude to each of the approaches, in each of the scenarios.

## **Results**

The focus groups transcripts were analysed for emerging themes, which alongside evidence from quotes supporting these themes, were used to address the specific research questions raised in the research brief.

The main findings were:

- Parents perceive certain sources to have expertise in managing children's behaviours; these include other parents, some care/health education professionals and some TV professionals. They had not considered government sources, such as leaflets, websites and press releases or web-sites in general, as 'expert' sources.

- In every focus group, the parents commented on how good it was to discuss experiences and share them with others. The implications of such comments and the participants' perceptions of a lack of any formal support/training/discussion structure for parents of older children may be incorporated into any future intervention – whether by having face-to-face parents groups or by having on-line parent discussion fora linked to particular schools or local authority areas.
- Positive parenting was recognised by all of the parents as being the most effective way of managing children's behaviour so interventions might be strategically focused on building the associated skills since the principle is accepted.
- Parents stated that positive parenting required multiple approaches to manage behaviour. Modelling good behaviour and the use of age-appropriate sanctions were highlighted as forms of proactive practice. There was some tension in the discussion groups suggesting that parents may privately have thought reactive parenting (i.e. reacting to their child's behaviour) appropriate in certain circumstances.
- Parents also noted that instilling respect was an important aspect of positive parenting practice. Many of them valued the role of formal organisations such as scouts, air cadets and school initiatives, including sports clubs, in enabling this. It would be worth exploring the availability of and access to such organisations in future quantitative work. Schools have the access, opportunity and structures in place to facilitate the instillation of respect for others but they were not mentioned by parents in this context.
- There was a mixed response to the use of legislation in relation to parenting practice and to the usefulness of physical punishment. It was generally thought that legislation should be avoided.

### **Policy implications and future research**

The findings of this report indicate that it would be useful to explore the knowledge and opinions of a much wider sample using a questionnaire developed from the findings from the focus groups. Such a study would enable a representative sample of the Welsh population to express their views on appropriate parenting via a medium which would enable them to retain anonymity. Such research could explore the important issues identified within this report, which should be considered in developing future policies in this area.

# 1 Introduction

This report presents the findings from focus groups undertaken across Wales to explore parents' views about parenting practices and approaches to child discipline.

## 1.1 Parenting approaches to child discipline – punitive and coercive strategies

Research in such a sensitive area as parental discipline can be problematic and that is possibly a reason for the relatively small amount of published research in this area. Parents may well be reluctant to report on their own behaviour, particularly in a situation where they may feel that they are being judged or evaluated.

Reliance on punitive strategies such as physical punishment to address problem behaviours can have lasting negative effects on both children and their parents (Sidman, 2000). In extreme cases, the use of such strategies is associated with increased risks of antisocial behaviour and delinquency in children (Vuchinich *et al.*, 1992). At best, the use of punishment (and physical punishment in particular) produces a range of negative side effects, such as resentment, retaliation and fear. More importantly, a parent's use of physical punishment suggests to the child that aggression is an effective strategy for changing another person's behaviour.

Deater-Deckard and colleagues (2003) noted in an eight-year longitudinal study that children who had been physically punished by parents were more accepting of hitting and were more likely than a control group to condone the use of physical punishment for their own anticipated children. Therefore, it is not surprising that children whose parents use physical punishment as a disciplinary strategy are often more aggressive than those whose parents use more positive strategies (Gershoff, 2002). They also tend to have higher rates of mental health issues and less tendency to internalise moral values (i.e.



having a 'moral conscience'). One problem here is that most studies are correlational in design and hence do not allow for identification of causality and this fact is further complicated by the fact that the range of experiences a child may have makes it difficult to identify any singly direct causal impact of physical punishment on the child.

There is little evidence to support the use of physical punishment or other non-positive strategies as an effective means of managing behaviour despite many decades of research. Almost all of the studies that have suggested a beneficial effect have relied upon self-reports of behaviour by parents. As little distinction tended to be made between severity of punishment strategies nor indeed was frequency of punishment identified it is hard to draw any firm conclusions about the precise relationship between physical punishment, behaviour and the psychological wellbeing of the child. (Gershoff, 2002).

The finding that coercive parenting strategies (e.g. smacking, shouting, threatening and using insults) result in poorer relationships between parents and children is also well documented (Latham, 1994). Although the adverse effects of coercive practices are quite clear (Sidman, 2001), it may be difficult to isolate the specific effects of physical punishment on children and their parents. What is known is that positive parenting strategies tend not only to promote lasting change in children's behaviours (e.g. Jones *et al.*, 2007), but they can also positively affect relationships between parents and children (Latham, 1994) and reduce mental health issues in both children and their parents (Webster-Stratton and Herman, 2008).

While there is considerable research evidence for the effectiveness of positive parenting approaches to manage behaviour, there is limited evidence from a Welsh perspective. In addition little attention has been paid in Wales to parental attitudes nor to their understanding of the techniques of positive parenting. This is an area explored in the current study, particularly in relation to Welsh-specific parental attitudes.

## 1.2 Physical Punishment, Children and the Law

The current law does not prohibit the use of physical punishment to discipline children. Rather, Section 58 of the Children Act 2004, removes the availability of the reasonable chastisement defence for parents or adults acting in loco parentis where the accused is charged with wounding, causing grievous bodily harm, assault occasioning actual bodily harm or cruelty to persons less than 16 years of age. However, the reasonable chastisement defence remains available for parents and adults acting in loco parentis charged only with common assault under section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Parsons, 2007). Section 58 of the Children Act 2004 takes away the use of the defence of reasonable punishment in any proceedings for an offence of cruelty to a child or assault occasioning actual bodily harm against a child or inflicting grievous bodily harm against a child (Parsons, 2007).

