

Physical punishment and child outcomes in the UK

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Executive summary



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1 Introduction

Physical punishment is a major concern from both children's rights and public health perspectives (WHO, 2025, 2026). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), protection from physical punishment is a right of every child (United Nations, 1989). Although there has been considerable progress globally, with growing numbers of governments passing legislation to protect children from physical punishment, it is still legal in most countries (End Corporal Punishment, 2026). In the UK, a unique situation exists, with Scotland and Wales having prohibited physical punishment in all forms and settings, while physical punishment in the home remains legal in England and Northern Ireland via the defence of 'reasonable punishment'.

Research has consistently shown that physical punishment is harmful to children's development

and wellbeing (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Heilmann et al., 2021; WHO, 2025). However, the evidence for its negative impact rests largely on studies from the USA, while robust research using UK data is limited. In addition, there is a lack of comparative qualitative research exploring the differences between the UK jurisdictions that have prohibited physical punishment and those that have not.

This research aimed to address these gaps using both quantitative and qualitative methods, and with input from an advisory group of young people. The findings are intended to inform the ongoing debate around law reform in England and Northern Ireland, and also beyond.

2 Project aims

Quantitative workstream

The quantitative work analysed existing data to examine the prevalence of physical punishment in the UK and trends over time, as well as the impact of physical punishment on children's behavioural, cognitive, and educational outcomes.

Qualitative workstream

The qualitative work involved interviews with UK stakeholders to explore how decisions around law reform were made in the four UK countries, and to identify transferable learnings.

3 Methods

3.1 Involvement of young people

Children and young people are most directly affected by the reality of physical punishment, but their voices are often missing from the discourse. For this project, we worked with two advisory groups of young people (one in London and one in the Midlands) to ensure important issues that matter to children were not missed. Their input informed all parts of the research, including how we approached the topic, the stakeholder interviews, interpretation of findings, and dissemination.

3.2 Data analyses (quantitative workstream)

The quantitative workstream analysed existing data from UK longitudinal studies. Most of our analyses used data from the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a nationally representative, longitudinal study that follows the lives of approximately 19,000 children who were born in the UK between 2000–2002 (UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2024). We analysed data collected at regular intervals from age 9 months to 17 years to examine how physical punishment relates to family characteristics and to child outcomes over time. The MCS also includes datasets linking information from the National Pupil Database for pupils in England, which were used to examine whether physical punishment was associated with later educational attainment.

Understanding Society (USoc, also known as the UK Household Longitudinal Study or UKHLS) follows the same families every year (Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2024). When a child in the household is 10 years old at the time of data collection, both parents are asked a set of questions around parenting styles in relation to that child, including questions on physical punishment. Understanding Society was used to assess the prevalence of physical punishment in the UK and trends over time.

Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) tracks the lives of Scottish children and allows comparisons between maternal and child reports of physical punishment (Scottish Centre for Social Research, 2024).

3.3 Stakeholder interviews (qualitative workstream)

For the qualitative workstream, we interviewed 29 stakeholders across all four UK countries, representing multiple sectors with a professional or organisational interest in the subject of physical punishment. Topic guides were informed by the overarching research questions, discussions with the advisory groups of young people, and findings from the quantitative workstream. Data were analysed using framework analysis, which is a form of thematic analysis (Gale et al., 2013; Goldsmith, 2021).

4 Key findings

4.1 Key findings from quantitative data analyses

Our findings corroborate the existing international evidence that physical punishment has no benefits and is linked to detrimental outcomes for children's development and wellbeing. All observed associations were in the direction of either harmful or neutral effects.

While our analyses of links between physical punishment and child outcomes cannot establish causality, all accounted for a wide range of possible confounders, as well as the initial levels of the outcome in question. This means the results are not explained by family and child characteristics such as household income, maternal education, ethnic group, family structure, maternal mental health, maternal warmth, special educational needs, or by reverse causality.

1. Physical punishment is still common in the UK.

Despite a declining trend, physical punishment was still experienced by more than 20% of 10-year-old children in 2020/21. It is likely that younger children are substantially more affected, as physical punishment is most common during the preschool years and tends to decline as children get older.

2. Physical punishment does not improve behavioural outcomes in early childhood.

Across ages 3, 5, and 7 years, children who experienced more physical punishment displayed on average more externalising behaviours (such as conduct problems), more internalising behaviours (such as emotional problems), and fewer prosocial behaviours (such as helping others).

Physical punishment did not improve children's behaviour over time. When we examined how physical punishment and behaviours influenced each other, we found that among boys, more physical punishment at age 5 predicted fewer prosocial behaviours at age 7. Among girls, more externalising behaviours at age 3 predicted more physical punishment at age 5. When the analysis was restricted to children with complete data at all three time points, a reciprocal pattern emerged: more externalising behaviours at age 3 predicted more physical punishment at age 5, and more physical punishment at age 5 predicted more externalising behaviours at age 7. This suggests that physical punishment and externalising behaviour may reinforce each other over time.

3. Physical punishment is associated with lower literacy in early childhood.

The repeated experience of physical punishment across ages 3, 5 and 7 years was associated with lower literacy scores at age 7. There were no links between physical punishment and numeracy.

