



Violence prevention through legislative change: Qualitative insights on ending the physical punishment of children in the UK

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Physical punishment
Corporal punishment
Legislation
Law reform
Children's rights

ABSTRACT

Physical punishment violates children's rights as outlined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and has consistently been linked to detrimental outcomes, yet it remains legal in most countries. In the UK, it is prohibited in Scotland and Wales, whereas in England and Northern Ireland, the defence of 'reasonable punishment' remains available to parents.

We report findings from a qualitative study that sought to understand how law reform was achieved in Scotland and Wales and why it has been resisted in England and Northern Ireland. We interviewed 29 stakeholders across the four UK nations and a broad range of sectors. Data were analysed using framework analysis. Two advisory groups of young people provided their perspectives on the research throughout.

In line with Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework, our findings suggest that law reform becomes possible when three elements align: recognition of the problem, a feasible solution, and a favourable socio-political climate. Successful advocacy for reform centred arguments around physical punishment's incompatibility with children's rights, evidence of harm, and the need to address the ambiguity of what constitutes 'reasonable punishment'. Ultimately, the case for reform required strong cross-sector coalitions and a receptive political environment. Participants also highlighted the importance of careful implementation, including public education, parenting support, guidance for frontline professionals, and monitoring.

These findings provide transferable lessons for efforts to reform legislation in England, Northern Ireland and internationally, and add to the wider understanding of how research evidence and rights discourses can be translated into policy.

1. Introduction

The United Nations (UN) Committee on the Rights of the Child, which oversees the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), defines corporal (or physical) punishment as "any

punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light" (UNCRC, 2006). Physical punishment of children is incompatible with the UNCRC, which has been ratified by all UN member states except the USA (United Nations, 1989). Despite this, physical punishment remains the most common

This article is part of a special issue entitled: Violence against children published in Social Science & Medicine. We thank the Nuffield Foundation who funded this research (Grant number: WEL/FR-000023794:2023). The views expressed are those of the research participants and authors, and not necessarily the Foundation. Website: www.nuffieldfoundation.org

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2026.119548>

Received 6 February 2026; Received in revised form 10 June 2026; Accepted 1 July 2026

Available online 2 July 2026

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form of violence against children, with an estimated 1.2 billion children globally subjected to physical punishment in the home each year (WHO, 2025). In the UK, the limited available evidence suggests that despite a declining trend, physical punishment was experienced by one in five 10-year-olds in 2020/21, with younger children likely more affected (Heilmann et al., 2024).

Extensive research has shown that physical punishment is harmful to children's wellbeing. Detrimental outcomes include increased childhood aggression and antisocial behaviours, poorer mental health, poorer cognitive outcomes, and a heightened risk of more severe forms of maltreatment (Gershoff and Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gershoff, 2002; Heilmann et al., 2021). The evidence is particularly strong in relation to aggression and antisocial behaviours, with several studies reporting that physical punishment and aggressive behaviours reinforce each other over time (Lee et al., 2020; MacKenzie et al., 2015). Negative impacts have been observed well into adulthood, including an increasing recognition of the intersection between violence against children and violence against women (Guedes et al., 2016; Temple et al., 2018). Importantly, there are no known benefits.

A central debate within the academic literature concerns the role of legislation in reducing the physical punishment of children within the home (Freeman, 2010). Existing research demonstrates that the legal prohibition of physical punishment in the home, particularly when accompanied by public education and effective implementation measures, is associated with reductions in both the prevalence and social approval of physical punishment (Zolotor and Puzia, 2010).

At the time of writing, 70 countries across all continents have legislated to prohibit physical punishment in all forms and settings, including in the home (End Corporal Punishment, 2026). However, despite the evidence of harmful impacts and violation of children's rights, it is still legal in most countries around the world, underscoring that change is rarely driven by evidence-based or legal arguments alone. The United Kingdom (UK) presents a unique case study, with physical punishment fully prohibited in Scotland and Wales, but not in England and Northern Ireland (NI).

In England and NI, the common assault of a child by a parent or adult acting *in loco parentis* can be legal via the defence of 'reasonable punishment', as long as it does not amount to offences that constitute wounding, grievous bodily harm, actual bodily harm, or "cruelty to persons under 16" (Crown Prosecution Service, 2020). In 2019, Scotland was the first UK country to abolish their (very similar) version of the defence, with Wales following shortly after in 2020. Neither country created a new offence - removing the reasonable punishment defence automatically gave children the same legal protection from physical assault as adults. However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has repeatedly called on the UK to repeal the legal defence across all its four nations - most recently in 2023 (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023). In 2025, an attempt to reform the law in England through an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill was made but failed (UK Parliament, 2025). Fig. 1 depicts a timeline of influential national and international events and developments regarding the physical punishment of children.

Despite recognition of the role played by the political, social, and cultural contexts surrounding legislative reform, there is a gap in understanding how these factors create the conditions under which legislative proposals gain traction and achieve passage (Smith et al., 2010).

In particular, there has been limited analysis of the factors that contributed to legal reform and the experiences around implementation in Scotland and Wales, and no comparative research has yet examined differences between the four UK jurisdictions. These are research gaps that our study seeks to address.

We report findings from a qualitative study conducted as part of a mixed-methods research project on physical punishment in the UK. The aim of the current study was to understand the decision-making processes around law reform in the four UK countries, and to identify learnings that are transferable to other contexts. We sought to answer the following research questions.

