



**Attitudes towards  
Child Protection  
in Northern Ireland:  
A survey by the four Area  
Child Protection  
Committees and NSPCC**

**Executive Summary**

## 1. Background to the Research

The four Area Child Protection Committees (ACPCs) are responsible for developing a strategic approach to child protection within the Children's Services Planning process in Northern Ireland. One of the key roles of ACPCs is to raise awareness of Child Protection issues with the public, parents and professionals. A Regional Communications Sub-Committee comprising membership from the 4 ACPCs has been established to achieve higher levels of public awareness.

A regional child protection inspection led by the Social Services Inspectorate, *Our Children and Young People - Our Shared Responsibility*, (DHSSPS 2006) included a recommendation that information should be made available to potential service users, parents and members of the public about the nature of child protection services and how and when to access them. Consequently, a survey of public attitudes toward child protection was commissioned in 2007 by the Communications Sub-Committee of which NSPCC Northern Ireland is a member. NSPCC Northern Ireland had previously published attitudinal research which examined issues towards smacking, kite marking in sport and advice received by parents from professionals, consequently NSPCC agreed to assist with the development and commissioning of the public attitudes survey.

## 2. Research Methods

The survey was designed to examine levels of confidence among the general public in Northern Ireland in relation to

- recognising the signs of abuse;
- reporting behaviours and the barriers experienced;
- identifying the main concerns of the public and parents relating to child safety;
- the views of parents, and their experiences, on a range of issues including: Internet safety, Physical punishment, Bullying, Child protection in community and sporting organisations, and the Keeping Safe Curriculum in schools.

Ipsos MORI was commissioned to conduct the public attitudes survey across Northern Ireland as part of its Omnibus Survey. The Survey involved face-to-face interviews with 1,000 people aged over sixteen; it was conducted in February and March 2008. The sample was representative of the Northern Ireland population in terms of age, gender, social class and geographical location. A detailed set of questions were designed to explore the participants' attitudes to and experiences of child protection issues.

Respondents to the survey were evenly spread across the five Health and Social Care Trusts' areas. Just over half of those interviewed were women, 37% was aged sixteen to thirty-four years; one third was aged thirty-four to fifty-four years, and 29% was aged fifty-five years and

over. Half of the respondents were married or living as married, two-thirds owned their home and just under half were employed. One quarter of those interviewed lived in low income households with 22% in middle income households and 23% in high income households. Just under half (48%) identified themselves as members of the Protestant community and 43% as members of the Catholic community. Of the sample, 41% were parents or legal guardians of a child under the age of eighteen and 40% had a child under eighteen living with them. These parents were asked to think of the child with the last birthday in their family and asked specific questions about how they disciplined the child, the child's use of the Internet, and their experience of bullying.

This Executive Summary focuses on the Survey's key findings and recommendations for possible actions to be taken by the ACPCs and the proposed Safeguarding Board in Northern Ireland (SBNI). More detailed technical data and research references can be found in the technical report which is published separately.

### **3. Key Findings from the Survey**

#### **3.1 *The Public's Perception of Child Safety and Abuse***

A majority of adults, whether or not they are parents, think children are less safe now than ten years ago. While the abuse of drugs and alcohol tops the list of their concerns; worries about child abuse, the risks posed by sex offenders, child abductions and abuse by strangers are listed in the top five of their concerns. Although sexual abuse by strangers is relatively rare, accounting for only 5% of the sexual abuse experienced by children under sixteen years of age in the United Kingdom, the Survey found it to be a significant worry for parents and the public. Internet use, anti-social behaviour, bullying and peer pressure are also issues of concern to parents. Perhaps more surprisingly, given the media focus on teenage suicides in Northern Ireland in recent years, self harm and suicide involving young people did not emerge as a specific issue for the parents interviewed.

Two thirds of those surveyed considered child abuse to be a problem in Northern Ireland. Confidence in recognising the signs of abuse varied significantly depending on the type of abuse. Many felt most confident about being able to recognise that a child was being neglected (59%) or physically abused (50%). Around a third said they thought they would recognise that a child was being emotionally abused, just one in five thought, however, that they would identify sexual abuse. This is likely because physical abuse and neglect have more obvious and visible symptoms than other forms of abuse.

