

A photograph of two children, a girl on the left and a boy on the right, seen from behind. They are holding hands and standing in a field of tall grass. The background is a bright, hazy sky, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The children are silhouetted against the light.

Physical punishment of children in the UK

RESEARCH BRIEFING



Physical punishment of children in the UK

How common is it and has it changed over time?

More than one in five 10-year-old children experienced physical punishment in 2020/21.

Physical punishment (such as smacking and hitting) is the most common form of violence against children. Scotland and Wales have recently prohibited physical punishment in all settings, while physical punishment in the home remains legal in England and Northern Ireland.

This research briefing presents data from large, representative UK cohort studies on the prevalence of child physical punishment in the UK, and changes over time.

This briefing is aimed at anyone with an interest in children's health and wellbeing, as well as children's rights.

Key Messages

- 1 Physical punishment is common in the UK. Prevalence is highest for pre-school children and declines as children get older. Boys experience more physical punishment than girls.
- 2 Physical punishment is common in all social groups. The data show little variation by household income, although prevalence is slightly lower for children living in households with the highest incomes. Differences by maternal education are more pronounced – prevalence is lower among children of more educated mothers.
- 3 The prevalence of physical punishment reported by children themselves was slightly higher, and social inequalities more pronounced, when compared to parental reports.
- 4 Data suggest that parents' use of physical punishment has declined over the last decade. However, among children aged 10 years, more than one in five still experienced physical punishment in 2020/21.
- 5 Physical punishment is a public health and children's rights issue. It is time for children to be legally protected from all physical punishment everywhere in the UK.



Background

Research has consistently shown that physical punishment can harm children’s development and wellbeing and is not effective in improving children’s behaviour.^{1,2}

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated unequivocally that protection from physical punishment in all settings, including in the family home, is a basic human right of every child.³ In the UK, physical punishment is no longer lawful in Scotland and in Wales. In England and Northern Ireland, physical punishment of a child by a parent or adult acting in loco parentis remains legal via the defence of ‘reasonable punishment’ to the offence of common assault.⁴

This briefing summarises findings from UK data on the prevalence of physical punishment, how it is related to child and family characteristics, and how it has changed over time. Data came from three large, representative cohort studies: the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS),⁵ Growing Up in Scotland (GUS),⁶ and Understanding Society.⁷

Findings

How common is physical punishment in the UK?

Figure 1 shows data from the MCS, collected between 2004 and 2008. Mothers reported their use of physical punishment (“smacking”) when children were 3, 5, and 7 years old. Physical punishment of any frequency was most common for 3-year-olds (70% for boys and 64% for girls) and decreased as children got older and moved through their primary school years. The peak around age 3 years and decrease with age is a universal finding that has also been reported internationally in comparable contexts.⁸ Looking across time, more than 80% of mothers reported using physical punishment by the time the child was 7 years old.

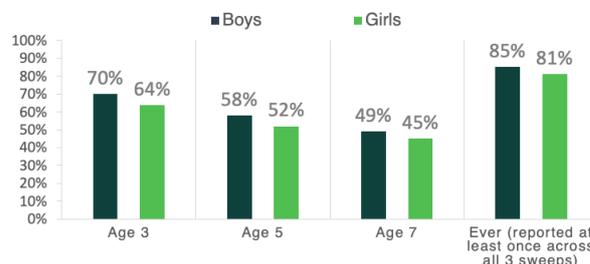


Figure 1 Prevalence of physical punishment by age and sex, Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), which follows the lives of around 19,000 children born in 2000-02 across the whole UK (data collected 2004-2008).

Does physical punishment vary by social background?

Physical punishment was common across all social groups. There was little variation by household income (Fig 2). A social gradient was however apparent by maternal education (Fig 3). Mothers with higher education levels were less likely to report physically punishing their children.

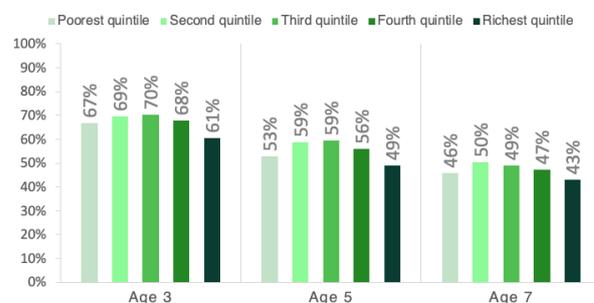


Figure 2 Physical punishment by age and household income, Millennium Cohort Study (data collected 2004-2008).