- RQ1 How was law reform on physical punishment achieved in Scotland and Wales?
- RQ2 What were the main barriers and which strategies were used to overcome them?
- RQ3 How was law reform in Scotland and Wales implemented?
- RQ4 Are there transferable learnings from the process of achieving and implementing law reform in Scotland and Wales that are relevant for the rest of the UK and internationally?

2. Understanding changes in public policy

Within this article we employ Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework (MSF) (Kingdon, 2014) as a heuristic lens for examining processes of law reform. The MSF provides a widely used model for examining how, why, and when changes in public policy occur (Kingdon, 2014). The framework posits that policy change becomes possible when three distinct "streams" - the problem, the policy (solution), and the political context - align to open a "policy window" through which reform can be advanced. The problem stream concerns the recognition and framing of a particular "condition" as a problem requiring government action. In the case of physical punishment, this could involve determining whether it is viewed as a violation of children's rights, impediment to children's wellbeing, or a legitimate exercise of parental authority. The policy stream refers to the range of potential "solutions" proposed to address the identified "problem". In this context, legal prohibition of physical punishment constitutes one possible response. Competing proposals may also exist, such as prioritising parental education or awareness campaigns. These policy alternatives may be grounded in empirical evidence or in ideological positions. "Policy entrepreneurs" who advocate for specific "solutions" play a crucial role in promoting specific proposals and in mobilising support among decision-makers. The political stream comprises "such things as swings of national mood, administrative or legislative turnover, and interest group pressure campaigns" (Kingdon, 2014)(p.20), which can facilitate or hinder the adoption of a proposed solution. For instance, why has a "policy window" emerged for legal reform in some jurisdictions (Scotland and Wales) but not in others (England and NI)? This divergence suggests that, despite a strong evidence base on the detrimental effects of physical punishment, research evidence alone is insufficient. Rather, as illustrated by other studies of public health policy (e.g., water fluoridation) (Lowery et al., 2021), evidence becomes a catalyst for policy change only when it intersects with a favourable socio-political landscape.

We used the MSF as a heuristic framework to explore the alignment - or misalignment - of the three streams of problems, policies, and politics in efforts to abolish the defence of "reasonable chastisement" in the four nations of the UK. Although the MSF has been critiqued for its limitations in capturing certain dimensions of policy change (Béland and Howlett, 2016), we argue that it remains a valuable framework for exploring how stakeholders framed problems, proposed solutions, and navigated the broader socio-political context surrounding the prohibition of physical punishment.

3. Methodology

3.1. Young people's advisory groups

Work on this project involved ongoing consultations with two advisory groups of young people (one in London and one in the Midlands) to ensure children's perspectives informed the research. Their views and ideas were elicited during four interactive workshops with each group and incorporated in the development of interview topic guides. We used participatory, creative activities to encourage the groups to reflect on what they knew or assumed about physical punishment and what questions this project should explore. For example, young people were interested to understand why the four UK

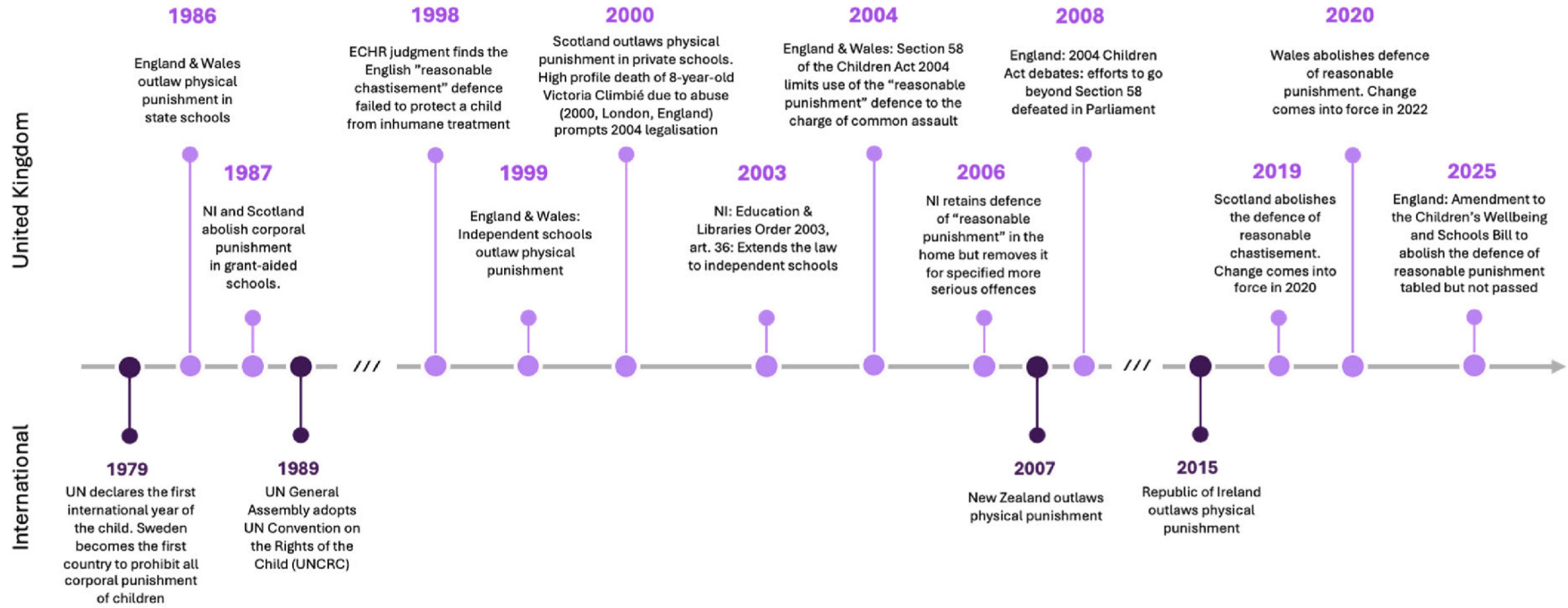


Fig. 1. Timeline of key national and international developments relevant to physical punishment legislation in the UK (note: length of segments is not proportionate to actual time).

