

Parenting practices and support in Scotland

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This briefing outlines some findings about current parenting practices and support for parents in Scotland from the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study. It also puts the GUS data in the context of the literature around parenting. Although it talks about 'parents', in many households mothers are more involved with the everyday care of children than fathers. These findings were originally presented to the GUS annual conference earlier this year.

Key Points

- Variation in parents' circumstances confounds evidence about parenting styles. Informal support systems and economic resources are likely to be at least as important in terms of outcomes for children
- Parental levels of education make little difference to their choice of disciplining techniques
- Most parents don't think smacking or shouting is useful when disciplining their child
- There is an association between smacking and raising your voice or shouting but most parents also try other techniques
- Grandparents and informal networks provide important support to most parents and carers
- Formal support services play a part in the lives of most parents and children. Young mothers, particularly lone mothers on low incomes, are the most wary of professionals
- Advice on parenting often goes unchallenged and is not necessarily backed up with research evidence

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Context

What is 'best' and who says?

Assessing what is 'better' or 'best' involves judgment. It is almost impossible to have a value-neutral, purely evidence-based parenting theory. Changing expert knowledge suggests continual review of how we 'know' what is 'best' and from what point of view 'best' is determined.

In currently popular TV programs psychology experts advise parents of toddlers. 'Better' here means more able to control the child's behaviour. An expert gives explicit direction to parents about how to get children to do what parents ask them to do, for the rest of us to watch. The messages are simple and often repeated with no caveats or background about evidence informing the techniques.

Academic psychologists are often concerned with the longer term impact of parenting practices on child development. What is better, from this perspective, depends on what types of parenting are seen as producing good outcomes. Maccoby (2000) summarises the evidence that parents' behaviour impacts on how children turn out. She concludes parenting behaviour

does have an impact on children's development along with genetic factors and other social and economic influences.

Much recent social science work focuses on children's wellbeing (Bradshaw et al 2006). Many studies look for associations between poor outcomes for children and aspects of parenting suspected of causing harm, such as the disruption of parents separating. Most researchers would not claim that current theory and measurement can be translated into recipes for 'best parenting'.

Circumstances and resources matter

It is generally recognised that how parenting impacts on children is a very complex matter and is difficult to distil into measurable behaviours. Different parenting styles partly reflect the different social, economic and cultural circumstances in which parents and children live. Sociologists (Gillies 2005, Hansen 2005, Lareau 2003) document how the strategies that are necessary to ensure children's wellbeing need to be very different on a housing estate with high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, vandalism and violence from those of the middle-class leafy suburb.

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The search for quantitative measures of the effects of parenting, often results in questions about behaviours and attitudes that are stripped from their social context. Context can only be, rather crudely, added back later when researchers analyse the pattern of responses by social class, type of neighbourhood and other indicators.

Small scale detailed studies of family life also suggest that it might not always be appropriate to focus on the behaviour of the main carer, as is still the norm for many studies. Most children are brought up by two parents not one, or there may be other significant adults in parenting roles. The picture of the child's experience might be very different if all parenting practices are considered.

The study

The GUS study is a longitudinal research project aimed at tracking the lives of Scottish children from the early years, through childhood and beyond. GUS surveys parents and children annually and is funded by the Scottish Government's Education Analytical Services Division.

The study's principal aim is to provide information to support policy making, but it is also intended to be a broader resource that can be drawn on by other interested parties. The survey is conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in collaboration with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR).

The first set of interviews focused on 5,217 babies (10.5 months) and 2,859 children aged 2-3 years old (34.5 months). In the second year, interviews were successfully completed with 4,512 parents of toddlers (22.5 months) and 2,500 nursery aged (46.5 months) children. This briefing is based on an analysis of the second year of GUS data.

Table 1 Discipline techniques used by group

	Toddler group (22.5 mths)		Nursery group (46.5 mths)	
	mothers	partners	mothers	partners
Ignoring bad behaviour	67%	57%	68%	59%
Raising your voice or shouting	63%	66%	76%	80%
Time out or 'naughty step'	56%	48%	79%	78%
Removing treats or privileges	29%	40%	74%	76%
Smacking	16%	16%	34%	37%
Reward system/ sticker chart	8%	14%	56%	54%
None of these	8%	9%	1%	1%

The findings

Approaches to discipline

Parents were asked whether they used a range of techniques when children's behaviour was difficult. With young children, the most commonly used was to ignore the behaviour, followed by raising the voice or shouting.

Naughty step

TV programs like Supernanny have popularised some techniques for controlling children, particularly the notion of 'time out'. This technique removes the child from conflict or disruption to allow them to calm down. It can also involve repositioning the child to a designated place such as the 'naughty step' on a staircase. Many parents used this method for their nursery aged children (see Table 1).