Women reported feeling more confident about their ability to recognise various types of abuse than men.

The findings suggest that further work is needed to help increase public confidence in recognising the signs of abuse, particularly amongst men.

## **Recommendations**

- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should ensure the Protect Life Suicide Strategy Implementation Body is aware of the Survey's findings on parental attitudes to suicide.*
- *The Communications subgroup of the ACPCs/SBNI should as part of its developing communications strategy consider how best to target key messages about child protection and its reporting to particular audiences such as men and those who are not parents.*
- *ACPCs should ensure close links with Public Protection Arrangements Northern Ireland (PPANI) in the development of key public messages about child protection and sex offending designed to counteract myths and stereotypes.*

### **3.2 Experiences of, and attitudes towards, reporting child abuse**

Almost one-fifth of respondents, (18%) had at some time suspected that a child or young person was being abused and in two thirds of those cases the child was personally known to them. The suspected incidents had taken place in one quarter of cases within the last year, while 43% had happened more than five years ago.

Of those who suspected abuse, more than 70% had taken some action, including talking to a professional. A significant percentage (23%) had, however, done nothing at all. The main reasons for not taking action included not wanting to get involved, being unsure that abuse was actually taking place, and worries about making things worse. Where action was taken the most common outcome was that Social Services became involved; in two out of five cases there was, however, no known outcome.

## **Recommendations**

- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should consider how best to communicate information about the new Gateway service established in each Trust as a single point of referral to parents and the general public. The findings also suggest the need to provide reassurance to the public about the handling of any child protection concerns.*
- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI may wish to ensure better follow-up of referrals is emphasised in revised guidance and practice subject to considerations of confidentiality.*

### 3.3 *Attitudes towards child protection in Church and Community-Based Clubs*

Parents were almost universally in favour of vetting volunteers and paid staff in Church based clubs and community settings to safeguard children. There was significant support among respondents for ensuring that staff are appropriately trained, that there are complaints procedures and that a designated person is identified in each setting to deal with child protection issues.

There was also strong support from respondents for the concept of Kite-marking or accreditation of clubs and sporting bodies. The concept of accreditation in Article 18 of the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults Order (NI) 2003 has been superseded by provisions in the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups (NI) Order 2007, despite this, respondents showed considerable public support for a voluntary accreditation scheme.

Where parents had children who took part in Church or community-based activities more than three quarters of them are not worried about their children attending activities such as Sunday Schools, scouts, girl guides, boy's brigade etc. Those from a Catholic background are, however, significantly more worried about their children attending Church-based Clubs (18%) than those from the Protestant community (5%). There is, however, no difference in the views of parents from different faith backgrounds in relation to community-based clubs and activities. The Survey does not assist with explaining the variation across the faith communities although it may be related to different levels of awareness about child protection issues or differing processes within various denominations and faith groups. There may also be a link to high profile child abuse scandals within the Catholic Church in recent years. As child abuse can occur across all social groups, classes and faiths there is a need for constant vigilance by all parents.

#### **Recommendations**

- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI in conjunction with the DHSSPS should ensure the widespread support found in the survey for safeguarding measures in community and church based activities is disseminated to policy makers and those charged with running such activities.*
- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI in view of the respondents' positive support for kite marking and accreditation should, in conjunction with the DHSSPS, consider the merits of a voluntary accreditation scheme.*

### 3.4 *Physical Punishment: Attitudes and Practices*

Views on the appropriateness of smacking children have changed in recent years. Recent research results in England (DSCF, 2008) show that younger parents are more likely to believe smacking is never justified than older parents. In Northern Ireland views on whether or not smacking should be banned have stayed the same since a previous NSPCC survey in 2003. Almost one third (30%) of respondents would support a complete ban while 57% support either a complete ban or a legal age restriction for the use of physical punishment.