Table 1
Stakeholder interviews.

	Number of interviews
Children's and equalities charities	7
Government advisors	5
Health sector	4
Faith groups	4
MPs/Politicians	3
Children's social care	3
Police	2
Parent groups	1
Total	29
Scotland	10
England	9
Wales	5
Northern Ireland	2
Cross-national	3
Total	29

jurisdictions have taken different approaches; how families could be supported following legal reform; and whether stakeholders had engaged with children and young people. They also looked at interview quotations and helped to identify key messages. Young people were recruited through their schools and volunteered to take part. The research team did not set any inclusion criteria in terms of their background or views on physical punishment, and both groups had a broad mix of opinions. 24 young people volunteered to take part (12 in London and 12 in the Midlands), including 13 boys and 11 girls. Both groups were ethnically diverse and aged between 12 and 15 years at the time of recruitment. Participants received a £10 voucher for each workshop they attended as a token of thanks.

3.2. Data collection and sample

The research aimed to conduct around 30 semi-structured interviews with stakeholders across sectors and all four UK countries, including policymakers, children's charities, advocacy organisations, public health professionals and academics, faith groups, parents' groups, social care professionals, and police representatives.

Stakeholders were purposively selected through recommendations from the project's expert steering group, and internet searches. Additional participants were identified using snowball sampling. Stakeholders were recruited on the basis of their ability to provide specific insights to address the study's research questions. Scottish and Welsh stakeholders were purposively recruited because of their direct involvement in, or experience of, the legal reform process and its implementation in these nations. In England and Northern Ireland, stakeholders were recruited due to their professional expertise which afforded them insight into the issue of physical punishment, the process of legislative reform or how reform might impact their professional practice. Stakeholders were largely in favour of reform or had a neutral position. Faith communities were included in the research because they are influential in shaping social values, family practices, and moral perspectives; ensuring that faith perspectives were heard is important for fostering dialogue around law reform and to understand how it may be received or contested within these communities.

Participants were invited to an online interview lasting up to an hour. An information sheet and consent form were provided prior to each interview. Interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and stored securely on a password protected server. Interview topic guides were collaboratively developed within the research team, drawing upon existing research on physical punishment and law reform, tailored to individual stakeholders, and continuously adapted to incorporate emerging insights as well as questions from the advisory groups of young people. We conducted 29 individual interviews between September 2023 and April 2025. The knowledgeable nature of the participants meant that after interviewing 29 participants, the team agreed that data

saturation had been reached. Table 1 shows the composition of the sample.

3.3. Data analysis

We employed framework analysis, a form of thematic analysis that integrates deductive and inductive approaches to develop a coding framework informed by existing research literature, while allowing for emerging and unexpected insights to be incorporated (Gale et al., 2013; Goldsmith, 2021). The research team reviewed the first ten interview transcripts and developed a preliminary coding framework informed by the research questions and existing research. This was tested and refined through a process of inter-rater coding whereby researchers independently coded the same subset of transcripts and then compared their coding decisions to identify and resolve any discrepancies, thereby ensuring a consistent understanding and application of the coding framework across the dataset. This framework was iteratively refined and expanded as further transcripts were analysed. All transcripts were coded using NVivo software (version 14). Framework matrices were subsequently generated based on 'parent' and 'child' codes corresponding to each of the research questions. Overarching themes were developed from the coded transcripts by organising them into clusters based on the similarity of their meaning. Themes were described in an analytic narrative with the inclusion of quotes to illustrate the findings.

3.4. Reflexivity

Reflexivity requires researchers to critically consider how their positionality, values, and assumptions shape the research process (Berger, 2015). Research on the physical punishment of children is inevitably situated within broader social, cultural, and ethical debates, and as such, it cannot be approached as a purely neutral exercise. In this project, the researchers take the position that physical punishment should be prohibited. This stance is informed by international human rights frameworks that emphasise children's rights to dignity and protection from all forms of violence, and the weight of existing evidence on the negative developmental consequences of physical punishment. This positioning influenced the conception of the research project and research questions we sought to address.

We took several steps to ensure rigour, transparency, and balance during the research process. Our advisory group of young people included a broad range of opinions. Workshops with young people and interview topic guides were developed with careful attention to language, using precise terminology and avoiding emotive framing. During data analysis we maintained detailed documentation of decisions made at each stage regarding coding frameworks and thematic revisions. Data were coded by multiple coders and inter-coder agreement and consistency assessed through team discussion of discrepancies using reflexive review. Where we encountered mixed views on the question of law reform, we aimed to present them transparently rather than overstating consensus.

3.5. Research ethics

Ethical approval for stakeholder interviews and workshops with the advisory groups of young people was obtained from the University College London Research Ethics Committee (reference 5366/005). All participants provided informed written consent.

4. Findings

In this section, we present the key findings from stakeholder interviews in relation to the research questions of this study.

4.1. Drivers of law reform in Scotland and Wales

4.1.1. Framing the arguments

Interviewees highlighted the framing of arguments for law reform as critically important, aligning with the *problem stream* of the MSF. In both Scotland and Wales, the main arguments centred around two areas: children's rights and the public health impact of physical punishment. However, the balance between them differed and additional framings emerged as important.