A number of surveys have been undertaken which have found that the majority of parents think that the law should allow parents to smack their children. For example, an Angus Reed Public Opinion poll (2012) suggested that 63% of respondents across the UK were opposed to banning parents from smacking their children. Similarly, in research in Wales for the Western Mail newspaper, Beaufort Research (2011) found that 65% of adults would not support action to make it illegal for parents to smack their children.

## 1.3 Welsh policy context

The current and previous Welsh Governments have shown a commitment to positive parenting and the non-physical discipline of children within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The Welsh Government provides a range of support and information to parents to encourage the use of positive parenting. This is promoted through, for example, Flying Start, Families First, Communities First programmes and Integrated Family Support Services. The Family Information Service in every

local authority area also provides families with information about services and resources that can support them with positive parenting.

The Welsh Labour manifesto (2011: 59) and subsequent Programme for Government (Welsh Government, 2011) contains a commitment to: 'Work to make physical punishment of children and young people unacceptable through the promotion of positive alternatives'.

In October 2011, this commitment was reiterated by the then Deputy Minister for Children and Social Services, during a backbench-led debate in the National Assembly for Wales. The debate was on a motion urging the Welsh Government "to bring forward legislation for consideration by the Assembly which would end the availability of the defence of 'lawful chastisement' for an offence of assaulting a child"<sup>1</sup>.

During the debate the Deputy Minister stated that the Welsh Government was continuing to work with partners in local government and the health and education sectors to promote positive approaches to parenting. She said that a great deal of preparatory work would need to be done to pave the way for legislation of this sort. She confirmed that the Welsh Government would not bring forward legislation during the 2011-2016 term of the Assembly. In particular, she stated the need to understand why some parents see no alternative to physical punishment and the need for the Welsh Government to demonstrate that positive parenting skills result in better outcomes for children in the longer term.

In order to fill gaps in their current knowledge about Welsh specific attitudes towards physical punishment and parenting practices the Welsh Government commissioned this qualitative research. As noted above, the information derived from this qualitative study will be used to inform the development of questions on attitudes to the physical punishment of children for future quantitative work with a representative sample of the Welsh population.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-chamber-fourth-assembly-rop.htm?act=dis&id=224349&ds=10%2F2011#dad>

#### 1.4 Parental attitudes towards positive parenting approaches

Despite the drawbacks noted above, punitive strategies tend to be among the first 'lines of defence' selected by parents, particularly when those parents have themselves experienced punitive parenting during their upbringing. Changing parents' attitudes (and more importantly, their behaviour) with respect to punitive strategies will require access to a range of information about the influences on parents' decision-making, their understanding of the limitations of punitive strategies, their knowledge regarding alternative strategies and the degree to which parents' believe alternative strategies would 'work' with their children.

As noted earlier, research in this area is inherently problematic due to the issue of topic-sensitivity. This is for two main reasons. First, despite emphasising to parents that the research is focussed on their broad attitudes to positive parenting rather than their own parenting practices, it is difficult in practice for parents to disentangle the two. Second, discussion of sensitive issues may lead to a degree of impression management among focus group participants, where they may be less likely to be forthcoming about their views. This could potentially lead to bias in the views expressed, which is less likely to be the case when using a research instrument with greater anonymity such as a questionnaire. However, focus group research remains the best initial research approach as expectations and anxieties can be managed to a certain extent (i.e. through asking about hypothetical scenarios rather than personal experience). In a focus group, while the presence of other parents may lead to an element of impression management, at the same time the parents can see that their own views are being valued and given a full hearing.

The research presented here is preparatory work to explore the ways in which parents think about managing their children's behaviours, including an exploration of what they think about the use of physical punishment. One of the research aims is to explore their beliefs about other parents' behaviours

rather than focusing on the individual parent's own actions. Thus it is a study of parental attitudes rather than behaviours in relation to managing behaviour.

Armed with this information, it may be possible to identify the most salient and powerful avenues for enacting a change in perceptions about the appropriateness of punishment, as well as the potential benefits of using alternative techniques. These are matters which could usefully be explored with a large number of parents; such an exploration would entail a specific understanding of specific parental attitudes to positive parenting, coercive parenting and the use of physical punishment.

The Welsh Government commissioned this study of attitudes to child discipline and parenting practices to provide an overview of public perceptions about using physical punishment to discipline children. The study findings will be used to inform the development of questions for inclusion in future quantitative research, providing a baseline against which potential subsequent shifts in public opinion may be analysed.

## **2 Aims and Objectives**

The aim of the research was to inform the development of questions which could be asked in future surveys of attitudes to child discipline and parenting practices. The University of South Wales was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake focus groups to explore parents' views relating to issues including:

- the methods/techniques available to parents to manage their child's behaviour;
- where parents can seek information, support and advice about parenting and managing a child's behaviour;
- factors that might influence parents' attitudes and approaches to child discipline;
- the acceptability and effectiveness of physical punishment as a child discipline technique;
- the acceptability and effectiveness of positive parenting skills to manage child behaviour;
- the circumstances under which it is considered acceptable to use physical punishment to discipline children; and
- whether or not the law should allow parents to use physical punishment to discipline their children.

The overall objective of the research was to gain a better understanding of parents' views on a range of issues relating to managing children's behaviour, parenting practices and child discipline. The aim was not to gather data on the actual parenting practices of individual parents.

### **3. Methods**

#### 3.1 Background to method chosen

Focus groups allow for the discussion of broader ideas and knowledge around an issue rather than being focused on specific personal experiences, beliefs or attitudes (Sim, 1998). In addition, focus groups encourage the participation of people who might be reluctant or unable to be interviewed alone (Gates and Waight, 2007) and have been widely used to explore attitudes and values as they allow for discussion and the sharing and developing of ideas (Rabiee, 2004).