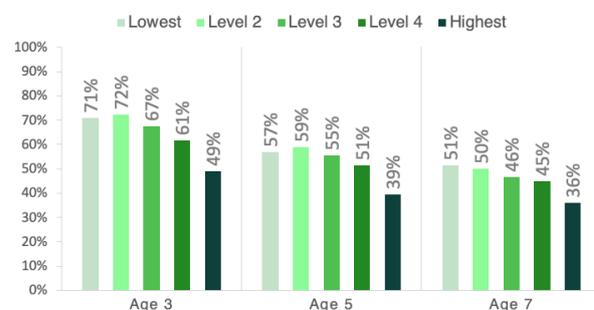


Figure 3 Physical punishment by age and maternal education, Millennium Cohort Study (data collected 2004-2008).



Do child and parent reports differ?

Growing Up in Scotland is the only large study that asked children themselves about their experience of physical punishment, when they were 7 years old (in 2013/14). The prevalence reported by children was higher than parental reports and more socially graded, suggesting that parents might underreport their use of physical punishment (Fig. 4).

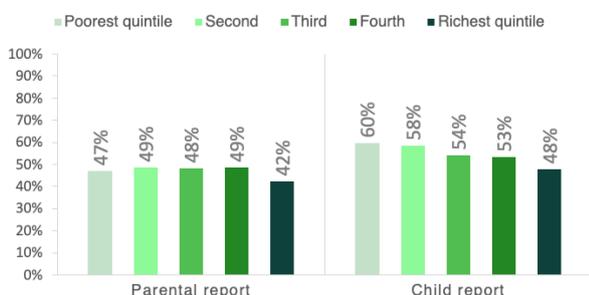


Figure 4 Physical punishment reported by parents and children aged 7 years, by household income, Growing Up in Scotland (data collected 2013/14)

Trends over time

Understanding Society follows the same households annually and asks all parents of 10-year-old children whether they use physical punishment (Fig. 5). As expected, given the children in Understanding Society were older (aged 10), the prevalence of physical punishment was lower when compared to reports for 7-year-olds in the MCS and GUS. Fathers were more likely to report using physical punishment than mothers. Since 2013/14, the reporting of physical punishment by either mothers or fathers has declined. However, in 2020/21, it was still reported for 22% of all 10-year-olds in the UK. The decline is in line with findings from the newest NSPCC YouGov survey, where 71% of respondents said that physically disciplining a child is not acceptable and 52% agreed that the law in England should be changed, suggesting major shifts in public opinion.⁹

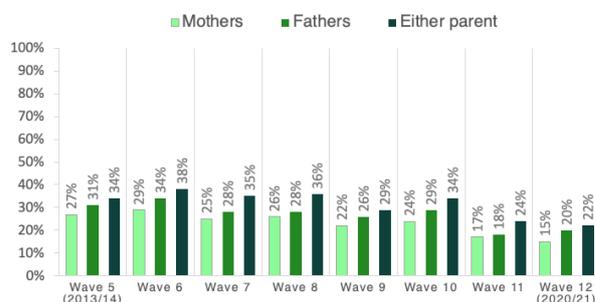


Figure 5 Prevalence of physical punishment 2013/14 to 2020/21, reported for children aged 10 years. Data from Understanding Society, a UK household panel study that follows the same households annually. If a child in the household is 10 years old at the time of the survey, both parents are asked if they use physical punishment as a way of disciplining that child.

Conclusion and policy implications

The data presented in this briefing show that physical punishment is common in the UK across all social groups, with the highest prevalence reported for very young children. While the recent decline is encouraging, in 2020/21 physical punishment was still experienced by one in five children aged 10.

Both children's rights and public health perspectives call for the protection of all children from physical punishment in all forms and settings. Evidence from other countries has shown that physical punishment declines faster where it is prohibited.¹⁰ Scotland and Wales have paved the way and reformed their laws – it is time for England and Northern Ireland to follow.



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