Arguments around children's rights

In both Scotland and Wales, the drive for law reform reflected a shifting discourse around children's rights, partly influenced by the UK being repeatedly criticised for its lack of compliance with the UNCRC (UN Committee on the Rights), and high-profile judgements by the European Court of Human Rights highlighting the UK's failure to adequately protect children's rights in this area, which had been regarded as a source of international embarrassment:

"A lot of discussion in the early days of the Scottish parliament was a series of European court judgements against the UK in relation to physical punishments, an absolute international point of shame." (Children's charity representative, Scotland)

The children's rights argument was given particular emphasis in Wales:

"the government came out with their proposal and grounded it very overtly in children's rights ... once it was firmly and overtly grounded in children's rights, that stopped a lot of arguments in their tracks." (Government advisor, Wales)

In both countries, reform was framed around equal protection – highlighting that abolishing the defence of reasonable punishment would give children the same protection from physical assault as adults. This framing resonated widely:

"Definitely in making the case the equal protection, the same protection as adults, was the strongest thing that people got – like people that don't work in this field ... making it as a legal loophole that needed to be closed rather than this big law change thing - definitely landed with the public." (Government advisor, Wales)

In both Wales and Scotland, reform was also framed as providing much-needed clarity for professionals working with children and families, such as police and social workers, who described existing legislation as ambiguous and unhelpful:

"It was a grey area, and people would still belt their children and think that was acceptable ... So it did need reform because it was too grey, there was too much room for interpretation." (Policing representative, Scotland)

However, campaigners in Scotland found that focusing on children's rights alone was not enough:

"[That] the argument always had to be broached in relation to children's rights had always been a source of tension because as each attempt is made and failed, you kind of feel, well I understand this is a fundamental children's rights issue, but there has to be other ways of convincing people if they're not going to hear that." (Children's charity representative, Scotland)

Arguments around the public health impact

Stakeholders highlighted the research evidence on the detrimental impact of physical punishment on children's development and wellbeing and how this was pivotal in putting law reform on the political agenda in both countries:

"That was a really important turning point ... using that evidence base and taking a slightly different strategy in terms of the campaign

and starting to then bring in a much stronger evidence base." (Government advisor, Scotland)

In Scotland, ensuring the research evidence was accessible to policymakers and other stakeholders was described as instrumental. In 2015, leading children's charities commissioned a review that summarised the existing international evidence and placed it in the Scottish context (Heilmann et al., 2015). The resulting report was seen as a catalyst for the Scottish campaign:

"That research that was commissioned in 2015 in Barnardo's – that was actually a real significant change in terms of the campaign and having a real strong evidence base to then build the wider campaign around." (Children's charity representative, Scotland)

Positioning physical punishment within the broader context of violence prevention became another key strategy. Advocates, including paediatricians and police representatives, framed physical punishment as a violent act like any other, drawing on their professional experiences of community violence:

"We talked a lot about Scotland's challenge around domestic abuse. And we placed the physical abuse or physical punishment of children within a continuum that starts way over here – that if we normalise physical punishment to children, what does that teach them about relationships further down the line?" (Children's charity representative, Scotland)

"Being really clear in terms of the concerns they [Police] had around violence in the community, and how violence creates more violence, and their understanding of how physical punishment, and assault more generally and violence in the community, was something they were really keen on addressing." (Government advisor, Scotland)

4.1.2. Building strong advocacy coalitions

Reflecting the MSF *policy stream*, stakeholders universally agreed on the critical importance of building a strong coalition across different professional sectors:

"What we thought was 'we're children's rights organisations, people expect us to talk a lot about this kind of thing' – but it's much more powerful if you can build a coalition of paediatricians, law makers, research-based people." (Children's charity representative, Scotland)

"The breadth of organisations that were supportive of it, the diversity of the voices that were included was part of the campaign, was to make sure that it wasn't just seen as the same old suspects talking about it, that actually it had a broader coalition ... it's been lots of different voices campaigning collectively – that brings legitimacy." (Parent group representative, Scotland)

Establishing these coalitions required prolonged engagement with stakeholders across police, public health, social care, as well as parent and faith groups to demonstrate how law reform would provide legal clarity and improve children's wellbeing. This also allayed concerns about implementation and negative impacts (further discussed below). Cross-sector support gave credibility and weight to the arguments for law reform and helped secure political backing:

"The fact that the enforcement bodies were in favour of it and weren't saying that this is going to use a lot more resources ... it's the same with social services and health, all the evidence from those professionals was saying this is going to help and we don't envisage that it's going to be an extra burden. Had it not said that, then things might have been different." (Government advisor, Wales)

Securing support for law reform from faith organisations and parent groups was pivotal:

“The fact that the Church of Scotland, the biggest religious group in Scotland, came out very strongly in support ... was a major issue. And then the parenting organisations, the fact that they were really supportive was an absolute game changer, because if they’d opposed it would have been a non-starter.” (Children’s charity representative, Scotland)

Children and young people’s views on physical punishment were included in both Scotland and Wales through engaging with Youth Parliaments, consultation work in schools, and children’s charities working with young people. One stakeholder commented on the impact of children’s voices:

“We just kind of used some of those voices to present the contradictions between on the one hand what we would say to children, which is do not hit other people, and then this acceptance that adults have the right and the power over children to do what they like. So I think children’s own voices within this space were probably more powerful than anybody’s.” (Children’s charity representative, Scotland)

4.1.3. *Being responsive to changes in the political context*

Stakeholders discussed the changing political contexts in Scotland and Wales and the opportunities this presented for reform. Related to the *political stream* of the MSF, legal change in Scotland and Wales became possible only after devolution from the UK Central Government. In Wales, it was not until the subsequent extension of the Senedd’s legislative powers in 2011 that progress towards changing the law could be made.