As the focus of interest was on parents' perceptions of how parents could respond to situations, the most appropriate method was to use focus groups. Scenarios were used to break down researcher/ participant barriers and to emphasise that the study was about possibilities and hypothetical situations rather than asking what parents had specifically experienced themselves. The sensitivity of the issues being explored means that care needs to be taken in order to allow parents to feel safe when discussing approaches and attitudes. The use of scenarios allows parents to move away from talking about their own practices and towards a more generalised commentary. Scenarios are not commonly used in focus groups but are particularly helpful when sensitive topics are being explored.

Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate in the development stage of research. They permit a flexible approach to exploring a range of ideas and values which can then, at a later stage and if appropriate, be translated into a questionnaire or checklist format for a large-scale study using a whole population or a very large sample of that population.

### 3.2 Focus Groups

Fourteen focus groups were conducted in eight local authority areas around Wales. The participants needed to be as representative as possible of the broad socio-demographic structure of the population. Selection of the number and location of focus groups was constrained by practicalities such as availability of space and response to recruitment calls. Focus groups were held in various locations to ensure the sample included parents from urban and rural areas, parents of primary school and secondary school children, and both working and non-working parents. The locations were in the following local authority areas:

- Cardiff;
- Ceredigion;
- Gwynedd;
- Merthyr Tydfil;
- Newport;
- Powys;
- Rhondda-Cynon-Taff; and
- Swansea.

A sample of schools were approached across Wales and asked if they would be willing to host a group. Where a positive response was received, recruitment letters were sent to parents through the school. University-based focus groups were recruited through snowballing (e.g. participants suggesting other people who could be approached) and distribution of letters by local schools. There were six further schools across Wales which expressed an interest in participating but which were not used for practical reasons such as unavailability on specific dates and times or being geographically too close to the location of other focus groups.

Participants were informed of the purpose and aims of the focus group before they attended and were asked to give verbal consent to participate at the start



of the session. All participants received an electronic copy of the consent form prior to attending the group (Appendix 1). Approval for the project was obtained from the School of Psychology's Ethics and Professional Practise Panel (EPPP) at the University of South Wales (Ref: SOP13-003).

Participants received a £10 incentive payment. In total, 70 parents were recruited as participants. The smallest group had two participants and the largest eight, with the majority having five or six participating. Table one (next page) summarises the distribution of participants with respect to their children's age/gender and their own age/gender. The 'other' category indicates parents who reported having adult children as well as school-age children.

Each focus group was semi-structured in nature. As it was important to tap into broad knowledge and attitudes towards parenting styles, rather than specific experiences of individual parents, it was decided to use scenarios to introduce discussion as these scenarios related to a 'typical' child with parents being asked what might be done. This directed the focus of discussions away from the parents' own behaviours to their attitudes towards positive parenting and their knowledge about where to seek information.

Hypothetical scenarios and possible approaches to discipline were presented to each group and participants were asked to think about their attitude to each of the approaches in the scenarios presented (e.g. they may think one approach is appropriate for imminent danger, but not for failing to achieve). Eight scenarios were constructed and three to four were presented during each group based on the demographics of the parents (e.g. scenarios regarding young children were selected for groups comprised primarily of parents with primary school aged children). The scenarios and the focus group facilitation guide can be found in Appendix 2. The focus group proceedings were audio taped for the purposes of transcription.

**Table one: number of participants from each key demographic (N=69)**

**(Note, of the 70 participants, one declined to provide demographic information)**

Gender	Age	Work	Boys < 11	Boys 11+	Girls < 11	Girls 11+	Boys <11 and girls < 11	Boys 11+ and girls 11+	Boys <11 and girls 11+	Boys 11+ and girls <11	Boys <11 and 11+	Girls <11 and 11+	Other combinations	
Male	18-30	No			1									
		F/T	2				1							
		P/T												
	30+	No		1										2
		F/T			2				1				1	1
		P/T												
Female	18-30	No	1		3		1			1		1		
		F/T		1										
		P/T			1									
	30+	No		2	2	1			1			2	1	6
		F/T	2	4	3	3	3	4		2			1	
		P/T		1		3		4			1			2

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Analysis of focus groups

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and commonalities from parents' discussions within the focus groups. The transcripts were analysed for emerging themes and then these themes and supporting evidence (such as context and content of quotes from parents) were used to address the specific research questions raised in relation to positive parenting outlined earlier in the report.

The process of thematic analysis involves the identification of themes which run through and across the different focus groups. The typed transcripts were analysed by identifying text (verbal output by parents) illustrating specific themes. All these themes were then examined and collapsed into major emerging themes and specific narratives were selected to exemplify the themes. In this way some thirty hours of discussion was analysed. In order for an emergent theme to be reported it had to be evidenced in more than one focus group discussion and be present for more than one element of verbal output within a single focus group. That is, a single comment by one parent in one focus group, however interesting, did not constitute a theme.

In the following section of the report, where quotes from parents are used to illustrate key themes, 'M' refers to a male parent, 'F' to a female parent and the number following the letter in parenthesis refers to the parent's age. For example, (M, 34) refers to a thirty four year-old male parent.

### 4.2 Emerging Themes

Five themes emerged from the analysis: expertise and expert knowledge; parent as the expert; positive parenting; formal structures and legislation; and respect. These are discussed in turn.

