

Authoritarian parents have negative effects on behaviour



Welsh Government research using Understanding Society suggests authoritarian and 'uninvolved' parenting styles have more negative implications for children's problems and behaviour than authoritative and permissive styles.

Child development

The Welsh Government has a number of initiatives devoted to parenting, including 'Parenting. Give it time.' designed to encourage positive, authoritative parenting – and the Children (Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment) (Wales) Act 2020, to protect children by prohibiting physical punishment.

As part of the research approach, Welsh Government officials looked at changes in parenting approaches between 2012 and 2022, before the Act came into force. They analysed:

- relationships between four parenting styles (authoritarian/harsh, uninvolved, permissive, authoritative/positive) and 11-12-year-olds' self-reported externalising problems, prosocial behaviour, and conflict with their parents
- relationships between the level of parent-reported physical punishment (regularity of grabbing, smacking, slapping, and physical punishment) and 11-12-year-olds' problems, behaviour, and conflict with their parents
- changes in the proportion of parents adopting each parenting style between 2012 and 2022, and differences between groups of children and parents
- changes in the proportion of parents reporting using physical punishment between 2012 and 2022, and differences between groups of children and parents.



Parenting styles

The different styles of parenting were defined in the research as:

- Authoritarian – characterised by high demands for obedience, low warmth, and harsh discipline
- Uninvolved – not demanding, but also unresponsive, i.e. parents don't provide expectations or support regarding children's behaviours, emotions, or needs
- Permissive – high responsiveness but low 'demandingness'. Parents are supportive and pick up on their child's emotional needs but struggle to set boundaries and expectations
- Authoritative – high 'demandingness' and responsiveness and warmth. These parents provide a warm, nurturing environment and also set firm limits and boundaries.

The research defined the children's behaviour they wanted to study as:

- Prosocial behaviour – voluntary behaviour that benefits others or promotes good relations, such as considering other people's feelings
- Peer problems – difficulties in relationships with other children, such as being picked on, or bullied
- Externalising – maladaptive (i.e. poor coping) behaviour, such as lying, cheating, or being hyperactive
- Internalising – maladaptive emotional and behavioural difficulties which are directed internally, measured by looking at peer problems and emotional problems (such as having many fears, or being easily scared)
- Self-esteem – confidence in one's own worth or abilities
- Conflict with parents – regularity of arguments with mothers and/or fathers.

Main findings

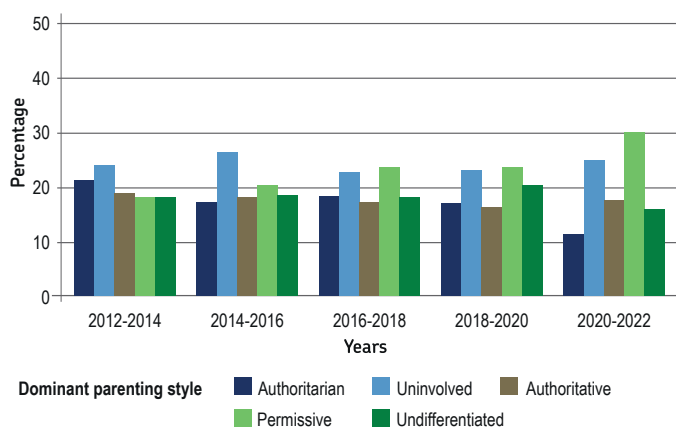
The report's headline finding was that "authoritarian and uninvolved parenting styles have more negative implications for child externalising problems, prosocial behaviour, and conflict with parents, relative to authoritative and permissive styles. These effects are stronger and more consistent for mothers adopting an authoritarian or uninvolved parenting style, relative to fathers."

Other findings included:

- Higher levels of reported physical punishment were related to poorer child development outcomes.
- For externalising problems and prosocial behaviour, this effect was only meaningful for mothers.
- Physical punishment was associated with increased conflict between child and parent for both mothers and fathers.
- The negative relationship between mothers' physical punishment and child prosocial behaviour was stronger for single mothers, compared to non-single mothers.

The research also noted trends in parenting styles and levels of physical punishment over the decade studied. There was an overall decrease in the proportion of authoritarian parents between 2012 and 2022, and an increase in permissive parents. There were also differences in parenting styles between groups:

- While fathers were more likely to be uninvolved or permissive, mothers were more likely to be authoritative.
- Parents from Asian or Black ethnic groups were more likely to be authoritarian compared to those from White or mixed/multiple ethnic groups.
- Parents from White ethnic groups were more likely to be uninvolved than those from Black ethnic groups.
- In general, parents from higher income groups were more likely to be permissive compared to those from lower income groups.
- Those from lower income groups were more likely to be uninvolved than those from higher income groups.



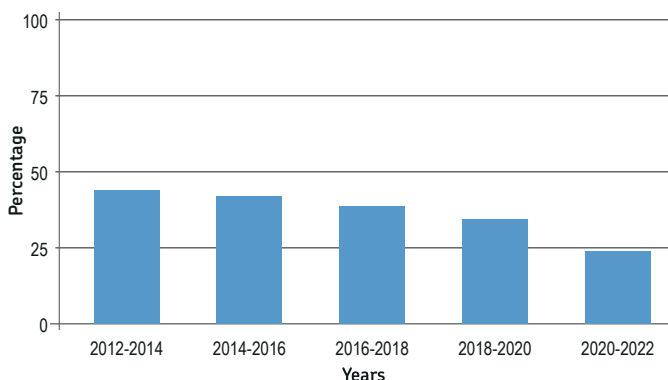
Changes in dominant parenting styles in the UK over time

Parents' health and economic circumstances also played a role. Those with self-reported mental health problems were more likely than those without to be uninvolved, but less likely to be authoritative. Unemployed parents were more likely to be uninvolved, and less likely to be authoritative, than parents who weren't unemployed.

Also, there were differences by the child's gender. Parents were more likely to be authoritarian with boys than with girls.

Physical punishment

Between 2012 and 2022, there was an overall decrease in parents saying they'd used physical punishment. Fathers were more likely to report using physical punishment than mothers, and parents from Black or Asian ethnic groups were more likely to report physical punishment compared to White parents.



Percentage of UK parents reporting using any form of physical punishment

Again, there were differences according to the child's gender. Parents were more likely to report using physical punishment for boys than for girls.

Conclusions

The research concluded that the findings "add further support for prohibiting the use of physical punishment, highlighting negative effects of physical punishment for a range of child development outcomes". However, they add that some groups seem to respond differently to physical punishment.

The findings also broadly support the aims of the Welsh Government's Parenting. Give it Time initiative, which encourages authoritative parenting. However, they highlight some nuances:

- Permissive parenting, which (like authoritative parenting) has high levels of warmth has good outcomes compared to authoritarian and uninvolved styles (for children aged 11-12).
- The relationship between authoritative parenting and positive child development outcomes was more apparent for mothers. For fathers, effects were less pronounced, and mostly related to permissive parenting. Also, authoritative parenting was much more common in mothers than in fathers.
- It may be that the 'warmth' in authoritative and permissive styles is central to the link between fathers' parenting and child development, while both warmth and control are important when it comes to mothers.

Next steps

Now that the 2020 Act has been implemented, this framework could be used to evaluate changes following the law change, and to monitor changes in levels physical punishment. Future research could also explore differences between groups which adopt different parenting styles, potentially highlighting the children who are most at risk of negative developmental outcomes.



Read the report Matthew Scott, Hannah Davies, Parenting styles and physical punishment: changes over time and associations with child development outcomes, 2012 to 2022, Welsh Government, 2025