In Wales, the appointment in 2018 of a First Minister and Deputy Minister supportive of law reform and the emergence of a cross-party group of female Members of the Senedd who prioritised the issue raised its political visibility, advancing it on the policy agenda.

The establishment of Children’s Commissioners in each of the UK countries constituted another important driver. Commissioners have a legal duty to promote and protect the rights of all children in line with the UNCRC through providing expert advice to Government and ensuring that children’s needs and voices are considered in all matters that affect them. In Scotland, successive Commissioners made children’s legal protection from physical punishment a priority. The influential role of the Children’s Commissioners in advancing law reform aligns with the concept of *policy entrepreneurs* within the *policy stream* of the MSF.

Evidence of shifts in public attitudes was also important, reflecting another aspect of the *political stream* of the MSF. In both countries, public opinion polls showed a steady decline in the acceptance of physical punishment, suggesting that law change would be in line with the public view. Stakeholders deemed this an essential condition for securing political support:

“The main parties only came on board once it was clear that the public was on board ... unlikely that this would be a campaigning issue for a political party unless they were clear that there was public support behind it.” (Government advisor, Scotland)

4.1.4. *Securing engagement from policymakers*

In Scotland, it had been unlikely for legislation on law reform to be introduced by the Government. Procuring the backing of a Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) willing to champion the issue and put forward a private member’s bill proved instrumental:

“It’s like the elephant in the room that everyone’s just been avoiding looking at for so long until somebody politically is willing to stand up as a champion.” (Children’s charity representative, Scotland)

By forcing a vote, politicians who were opposed to or ambivalent about law reform were put into a position whereby they had to publicly defend their position:

“Unless you actually force the issue then it’s very easy for them to say we’ll focus through education, there’s no need to legislate ... the really strong lesson is to really force the government into a position where it’s defending the assault of children.” (Government advisor, Scotland)

In Wales, the bill that would reform the law was introduced by a Member of the Senedd from the governing party. As a former Minister for Social Services with a strong record on children’s rights, their leadership was instrumental in securing broad political support.

4.2. *Barriers to reform in Scotland and Wales and how they were addressed*

4.2.1. *Ideological opposition*

Speaking to the *problem stream* of the MSF, stakeholders discussed how arguments for law reform had been met with ideological opposition. These included claims that prohibiting physical punishment would interfere with family life and constitute government ‘overreach’. Participants also recalled how some faith groups had argued that law reform would restrict freedom of religion.

These arguments were countered by highlighting the established precedent for the Government to intervene legislatively in matters relating to violence:

“This thing about we’re not going to intervene in the family. But against that we would then say well so if a bloke decides to hit his wife are you not going to intervene? If your elderly father with dementia keeps doing something you don’t want them to do and they hit them, are you not going to intervene? You know it makes no sense at all.” (Public health representative, Scotland)

Arguments regarding freedom of religion were addressed by faith groups such as the Church of Scotland and the Churches’ Network for Non-violence in Wales, who challenged faith-based justifications for physical punishment and spoke out in support of its prohibition:

“I’m really proud that the Church of Scotland had done it, because if we hadn’t then perhaps the only religious voice on the field for this topic would have been the ones against it.” (Faith group representative).

4.2.2. *Political ambivalence*

Another important barrier identified by interviewees and exemplifying the *problem stream* of the MSF was the political ambivalence amongst some policymakers, who did not view physical punishment as a priority and did not see the need for law reform:

“The reality is it took ten years because there were some people who either didn’t see the importance of it ... And each time it would become a little bit more of a priority because they’ve also got to sort out the roads, the economy and everything else in Welsh government.” (Public health representative, Wales)

Some stakeholders encountered arguments by politicians that law reform was unnecessary because data showed that the use of physical punishment was already in decline. Proponents of law reform responded by citing survey data indicating that, despite an overall decline, physical punishment remained prevalent, even as its social acceptability fell and public support for reform grew.

4.2.3. *Arguments that law reform would have negative consequences*

Stakeholders reported how opponents of reform had argued that prohibiting physical punishment in the home was not enforceable would lead to the criminalisation of parents for minor transgressions, would increase workloads for police and child protection services, and result in an overall lack of discipline and broader social disorder. These voices contended that the issue of physical punishment would be better

addressed through parental education rather than law reform. This speaks to the *policy stream* of the MSF and competing “solutions” to address the identified problem.

Advocates used evidence from countries that had already introduced law reform, particularly New Zealand, and the Republic of Ireland which was perceived as similar to the UK context. Highlighting the increasing number of countries that had already legislated reinforced the message to policymakers that changing the law on physical punishment was not a radical proposition but a moderate and evidence-based response to changing attitudes based on children's rights and public health arguments:

“It definitely helped us with influencing government, in that you wouldn't be an outlier if you were doing it, with all the other countries that have done it.” (Government advisor Wales)

Arguments that law reform would lead to the criminalisation of parents were addressed by highlighting that law reform was supported by the police, as well as the evidence on post-implementation impacts from other countries, which did not bear out these concerns:

“It didn't show any evidence in countries that had outlawed physical chastisement that it meant that lots of parents were getting criminalised and getting charged with assault as a consequence. So that was mega-helpful in terms of giving us good robust authoritative evidence to counteract some of the clear arguments that are in the way of equal protection.” (Parent group representative, Scotland)

Additionally, advocates utilised implementation information from these countries to clarify professionals' roles and responsibilities in relation to monitoring and enforcement.