#### 4.2.1 Expertise and expert knowledge

One theme was related to the issue of expertise and expert knowledge. This theme ran through all the focus groups and across all ages of parents, regardless of the age of their children. The main issue of this theme was the understanding and definition of what constituted an 'expert' in managing children's behaviour. Some parents saw themselves as experts as a result of their experience as parents or their own experience of being parented. Some parents followed their own parents' example; while others said the opposite of what their own parents had done was 'good parenting'. However, not all parents saw themselves as knowledgeable. One parent (F, 38) said *'I get it all wrong, she is rude and runs rings round me and I don't know what to do. I give in to her and it makes her worse'* about her eight-year-old and her friend agreed that her own parenting issues were similar.

In relation to the question of where parents looked for information, few of the parents in any of the groups mentioned looking to the internet for information, government sites, Non Governmental Organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) or local authorities. When questioned further, parents said they did not understand how government departments could offer expert advice on parenting. This appeared to be due to a lack of awareness of the range of resources offered by government at a national level (as opposed to resources channelled locally through education or health services) and also a lack of awareness of how to access such information.

There was a general suspicion of web-based sources of information. It appears that parents believed that some web sites can offer little more than subjective opinion but did not feel they had the ability to make a distinction between the quality of different web-based sources. One parent mentioned a website which was a forum for mothers to discuss experiences but in a disparaging way rather than as a source of information. Another said *'I remember signing up to this one website that was to do with weeks of your pregnancy and I never cancelled it and I still get emails now, ... and if it is*

*relevant like 'is your seven-year old being cheeky' then sometimes I will have a look'* (F, 36). There was no evidence of parents reading hard-copy parenting pamphlets as an alternative to web-based sources of information.

Several parents reported finding TV programmes (referring to programmes on managing sleep behaviour, toddler tantrums and named programmes such as 'Super Nanny'<sup>2</sup>) helpful in providing information on managing behaviour and on the effectiveness of different parenting techniques. These types of programme were noted as particularly helpful because parents could see the outcomes of the recommended strategies. However one parent did comment that she felt that editing by the production teams (for the purpose of making the programme more appealing to a television audience and its message simpler) meant that the material shown was quite selective and possibly not typical either of the difficulties experienced by parents or the effectiveness in general of the techniques shown in helping parents manage such difficulties. It is possible that demonstrating the long-term effectiveness of positive parenting techniques may encourage parents to use strategies they might have otherwise been reluctant to use. They viewed the TV team as experts, partly because of the qualifications of the team (psychologists), but mainly because the programme demonstrated clear and specific outcomes. For example, one parent noted that he had learnt a lot from watching the ways in which TV experts intervened and the effectiveness of their approaches, citing the example of how best to speak to children i.e. *'yes, if you shout at them they are just going to make a million mistakes, if you explain to them nicely they take more in and they take it on board. If you are screaming they are scared and then just ignore you. I have learned a lot from those TV programmes'* (M, 42).

Expertise was also perceived by some to reside in professionals such as doctors, health visitors and teachers. Health visitors were praised as sources of advice, such as *'you know, you find lots of things out from your health*

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<sup>2</sup> 'Super Nanny' is a television programme in which an 'expert' in childcare, Super Nanny, is placed in homes where there are badly behaved and troubled children. Advice is offered to parents on managing and improving the child's behaviour in a very short period of time.

visitor mentioning it' (F, 41) and 'if they are fully armed with information or time they can give you an address or some sort of information always' (F, 36). However, some parents were more cautious, one noting that 'I'm always wary of asking my health visitor for advice because she's going to think I'm not coping or something' (F, 38). Where schools were cited as sources of expertise this was in relation to specific teachers. Parents seemed to be quite selective about the advice they acted upon; if they didn't 'agree' with it, they ignored it, suggesting either that they did not perceive genuine expertise in the professionals or that they had concerns about being able to implement any advice given. They acknowledged that information may be available but it was not always easy to know where to go, for example 'there's so much support out there, but I think there is a big job to be done to let people just know' (F, 38).

Overall, parents felt there was a lack of available expert knowledge to draw on, particularly in the form of parenting groups and specific advice from experts such as educational psychologists, teachers, health care professionals etc. Access to such people seemed only to be available after a child's problems became serious rather than professionals taking a proactive approach if a child showed signs of a developing problem. The consensus was that proactive parents were best placed to sift through what little was available to make the best of developing expertise i.e. 'parents know best'. This did not mean that parents were experts at managing behaviour but that, as parents and knowing their children well, they were best placed to be the experts making decisions about what was appropriate for their own children. For example, one parent noted 'I do feel strongly that there's a sort of learning to negotiate and I think if things are really winding you up you just say "this is getting on my nerves" and you can say this to some children but maybe not always... parents know their children' (F, 45). This is related to the second theme of parent as expert.

#### 4.2.2 Parent as the expert

This theme also relates to sources of information, support and expertise. Parents used other parents as sources of advice and guidance and reassurance about their own children's behaviour e.g. *'I always ask my mum or friends, when I was younger always, now I still ask but I feel I am okay'* (F, 47). However, parents of older children noted that these informal networks of parents vanished as children moved from primary to secondary school and there was no longer a gathering and discussion at the school gates. One male parent stated that he felt ignored by other parents and by teachers when it came to gaining advice and he subsequently developed his own parenting expertise and practice (positive parenting, strict boundaries, praise for good behaviour and sanctions for bad behaviour) by trial and error. He was divorced and felt that the system operated against fathers when it came to getting advice, suggesting that *'my child's mum took all these parenting classes which I would say fifty percent of them were against dads...loads of different activities for mums but not one for dads'* (M, 37).

The majority of the parents felt that knowledge of the individual child (e.g. *'all children are different, you can't treat them the same'* (F, 34)) was far more important than theoretical knowledge or outsider expertise when it came to managing their children's behaviour.