4. Physical punishment is associated with poorer GCSE outcomes at age 16 in England.

Data on GCSE results were available only for England. For young people in England, physical punishment in early childhood was associated with lower attainment at Key Stage 4 (GCSE results at age 15/16). Young people who had experienced physical punishment in childhood were less likely to achieve a standard pass (grade A*–C or 4–9) in GCSE English, in GCSE English and Maths combined, and in five GCSEs including English and Maths. The strongest links were seen for physical punishment reported at age 7, and for repeated exposure across ages 3, 5, and 7.

5. Adolescents who experienced physical punishment in early childhood were more likely to report risky and antisocial behaviours at ages 14 and 17.

Young people who experienced physical punishment during childhood were more likely to report risky and antisocial behaviours towards others and towards the environment at age 14, such as bullying, physical aggression, and vandalism. These links were strongest when physical punishment was reported later in childhood or repeatedly across survey waves. Some associations were also present at age 17, although these were weaker.

When physical punishment was experienced in combination with low maternal warmth, there was also an increased risk of risky behaviours towards the self (such as self-harm or substance misuse), and towards the environment at age 14. Maternal warmth did not make a difference to the link between physical punishment and antisocial behaviours directed at others, or any outcomes measured at age 17.

4.2 Key findings from stakeholder interviews

In line with Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon, 2014), findings from our stakeholder interviews on law reform suggest that change becomes possible when three elements come together to create a window of opportunity: recognition by policymakers that a problem exists and requires action, a feasible policy solution to address the problem, and a favourable social and political environment for the proposed policy to become accepted.

In Scotland and Wales, the main arguments for law reform were that physical punishment was a violation of children's rights, and that public health evidence demonstrated its harmful impacts on child development. Additional key arguments were the ambiguity of the existing "reasonable punishment" defence and the need to provide clarity for parents and professionals, evidence from other countries that physical punishment

increases the risk of serious abuse, and that abolishing the defence of reasonable punishment should be seen as part of wider violence prevention strategies. The weight placed on each of these arguments needed tailoring to each country's context.

Successful advocacy for law reform required broad, multisectoral coalitions including stakeholders from public health, social care, parent organisations, faith groups, and police. Advocates contributed to creating a favourable socio-political environment by securing political leadership and support, and by ensuring arguments for reform were disseminated widely and heard by relevant audiences. The argument made by opponents of law reform that it would lead to the criminalisation of parents was effectively addressed using evidence from the fast-increasing number of countries where law reform had already been enacted and such concerns had not been borne out.

Scotland and Wales also provided key insights regarding implementation, with the successful approach taken in Wales offering a blueprint for change. Wales's implementation included a comprehensive public awareness campaign, clear guidance for professionals, and additional resources for parenting support, and resulted in broad public understanding and acceptance. The Welsh experience has been evaluated and documented in a 2025 synthesis report (Tully et al., 2025).

5 Conclusions and recommendations

While physical punishment has declined over time, it still affects a substantial proportion of children in the UK.

Physical punishment has no benefits. Instead, it is associated with a range of shorter- and longer-term detrimental outcomes for the children who experience it, including increased risks of poorer educational attainment and adolescent antisocial behaviours. Given these findings, physical punishment may have a negative impact on society as a whole.

The experience of abolishing the defence of reasonable punishment in Scotland and Wales provides valuable insights and learnings for the rest of the UK and beyond. Reforming the law requires political will and leadership, and careful implementation. Once achieved, societal acceptance of law reform is high.

5.1 Recommendations for future research

More comprehensive and current UK data are needed on the prevalence and distribution of physical punishment, and on attitudes towards it. Such data should include children across all age groups, with reports from both mothers and fathers as well as from children and adolescents themselves. Data should be collected regularly and considered in the planning of new large cohort studies, to monitor trends before and after any future law reform.

We also recommend qualitative research with diverse groups of parents, children, and young people to gain deeper insights into the reasons why parents do or do not use this form of punishment, how it affects children and families, and what kinds of support can help parents adopt positive parenting strategies.

Research into parenting practices should include assessing the effectiveness of interventions to reduce physical punishment.

Where law reform is enacted, its implementation and impact should be monitored. This should include assessing trends in the prevalence of physical punishment, public attitudes, and outcomes for children, as well as monitoring contacts with police and social services, prosecutions, and offers of parenting support. Research with professionals and stakeholders should identify best practice regarding processes and referral pathways.

5.2 Recommendations for UK policy

Given the sum of the existing evidence from previous international research and the current project, as well as consideration of children's rights, we are making the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

England and Northern Ireland should follow Scotland and Wales in removing the legal defence of reasonable punishment and prohibit all physical punishment by law, to give all UK children equal protection and comply with international law as laid out by the UNCRC.

Recommendation 2:

Implementation of law reform should be carefully planned and include co-development of guidance for professionals and agencies regarding processes and referral pathways, resources for the provision of family and parenting support, and plans for monitoring and evaluation. The Welsh experience provides a useful example of successful implementation and should be used to guide implementation in England and Northern Ireland.

Recommendation 3:

Law reform should be accompanied by comprehensive public awareness campaigns including information for children and young people, and provide fact-based assurance about the preventative intent of legislative change.

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