4.3. Implementation of law reform in Scotland and Wales

4.3.1. Preparation

Stakeholders emphasised the importance of preparation. Wales adopted a phased approach, allowing time to promote public understanding and address concerns, which stakeholders felt led to a smoother transition compared to Scotland's faster implementation:

“That kind of phased approach with the campaign and the education stuff coming in the interim is actually a good way to go.” (Children's charity representative, Wales)

Both countries drew on international examples to reassure policymakers and the public that reform could be implemented without increasing prosecutions or police workload.

4.3.2. Public education

Public education was seen as critical to reform. Wales implemented a comprehensive, inclusive campaign using positive messaging to explain that reform was about the equal protection, wellbeing, and rights of children, achieving high public awareness:

“There has been public information adverts on television and on social media, different platforms, just explaining that we don't do that in Wales. So it's not frightening, it's just much more a positive message.” (MP, Wales)

In contrast, Scotland's efforts were more limited, partly due to the timing of the COVID-19 pandemic and budgetary constraints, resulting in less widespread public awareness:

“I think we were all disappointed that there wasn't more emphasis put on it. I think we would have liked a big campaign, an awareness raising campaign for parents, and services as well ... and children, so that everybody understood it ... So I think that part of it was missing.” (Parent group representative, Scotland)

4.3.3. Guidance for professionals working with families

Guidance for professionals was crucial in both contexts. In Wales, specific guidance for social workers, health visitors, and other practitioners ensured clarity about their roles in communicating with families. In Scotland, initial challenges arose for police, who had initially not been provided with clear enough guidelines and had to develop protocols to triage cases via social work, highlighting the importance of consulting front-line professionals during planning:

“We've come up with protocols for across the region about how it's reported and it works a lot better now ... If it falls into this equal protection from assault guidelines then social work will hand it over to us – they'll make an initial assessment.” (Policing representative, Scotland)

4.3.4. Parenting support

Supporting parents was key to implementing law reform. In Wales, guidance focused on empathy, reassurance, and alternatives to physical punishment, particularly in deprived communities.

“We are working hard in our local area to try and provide more holistic support for parenting. Not so much because we're worried about physical punishment, but we are aware for families in some of our more deprived communities, parenting generally is tough.” (MP, Wales)

Scottish stakeholders similarly highlighted the importance of engaging parents to provide them with practical support and address underlying challenges, reinforcing that the law aimed to support positive parenting rather than punish parents.

4.3.5. Monitoring and evaluation

The legal commitment to monitoring and post-legislative evaluation helped to secure and consolidate reform in Wales:

“Being able to commit to the further follow-up ... A more detailed follow-up and scrutiny was one of the main things that was able to then get people on board with it passing.” (Children's charity representative, Wales)

In Scotland, evaluation was limited partly due to the pandemic and because there had been little controversy around the reform. Informal stakeholder meetings provided some feedback, but participants noted that systematic monitoring could have enhanced understanding of the law's impact on public awareness and prevalence of physical punishment:

“By the time the law was passed it wasn't hugely controversial, but that's a real missed opportunity because we know that violence still is prevalent in Scotland and we're not doing enough to monitor and evaluate that.” (Government advisor, Scotland)

4.4. Perspectives from England and Northern Ireland

Stakeholders also discussed why law reform had not been enacted in England and NI, and which strategies might have the potential to put the issue on the political agenda.

4.4.1. Views on framing

There was consensus amongst stakeholders that a children's rights framing was unlikely to be a primary driver for reform in England and NI, with some noting the hostile discourse that had accompanied previous initiatives grounded in children's rights language. Stakeholders felt that a combination of public health, violence prevention and legal clarity arguments would resonate more convincingly. The latter was described as particularly important for professionals whose work was

complicated by the grey area that existed under the current 'reasonable punishment' defence:

"Paediatricians do tell us that they see children in their child protection clinics where there has been an allegation of physical punishment – and that creates complexities. It uses resources, it's not right for the children themselves, and it could be handled in a more efficient way if there was an absolute clarity in the law." (Public health academic, England)

"And our angle in Northern Ireland will continue to be from that safeguarding perspective rather than children's rights." (Children's charity representative, NI)

Highlighting the unequivocal research evidence was seen as critical:

"I think the evidence is clear. The time for talking about this is over now, there's no debate anymore, this is bad for children's health ... Read the evidence and understand the risk of mental health adversity, the risk of educational adversity, the risk of physical abuse, the risk of significant health harm." (Public health representative, England)

The link between physical punishment and physical abuse held particular resonance in the NI context, where the legacy of institutional and church-related child abuse has profoundly shaped public and political sensitivities regarding the protection of children.

4.4.2. Barriers and counterarguments

Similarly to Scotland and Wales, opposing arguments centred around notions of interference in family life and Government overreach. The argument that law reform would lead to the criminalisation of parents was a barrier encountered in England and NI:

"Some people have said it will criminalise vulnerable parents ... there's a lot of work done with the police service here and the public prosecutions service around the public interest test." (Government advisor, NI)

Stakeholders in both nations underscored the importance of post-implementation data from countries where similar reforms had already been enacted. For NI, the law reform enacted successfully in the Republic of Ireland in 2015 was perceived as highly influential and a positive example that contributed to an optimistic outlook:

"The evidence from countries who have criminalised, particularly our nearest neighbours, has been huge ... So we were able to say, look the world hasn't fallen, you know prisons aren't full of parents, the courts aren't full of parents, the police stations aren't full of parents ... The more countries did it, the better, you know the stronger the argument is." (Government advisor, NI)

A social work stakeholder based in England discussed the implications for social services and law enforcement, stating that increases in workload were likely and would require matching resources:

"It would definitely increase workload for sure – there's no question. But I think that's a sort of second order point – that can't be a reason not to do it ... This is I think a sort of 'in principle' decision about how we want to treat children, and whether we see them as having you know rights from assault in the same way that adults do ... And I think they should have that right." (Social work representative, England).