Removing treats and giving children rewards

Only a minority of parents of younger children remove treats or privileges and use a reward system such as stickers as a disciplining technique. Use of both techniques becomes much more common with older children but withdrawing treats remains more popular, particularly among fathers. Most parents draw on a range of techniques.

- Those who use reward systems are more likely to also use time out. 70% of mothers and 64% of their partners who mention having used a reward system have also used time out compared to 50% of parents from the majority that have never used a reward system
- Those who use reward systems are also more likely to have withdrawn privileges. 51% of mothers and 63% of partners who mention having used a reward system have withdrawn privileges from their toddler compared with 29% of main carers and 37% of partners from the majority who have never used a reward system

Smacking and shouting

The majority of parents raise their voice or shout at some point. A minority of parents thought smacking was useful (see 'What works' section below). Except for 'raising your voice', parents who smack have broadly similar or higher rates of using other techniques than parents who do not smack. This is true of both the mothers and partners.

For both mothers and partners, there is an association between smacking and raising your voice.

There is no clear or systematic variation by age, income, socio-economic status or level of education. However those with no qualifications are more likely to see smacking or shouting as useful among the toddler group (see Table 2).

At the first interview parents were asked about the extent of their agreement or disagreement with the statement, "It may not be a good thing to smack, but sometimes it is the only thing that will work". 30% of carers of babies agreed and 49% disagreed whereas 42% of carers of the older children agreed and 40% disagreed.

Parents who feel unsupported are only slightly more likely to have shouted or smacked their child than those who

Table 2 Educational qualifications of carers who see smacking or shouting as useful

	Higher or above	Standard grade	No qualifications
Smacking or shouting are very or fairly useful with 22 month old	42%	42%	44%
Smacking or shouting are very or fairly useful with 3-4 year old	38%	34%	47%

feel supported. Among parents who report "they don't get enough help" 19% have ever smacked and 70% have raised their voice or shouted compared with 15% and 60% of those who feel they have enough support.

Attitudes to professional help are not obviously strongly related to the sorts of parenting techniques people use, although further analysis needs to be done.

What works – the parent's view

Parents were asked whether they thought particular techniques were useful or not.

- The only technique identified as useful by the majority of mothers and partners of toddlers was ignoring bad behaviour
- Removing treats and privileges, time out, and reward systems were all identified by the majority as useful when interacting with the nursery group
- Less than 20%, thought smacking was useful when caring for the 3 year olds and the proportions are less for younger children
- Raising your voice or shouting, on the other hand, is seen as a useful technique by about a third of main carers and over 40% of partners
- 42% of main carers of younger children think that either smacking or raising your voice are useful and 58% think that neither are useful
- The balance edges more toward neither smacking nor shouting being useful - among the main carers of toddlers, 62% of whom say neither is useful

Support for parents

GUS measures the everyday informal support given by family and friends as well as assistance from professional practitioners. Being the main carer of a child often involves acting as the anchor point for a network of care that extends beyond the household (Hansen, 2005).

Informal support and family networks

Most GUS parents and carers feel well supported. Those

who do not are less likely to have regular contact with grandparents at the first interview.

At each interview the survey has explored the availability and use of informal care networks made up of family members and friends. The first GUS (2007) report showed the importance of grandparents. The overwhelming majority of babies and toddlers were described as having a close relationship with at least one grandparent. The majority have a grandparent living within a 20 to 30 minutes drive and see a grandparent at least once a week. For 66% of mothers of babies who use childcare, it is grandparents who provide that care. The majority of parents received some support for their parenting from their own parents.

Older mothers are more likely to find it difficult to draw on some kinds of informal support, this is largely because the child's grandparents are less likely to be available as a backup. Use of friends and neighbours as a source of support was lower in areas of deprivation.

Professional and formal support

Some attitudes about formal support services are linked. For example, carers who are not worried about being stigmatised because of asking for help are also not worried about professionals taking over. Only 4%, who strongly disagree that "others will think they are a bad parent because they ask for help", agree that "professionals take over". 47% of those who strongly agree that asking for advice is stigmatising have a much higher level of concern about professionals.

Young mothers, and particularly lone mothers in low income groups, remain most wary of professionals, although most have contact with some types of professionals.

Policy implications

- Academic work points to risks in evaluating and endorsing particular parenting styles without caveat. Each child is different and different environments require and enable different parenting strategies
- Social and economic resources are likely to be as important as parenting styles in terms of outcomes for children
- The majority view that smacking children is ineffective may indicate support for a smacking ban if it were to re-emerge as a policy objective
- Parents' familiarity with 'time out' illustrates the potential influence of TV parenting programmes
- The informal support given to parents, particularly, by grandparents, should not be underestimated or the potential disadvantage of those lacking this support. Further investigation may be needed to examine ways of supporting parents who have little or no informal support
- The wariness of young mothers on low incomes of professional help needs to be further understood and addressed