#### 4.2.3 Positive parenting: modelling and managing behaviour versus reactive behaviour

This theme has particular resonance for the aims of the research, particularly for two issues: the acceptability and effectiveness of physical punishment as a child discipline technique and managing behaviour; and the acceptability and effectiveness of positive parenting skills in managing child behaviour and child discipline. This theme, emerging across all groups, manifested itself in detailed and open discussion about the role, if any, of physical punishment and alternatives to this. It is interesting to note that while positive parenting was clearly recognised by the majority of parents as being most effective,

physical punishment was still widely used. Over the course of discussions around the scenarios, the majority of parents reported using physical punishment on at least one occasion with their children, often with a younger child. They volunteered this information based on their own experiences. The disclosure of physical punishment was typically evoked by the scenario in which John, a young child, runs into the road in front of a car. Several parents reported that they felt that physical punishment is often the most effective way of communicating risk to younger children. However, most parents acknowledged that using physical punishment made them feel guilty.

One mother stated that she had used physical punishment with her four-year old to communicate risk and it had produced the desired effect. However, she also noted that doing so made her feel awful and she later realised she could have produced the same effect by explaining the risk to him. Only a small minority of the parents expressed the view that physical punishment would be the best way to manage behaviour with older children. Support for positive parenting was strong, although parents admitted that they could overdo it at times. For example, *'It's only when they get older you realise...I remember her once telling us, she was three, she had relapsed potty training so when she went to nursery and she improved, we got charts with gold stars and everything. We were "oh, that was fantastic" and she put her hands on her hips and said "you are being too nice and I don't like it" (F, 48).*

Overall, there was a consensus that the most effective way to teach a child good behaviour was to model that behaviour by remaining calm and polite, thus showing respect for the child's needs whilst also explaining the competing needs of others. However, the issue of sensitivity of the disclosures made by parents during focus groups, mentioned earlier, may have impacted on parents' willingness to express their genuine beliefs in relation to this. There may well have been a tension in the group between what the 'group' thought and what individual parents may have thought privately and this may be something better explored via the anonymity of future quantitative research. Even though parents were given a 'voice', it may



be that reluctance to be identified within the group was an issue for them. This will be discussed later.

Parents also noted their own relationships were important in modelling appropriate behaviour '*it's important for parents to agree and be consistent rather than argue and bicker or shout in front of the children*' (F, 41). Parents also noted that rewarding good behaviour while applying age-appropriate sanctions for bad behaviour, such as loss of privileges for a short fixed time, could also be effective. One parent described using a points system to reward her son for helping, adding that this involved negotiating with her son as to what constituted extra 'helping', rather than being part of normal family life. It was important that family norms of positive behaviour were internalised as everyday practice and that behaving well was part of normal life and, hence, a reward in itself. Children needed to be shown clearly that these positive behaviours were part of normal everyday life for everyone in the family. Consequences of actions for the child and the whole family were also emphasised, such as '*I try to introduce consequences that will affect them and explain it*' (F, 41).

Family meetings to discuss behaviour were widely used as a means of reflecting on events and actions and, overall, were valued as a way of managing intra-family interactions as well as behaviour outside the family. This was particularly important where there was a conflict between peer pressure (or as one mum noted, 'perceived peer pressure') and family norms, regardless of the age of the child. Several parents noted that they believed children appreciate having restrictions/boundaries placed on them as it served as a means of combating peer pressure to do things they did not want to do.

The position of school as an enforcer of rules of behaviour was also discussed. Several parents were of the opinion that schools had an obligation to enforce good behaviour; an obligation that not all parents felt was met. There was much 'it was different in our day' discourse, particularly in relation to the use of punishment including the cane, detention and exclusion. The consensus was that too often, schools were reluctant to enforce good

behaviour, particularly in relation to courtesy and safety. Parents also believed that schools were entitled to enforce rules and sanction children who broke them. That said, parents did comment on the fact that many teachers showed children far more respect than they themselves had been shown as children, and this should lead to children showing more respectful behaviour towards others. Modelling good behaviour was, therefore, implicitly seen as effective.

There was an element of contradiction in the discussion of what counts as positive parenting. Arguably parents felt that any intervention which achieved the desired behavioural outcome over time could be viewed as positive parenting. In addition, the discussion concerning school discipline indicated a degree of agreement that punishment and sanctions could be as effective as positive management of behaviour. To illustrate this, one parent argued that '*I think it [physical punishment] should be allowed in schools because teachers have their hands tied behind their backs...something exceptional then I think they should at least be able to shake them or something to differentiate from just telling them off for something which isn't so dangerous*' (F, 41).

#### 4.2.4 Formal structures and legislation

Each group included a discussion of the rights and wrongs of using legislation as a means of directing the ways in which parents manage their children's behaviours. This related specifically to the question of 'Whether or not the law should allow parents to use physical punishment or prevent them from using such punishments'. As one parent said, '*I know friends of mine who have older kids do feel the government is butting in big time. Oh well, I can't do this and I can't do that, it's my own kid you know*' (F, 31). Although most of the parents had used physical punishment on occasion, a significant number stated that they would be happy for legislation to be enacted that banned its use. For example, '*there's always one parent going to take it too far, what's the line, how far can you go? If you just ban it altogether it's better*' (M, 38). However, some parents felt they had the right to do as they saw fit with their own children and would '*be prepared to go to jail to defend my right to discipline my children in the manner of my choice*' (F, 42). It is interesting to

note that this participant was also a forceful advocate for positive parenting, including family meetings, as the most effective way of managing behaviour.