A concern seen as potentially more relevant in England, expressed by a different social worker, was that law reform could lead to families from ethnic minority backgrounds being unfairly targeted by interventions:

"When I worked with a lot of the cases with physical chastisement, those parents who came from Black and ethnic minorities were under a lot of scrutiny compared to other families where there was lots of harm and they weren't taken in the same light." (Social work representative, England)

It was suggested that because England was substantially more diverse than other parts of the UK, careful policy implementation and community engagement would be needed to address worries about racial bias affecting minoritised groups.

4.4.3. Socio-political environment

In both England and NI, the socio-political environment did not appear to be aligned so far. In England, the transition to a Labour Government in 2024 was perceived as creating a more favourable political environment for pursuing law reform. Nonetheless, some advocates considered it unlikely that the issue would feature as a priority on a new Government's legislative agenda and described challenges in finding opportunities to put law reform to a vote. Working with politicians willing to champion the issue and seeking to introduce an amendment to legislation already before Parliament were suggested.

In NI, one participant noted that most political parties had, in some form, expressed support for law reform. The significant policy backlog resulting from the two-year suspension of the Executive presented a barrier, however there was tentative optimism that a window of opportunity would eventually emerge.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to explore how law reform on physical punishment was achieved and implemented in Scotland and Wales, and to elicit transferable learnings for the rest of the UK and beyond.

Our findings broadly map onto the problem, policy, and politics streams of Kingdon's Multiple Streams Framework for the analysis of policymaking (Kingdon, 2014), which provides a useful structure for the formulation of transferable learnings. We discuss them here under these headings.

5.1. Problem stream

Before legislative change can occur, physical punishment must first be acknowledged as a *problem* in need of policy intervention. This relates to the importance of framing (Stewart-Tufescu, 2023; Durrant, 2003). In Scotland and Wales, key arguments centred on children's rights and the public health evidence of physical punishment's detrimental impact on child development. In relation to children's rights, the intent of giving children equal protection as adults from physical assault resonated widely. Advocates also successfully argued that reform would resolve the ambiguity of the 'reasonable punishment' defence. This carried weight because it was voiced by frontline professionals such as police and social workers, highlighting that it is not only the framing itself that matters, but also who is making the argument. Related to this was the point that physical punishment exists on a continuum of violence and is therefore incompatible with modern societal values and wider violence prevention strategies. The public health impact was a persuasive argument in both countries, as it was based on robust research evidence that was difficult for opponents to dismiss. Participants from Scotland noted that making the research evidence accessible to a broad range of stakeholders through a commissioned report (Heilmann et al., 2015) had been instrumental for it to make an impact. A similarly important resource was provided with the publication of a 2024 report published by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which laid out the public health arguments for law reform in England and NI (Fussey et al., 2024). Robust evidence is therefore essential for enabling more informed, evidence-based engagement with policymakers and other key stakeholders (Barrett, 2023).

Another salient insight was the need to tailor the framing of arguments to each jurisdiction's unique context and history. For example, the public health argument was given comparatively more weight in Scotland, while in Wales more emphasis was placed on the children's rights perspective – findings corroborated by recent narratives from prominent campaigners (Barrett, 2023; Holland, 2023). Interviewees from NI

suggested that given its context of historical child abuse, arguments for reform should emphasise its importance for safeguarding and violence prevention. It is notable that elsewhere reform has at times followed high-profile child abuse cases, as in Sweden [27] or emerged from broader efforts to confront historical abuse, such as institutional child abuse in the Republic of Ireland (van Turnhout, 2023) and Jersey (Barrett, 2023). In England, the framings seen as most likely to resonate were the public health impact of physical punishment, the need for parents and professionals to have legal clarity and placing law reform within a wider violence prevention strategy.

Finally, as noted in a global review of physical punishment legislation, it is important to be clear that the primary aims of legal reform are preventive and educational rather than punitive (Stewart-Tufescu, 2023). In most cases, this has involved removing the criminal or civil defence of “reasonable chastisement” or “corrective force” rather than introducing statutory prohibitions on physical punishment (Stewart-Tufescu, 2023).

5.2. Policy stream

If the key arguments against physical punishment are accepted and tackling this form of violence against children becomes a policy goal, advocates for reform must make the case that legal change is imperative. This position is supported by a wealth of research showing that law reform leads to changes in societal norms and beliefs and that the prevalence of physical punishment declines faster in countries combining law reform with public education (Zolotor and Puzia, 2010; Smith et al., 2010; Stewart-Tufescu, 2023; Bussman et al., 2011; Lansford et al., 2017). While declines in both the prevalence and social acceptability of physical punishment preceded legislative change, the rate of declines accelerated following the introduction of legislation (Zolotor and Puzia, 2010).