There was support for activities that would allow children to channel their enthusiasm, as well as allow them to recognise feelings of responsibility to others as normal and natural, including setting rules and emphasising boundaries and personal responsibility (whether in clubs or more formal organisations such as air or army cadets or by volunteering). One mum said that her daughter joining the air cadets at age 11 had been '*the making of her*' (F, 47) not just in terms of behaviour but also motivation and self-respect. In structured organisations, actions were seen to have consequences and children learned to extrapolate from these experiences to life in general. The lack of information about such resources was identified by several parents, a feeling that there was no place where parents could find out about such activities, unless they know someone on a personal level who can pass on the information to them. Parents had to rely on word of mouth to gain information about specific activities for children and young people.

#### 4.2.5 Respect

The final theme to emerge was respect. It was a clearly held view of the majority of the parents that showing respect earned respect, whether the person showing respect to a child was a teacher, parent, doctor or other authority figure or the social and educational system itself. Parents commented on the general lack of respect shown by their children for teachers but noted that the children themselves were not always shown respect. As one father observed '*I see the office staff, and they just ignore them (the children) queuing as though they are nothing*' (M, 37). Parents felt that discussion was more effective than instruction because it engendered respect for both parties. One mother said '*if we talk about things, she understands and accepts what I tell her to do*' (F, 47). Even when the parent was always going to be the final arbiter of what was to happen, parents felt that the discussion process was more likely to lead to acceptance of decisions and seeing family rules about how to behave as being sensible and right.

Peer pressure could undermine that respect and impact on a child's behaviour but if the child felt valued, s/he would overcome temporary behavioural mishaps associated with wanting to do what peers did (or said they did).

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Triangulation with research aims

The aims of the research were primarily to find out about parental views on positive parenting. This was to be done by drawing on their attitudes towards issues relating to discipline, punishments and positive parenting rather than by asking parents about their own experiences and how they had managed their own children's behaviour. The research questions informing the study are considered broadly in the narrative above. Parents' responses to these specific questions in the focus groups are summarised below:

#### 5.1.1 What methods and techniques are available to parents to manage their child's behaviour?

Parents identified a variety of methods ranging from positive parenting techniques through to physical punishment. Approaches included detailed explanation of why behaviour was not appropriate, reward systems, family meetings, setting boundaries, modelling good behaviour and identifying good behaviour when modelled by others, praise and use of appropriate sanctions. Many, indeed most, of these methods incorporate positive parenting principles. No parent felt any single approach would help to manage all behaviours and there was a belief that at different ages, the approaches might be more or less effective. Shouting and losing one's temper was held to be 'useless' (M, 42) in helping children develop appropriate ways of behaving or managing their own emotions and anxieties.

#### 5.1.2 Where can parents seek information, support and advice about parenting and managing the child's behaviour?

Parents tended to view their own experience, other parents and their own parents as good sources of information about parenting. It was reported that in the view of parents, experts such as health visitors, doctors or schools were

in a position to be very helpful. However, this was seldom experienced as being the case, although some parents had reported that health visitors were very useful as sources of information and advice. Certain TV programmes were highly valued for ideas about dealing with some types of behaviours, such as defiance and aggression. 'Super-Nanny' was mentioned specifically as giving ideas for managing behaviour in children of all ages, as was 'The World's Strictest Parents'<sup>3</sup> programme. However, these sources were seen as less valuable for problem behaviours emanating from fear or anxiety. Indeed, the only source specifically recognised as helpful when a child was anxious was the class teacher or the head teacher at the school and even these sources were not seen as helpful by all the parents in the study. This could be problematic for parents as they considered access to alternative expert advice such as educational psychologists to be limited.

Parents discounted web-based sources of information (even those linked to TV programmes they found insightful), including government websites and those run by Non Governmental Organisations. They had not considered looking for advice in such locations. As one parent said '*All I think of when I think of the web is [named website] and I haven't found that helpful*' (F, 26). Very few parents had looked for advice in specialist printed books or leaflets. In fact the idea of reading books about parenting had not been considered by the majority of parents, other than practical books providing guidance on caring for new-borns and infants. Some had read advice in magazines, although the value of the information was largely discounted as the advice was seen as 'entertainment' rather than 'expert knowledge'. Magazines were seen as being primarily entertainment whereas television programmes (mentioned earlier) employing experts such as doctors and psychologists were seen as factual and informative.

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<sup>3</sup> The World's Strictest Parents is a television programme in which difficult and troubled children, usually in the early teens, are sent to parents in another country for two weeks to experience rigorous parenting.

### 5.1.3 Factors that influence parental attitudes and approaches to child discipline

The primary influences noted by parents were their own experiences as children (i.e. the way they were parented), as well as what they saw friends and family doing. Memories of their own feelings about punishment as children influenced many parents, especially when they recalled punishment being unjust or inappropriate. Parents also made clear that they felt different approaches were necessary for different age groups, for example reasoning was not always appropriate for a very young child. It was also suggested that the context of a behaviour would also have an impact on the approach taken. It was felt consistently that explanation (e.g. of actions and consequences and of the reasons for any boundaries set) was appropriate in all situations, although the level of explanation would vary according to the age of the child. Parents felt ill at ease in contexts where they felt they lacked knowledge or guidance or where they felt their approach was undermined by the other parent *'all she does is scream and shout at them and I've said that's not the way to handle them and still she screams and shouts and has no respect for them. It's really sad to see'* (M, 37).