Efforts to advance law reform in Scotland and Wales were met with opposition based on ideological arguments that were also encountered in England and Northern Ireland, and internationally (Smith et al., 2010). Opponents framed law reform as state intervention in family life, a claim easily countered by highlighting that there is nothing controversial about state intervention in cases of violence against adults in the family. Related to this were claims that law reform would lead to the criminalisation of parents, which were not evidence-based. Rather, the experience from the increasing number of jurisdictions that already legislated has shown that such concerns have not materialised. In these contexts, post-reform evidence demonstrated reductions in the number of children entering care, attributed to earlier and more supportive interventions by social services, and no corresponding increase in prosecutions (Durrant, 1999; Gershoff et al., 2020).

Achieving law reform in Scotland and Wales was possible because abolishing the defence of reasonable punishment had broad and multi-sectoral support including from police and social services, corroborating the critical importance of building strong coalitions from across different professional sectors highlighted in previous research to pool resources, share expertise, and establish coherent public messaging (Smith et al., 2010).

Experiences in Scotland and Wales emphasised the importance of resources for public awareness campaigns and parenting support. There was also an expectation that in England, with its greater cultural diversity, supportive community engagement would be particularly important. In addition, clear guidance for practitioners is key to ensure confidence about processes, responsibilities, and referral pathways, and should be developed with involvement of those working in frontline services. Robust monitoring and evaluation following law reform is essential to ensure processes function as intended.

Interviewees close to the process in Wales relayed how its phased approach with a two-year implementation period helped to lay the

groundwork for a successful transition. In December 2025, the Welsh Government published its three-year post implementation review (Tully et al., 2025), which concluded that implementation had been successful. Representative surveys showed high public awareness of the law and majority support. As in other countries, concerns regarding the prosecution of parents were not borne out: over the three years since the new law was enacted, there had been fewer than five prosecutions and zero convictions of parents in relation to physical punishment. As part of its implementation processes, Wales introduced a government-funded Out-of-Court Parenting Support Scheme, providing the police with a referral pathway for bespoke parenting support as an alternative to prosecution. About 100 referrals have been made per year under the scheme, with the vast majority of participating parents reporting positive outcomes (Tully et al., 2025).

5.3. Politics stream

The reasons why the defence of ‘reasonable punishment’ has not yet been removed in England and NI appear to be linked mainly to factors described as the *political context* within the MSF, which so far does not appear to be fully aligned with the other two streams.

In Scotland and Wales, the sociopolitical environment was favourable to change with political champions playing a pivotal role. However, in both countries political backing came relatively late in the process. Advocates persevered over a long period of time while building a strong foundation and working towards a policy window to open. Policymakers had to be persuaded that children’s rights and evidence-based public health arguments outweighed ideological opposition and that public attitudes had shifted considerably towards supporting reform, with evidence from opinion polls given particular weight. An important lesson was the need to find a legislative vehicle forcing politicians and government to take a position through a vote.

Observers have noted that in England, children’s rights have historically received less political prioritisation compared to Scotland and Wales (Holland, 2023), which resonates with the views expressed by study participants. Reforming the law in England requires an act of the UK Government, who at the time of writing appears to be lacking the political will to move on the issue despite powerful, evidence-based arguments (Holland, 2023; YouGov, 2023; Rowland and Hastie, 2025) and public support for reform (YouGov, 2023). In NI, given its historical context, law reform might be achievable if the issue comes to a vote. Therefore, political will and leadership remain decisive determinants of whether reform progresses or stalls (Smith et al., 2010).

5.4. Limitations

Firstly, despite efforts to ensure broad representation, we were unable to recruit stakeholders from Muslim faith communities, which may limit the diversity of religious and cultural viewpoints represented. Secondly, whilst several stakeholders from NI were approached, only two participated in the research, constraining the depth of the findings from this jurisdiction. Third, the recruitment of politicians proved challenging, however we were able to speak to politicians from three major parties.

5.5. Theoretical contribution and transferable learnings

Our use of the Multiple Streams Framework was primarily heuristic, providing a meaningful structure to our findings. Consistent with the MSF, the findings underscore the importance of alignment between problem, policy, and politics in enabling legislative change. At the same time, the analysis suggests that such alignment is not merely contingent, but is shaped through strategic framing, context-sensitive argumentation, and the formation of cross-sector alliances built over time within

specific national settings. By foregrounding these processes, the article expands on the MSF by highlighting the role of timing and the relational work involved in sustaining policy momentum on contentious public health and rights issues.

The processes through which law reform was achieved in Scotland and Wales offer learnings transferable to England, Northern Ireland, and internationally. Framing, coalition-building, and securing political engagement are key to creating the conditions under which a policy window can open. Experiences in Scotland and Wales, as in other countries, suggest that law reform is unlikely to happen anywhere without ideological opposition; however, claims made by opponents can be refuted using evidence-based arguments as well as post-implementation data from jurisdictions where law reform has already been enacted. Finally, implementation should include careful planning, clear guidance for frontline practitioners and adequately resourced parenting support, public education, as well as monitoring and evaluation.

6. Conclusions

This study provides important transferable insights into legislative change on physical punishment. There are strong rights-based as well as evidence-based public health arguments why physical punishment should not be a part of any childhood, and why children should have the same legal protection from physical assault as adults.

By illustrating how problem, policy, and politics converge in the case of legal reform regarding physical punishment, this study contributes to a wider understanding of how contested policy agendas can move forward, offering insights that may be instructive for policymakers, advocates, and researchers working in similarly polarised policy fields.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Katie Hollingworth: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Kirrilly Pells:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sharon Eager:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Ruby Jarvis:** Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – review & editing. **Eleanor Mindel:** Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing. **Rebecca Lacey:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Yvonne Kelly:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Maria Sifaki:** Writing – review & editing. **Anja Heilmann:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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