### 5.1.4 The acceptability and effectiveness of physical punishment as a child discipline technique

Although one parent (M, 59) said *'Being caned never did me any harm'* the consensus was that physical punishment was neither acceptable nor effective. This appeared to be the case even among those parents who admitted having smacked their child/ren. Some parents who chose to report that they had smacked their child/ren said they had done so out of fear or frustration and occasionally anger. This issue raised concern in parents who did feel that while physical punishment was wrong, sometimes they felt it helped the child really focus on what they were doing which was wrong given the immediacy of the response on the part of the parent. They compared this to positive methods for managing behaviour which were more strategic and perhaps more distant in time from the behaviour which was causing concern.

### 5.1.5 Whether or not the law should prevent parents from using physical punishment to discipline their children

Despite many participants suggesting that smacking was not the best approach, there was disagreement about whether formal legislation outlawing physical punishment for children was encroaching into parental rights. Generally, the idea of formal legislation was not wholeheartedly welcomed, even when parents could see a case for it. As noted earlier, a parent reported she would defend her right to smack her child if she chose so to do. The debate was seen as being about the rights of the parent versus the rights of the state. Anxiety was expressed about the potential power of the state to spy on parents or to punish parents in some way. Strong opinions were expressed, ranging from support for the notion that the law should be changed to disagreement with the idea, with resentment towards perceived government interference. The idea that a change in the law might help parents was suggested by some; it was argued that if parents knew hitting was not permitted they would have to find an alternative and more positive way of parenting and managing their children's behaviour.

### 5.1.6 The acceptability and effectiveness of positive parenting skills to manage child behaviour

Parents valued positive parenting and recognised that it was about managing a child's behaviour in a way which indicates love, affection and respect for the child. The parents thought this included: focusing on the things that please a parent/carer, modelling appropriate behaviour and setting a good example; praising and rewarding desired behaviour; showing respect for the child; and hearing her/his views as part of the process of reaching a solution. They also suggested avoiding aggressive punishments, like shouting and smacking, while identifying clear limits to behaviour which are appropriate to the child's age. There was a consensus that this was the most effective way to manage behaviour whether of children or adults. The ways in which adults were seen



to manage or respond to the behaviour of other adults' was also thought to model appropriate responses for their children.

5.1.7 Under what circumstances and for what reasons is it acceptable to use physical punishment to discipline children?

Parents agreed, on the whole, that it was best to avoid physical punishment but there was disagreement as to whether it could, on occasion, be effective. For example, several parents suggested that when a small child behaved in a way which put him/her at risk, then smacking might communicate the seriousness of the situation. There was considerable discussion and some strong opinions expressed on the value of physical punishment and in particular, whether it served as a warning that something was wrong or whether it actually helped in improving children's behaviour across a range of situations. On the whole it was viewed to be not effective in improving behaviour.

## 6. Policy implications and future research

Parents perceive certain sources to have expertise in managing children's behaviours; these include other parents, some health/care/education professionals and some TV professionals. They do not see government sources or web-sites in general as 'expert' sources. This seemed to be because they lacked awareness of the range of resources the government had available. Thus any government-led initiative would need to address perceptions of expertise and would need to include proactive mechanisms to drive parents to any website. This could include asking parents what would facilitate their use of government information and resources. It may be that simple lack of awareness of the available material might be a factor.

In every focus group the parents commented on how good it was to discuss experiences and share them with others. This and the reported lack of any formal support/training/ discussion structure for parents of older children may be incorporated into any intervention – whether by having face-to-face parents' groups or by having parent discussion fora linked to particular schools or local authorities. Such possibilities certainly need to be addressed in a wider survey with a large population.

Although some parents still reported using physical punishment for their children many parents in the focus groups reported that positive parenting was the most effective way of managing children's behaviour. Interventions could be strategically focused on building the associated skills, since this principle is accepted.

There seems to be little consensus on the use of physical punishment other than that it was not effective, with the exception of communicating danger or risk. Some parents felt that while it would not help a child to learn appropriate behaviour, they still had the right to smack, while others suggested that it was never acceptable.

Given the findings reported above, it would be useful to explore the knowledge and opinions of a much wider sample using a questionnaire developed from the findings from the focus groups. The areas to be explored could include:

- What are perceived valid sources of expertise and expert knowledge? Why are these sources deemed expert?
- How are government websites used by parents and in what ways are they valued?
- What are the ways in which parents manage their children's behaviour? How and in what ways are these more or less effective?
- Do parents believe that different techniques be used for children of different ages?
- Is there a relationship between the type of behaviour to be managed and the technique used? If so what is this relationship?
- With what positive parenting techniques are parents familiar? How did they learn about these and their effectiveness? Which do they practice themselves? Which work?
- Is punishment ever effective in managing behaviour? If yes, what kind of punishment and under what circumstances is it effective?
- What is the role of government in helping parents manage children's behaviour? Should it be legislative or advisory? Or both?

To explore these issues at population level would require a broader study using a quantitative approach, with survey research seeming appropriate, using questionnaires which could be distributed in hard copy and/ or via an

on-line delivery method. Such a study would enable a representative sample of the Welsh population to express their views on appropriate parenting via a medium which would enable them to retain anonymity. Such research could explore the important issues identified above, which should be considered in developing future policies in this area.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix 1**



#### **Focus group research on parenting approaches to managing child behaviour**

#### **CONSENT STATEMENT**

##### **What's happening in the focus group?**

The focus group will consist of up to eight parents from your area. We will give you a number of descriptions of children's behaviour to look at with the other members of the focus group. We will ask you to comment about different ways of teaching children to behave well and what parents think about these different ways. In addition, we would like to talk about where it is possible to get help and information about teaching children how to behave well.

##### **Who is conducting the focus group?**

Your focus group leader will introduce themselves at the start of the session. All of the focus group leaders are academic staff based in the University of South Wales (formerly University of Glamorgan) in Pontypridd. Our contact details are at the bottom of this document.

##### **Why are we conducting this focus group?**

We are carrying out this focus group on behalf of the Welsh Government. They are interested in getting an indication of public opinion towards child

discipline and the public perception of different ways of teaching children to behave well. We would also like to find out where you get information about how to teach children to behave well from.

### **What will happen to the information gathered in this focus group?**

The session will be recorded using both audio and visual equipment. The session will then be written into a word document and you will be identified in that document by a code that will only indicate your age, gender and number of children. The comments that you make during the course of the focus group will be anonymous in the record of the focus group so that it will not be possible to identify you. We may include what you say in our report to the Welsh Government, but we will not include your name. Instead, we will use a general description of you, such as “*24-year old mum of 8-year old son*” alongside what you have said. Once we have written up notes from the focus groups, the audio and visual recordings of the focus group will be deleted.

### **Do I have to take part in this focus group?**

While we appreciate your help very much, you do not have to take part. You can choose to leave the focus group at any point and any comments you have made will not be written up. You can also choose to leave the focus group at a later date by contacting the research team. We will give you a unique number that will allow us to remove your comments from the write up. We would ask you to do this within 7 days of focus group.

### **Important Note: Safeguarding of Children**

Anyone who has knowledge, concerns or suspicions that a vulnerable person is being harmed, or is at risk of significant harm, has a responsibility to pass such concerns to those agencies who have statutory powers to investigate and intervene. Should any discussions arise during this focus group that give concern for the safety of a child, we are bound by ethical research standards to report this. Our discussions in the focus group will be **about your attitudes**



**towards parenting approaches rather than what you do and how you parent.**

### **I Agree to Participate**

At the start of the focus group, we will ask you to state that you have read this information, you understand it and that you agree to take part. You may still withdraw from the focus group after that point if you wish.

### **Contact details**

The project co-ordinator is Dr Gareth Roderique-Davies, University of South Wales, Pontypridd, CF37 1DL.

Tel: 01443 482679.

E-mail: [gareth.rdavies@southwales.ac.uk](mailto:gareth.rdavies@southwales.ac.uk).

## Appendix 2



### Discussion Guide for Focus Groups

#### PROTOCOL FOR EACH FOCUS GROUP

At the beginning of the focus group we will present 4 scenarios and possible approaches and ask participants to think about their attitude to each of the approaches in each circumstance (e.g. they may think one approach is appropriate for imminent danger, but not for failing to achieve).

#### Focus Group Scenarios

- This morning, three-year-old Jodie refused to get dressed. Her dad suggested several outfits, but Jodie cried and said she didn't like any of them. When her dad tried to help Jodie get dressed, Jodie ran into the sitting room. Her dad tried to dress her there, but Jodie escaped again. Now Jodie is going to be late for nursery and her dad is going to be late for work.
- John is an energetic three-year-old boy. Today, he let go of his mums hand and ran into the road to chase a ball. He was nearly knocked down by a van.
- Paul is 14 and won't do anything to help around the house. He is constantly leaving messes around the house to be cleared up by others. When his parents ask him to do anything he just shrugs and shuts himself in his room.
- Leslie is four and was repeatedly warned to leave her grandparents' dog alone (as he was old and had a tendency to nip at people). Leslie

continued teasing the dog, who was obviously becoming more and more agitated.

- Jack and Kelly are six and eight year old siblings who are constantly bickering and fighting. Today, they began fighting over whose turn it was to play Xbox. They were shouting and grabbing the games from one another, at which point a vase in the sitting room was knocked over and shattered on the floor.
- Anton is 20 months old and really wanted some sweets at the display by the check out in the supermarket. His mum said no and he had a tantrum.
- Sarah is in year 7 and was in top set for maths. As she has been struggling recently the school has put her into the second set – her parents are very disappointed with her for failing at school.

Possible responses from a parent could be:

The child could be sent to her/his room

The child could be asked to apologise

The parent could seek advice about the child's behaviour

The parent discusses the behaviour with the child

The child's behaviour is discussed with the in a family meeting

The child is sanctioned in some way (loss of pocket money, privileges, grounded for a length of time)

The parent distracts the child with another activity or toy

The parent reasons with the child

The parent uses praise and encouragement

Explain to the child that they can do one of a clear and limited choice of actions

The parent ignores the child's behaviour

After the scenarios have been presented, the group leader will ask "Think about the different ways that a parent might handle each situation"

## Probe Questions for the discussion

- What are some of the most effective ways that parents can help children behave well and be safe?
- What do you think influences the way a parent helps their child to behave well? e.g. how they were parented/TV programmes/the way their friends discipline their children.
- Do you think parents change their parenting practices? Why do you think parents might do this?
- Under what circumstances do you think parents might seek assistance with parenting issues?
  - when might parents seek help or be receptive to changing their parenting behaviour - at the birth of their child, when their child becomes a toddler or when they start school.
- Where can/do parents go for information about parenting issues or parenting skills GP? Health Visitor? Teacher? A web-site? A TV programme? Who else?
- Do you think the way parents behave can act as a role model for how a child behaves (or does not behave)?
- Do you think parents use praise to encourage good behaviour?

NOTE: The goal of the focus group is to ascertain the participants' answers to the general questions above. The questions and scenarios are intended to ascertain parents' beliefs about the appropriateness of particular parenting strategies, in particular situations, but not to collect information on their personal approaches to parenting.

NOTE: After scenario discussions, group leaders will return to any of the general discussion questions that might not have been addressed through the discussion of scenarios.

## **Final Discussion Question**

Some countries have made it illegal to smack children. How do you feel about that? Do you think that it would make a difference to parenting practices? Is it right for governments to legislate these types of things?