In keeping with the findings from a number of GB and Northern Ireland surveys (DSCF, 2008; Anderson et al, 2002, Thompson & Pearce, 2001; NSPCC, 2003), the Survey found different attitudes toward smacking depending on the age of the child. For children aged eleven to fifteen years and particularly those aged two years or under, most respondents felt that smacking was never justified. Three in ten of the respondents, however, thought smacking a child aged two or under may be necessary on some occasions. Although few considered smacking to be routinely necessary in any age group, there was a definite increase in those who felt physical punishment of children aged three to ten was necessary. A greater emphasis on positive parenting approaches may impact on this finding.

Physical punishment was one of the less common forms of discipline used by parents who more often favoured explaining why something was wrong, shouting or yelling or distracting their children. A significant proportion (47%), however, reported using physical punishment at some point and 40% reported using it in the past year. These findings are similar to those produced in a recent survey in Northern Ireland (Bunting, Webb & Healy, 2008) into the disciplinary practices and attitudes of parents to children under ten years of age, which found lifetime physical punishment rates of 47%.

The most common form of physical punishment reported was a smack on the bottom, hand or leg. In contrast more serious physical punishment such as slapping the face, head or ears was reported by 2% of parents; this result indicates a need to emphasise the dangers of blows and slaps to the head and face to children. Respondents who had no children were more likely than parents to support a complete ban on physical punishment. Respondents from the Protestant community were more likely to think that physical punishment was necessary and to be unsupportive of a complete ban. This is also in keeping with earlier research which showed there are different attitudes and practices in relation to physical punishment relative to religious background (Bunting, Webb & Healy, 2008; Murphy-Cowan & Stringer, 2001; Gershoff, 2002; Xu et al, 2000).

## Recommendations

*The ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should:*

- *emphasise with the public and professionals (Health Visitors etc) working with children the risks associated with and need to avoid hitting very young children aged under two years around the face and head;*
- *consider the further dissemination of material and information on positive parenting approaches;*
- *consider in conjunction with the Interdisciplinary Group on Positive Parenting (IDGPP) and structures established under the Families Matter Strategy the needs of children aged 3-10 years;*
- *consider the need for a link with faith-based organisations to explore how they communicate messages to parents about physical punishment and positive parenting.*

### 3.5 Children's Use of the Internet

According to respondents four out of five children aged 12 to 17 years of age have home Internet access and more than two-fifths of them use the Internet in their bedrooms, or another room, when adults are not present.

Daily Internet usage particularly among teenagers is common and many parents interviewed claimed that their children had been exposed to pornography, violent or gruesome material and racist or hateful material. Two per cent of the 165 parents who were aware of the nature and type of online activities engaged in by their children reported being aware of their children having been bullied, 4% knew of them receiving unwanted suggestive or sexual comments, and 3% of receiving unsolicited sexual material as a result of using the Internet.

Children frequently use chat-rooms and visited social networking sites, often on a daily basis and for several hours each day. Some parents reported that their children (4%) had given out personal details and 2% had gone on to meet someone face to face whom they contacted via the Internet.

The number of parents who reported problems was relatively small, it should be remembered, however, that parents only reported problems about which they knew. Research by Livingstone and Bober (2004) found that children and young people in the UK reported considerably higher levels of problematic online experiences compared to parental reports. For example, they found that nearly half (46%) of 9 to 19 year olds who go online at least once a week have given out personal information, such as their full name, age, email address, phone

number, etc compared with to 5% of parents who thought that their children had given out such information. The actual figures for children experiencing problems on-line are likely to be higher than those reported by parents.

Parents in Northern Ireland reported high levels of confidence in being able to understand how the internet works. The parents surveyed reported confidence in their knowledge of the potential dangers posed by Internet usage. Almost four in five parents reported that their children's computers had filtering software to block certain sites and software, to monitor websites visited, and Internet activity. Almost three quarters reported that they were able to check the websites their child visited and more than half could access their children's email accounts. This compares favourably with research in England (Livingstone & Bober, 2004) which reported only 30% had monitoring software while 23% parents did not know whether their computer had it installed. This suggests a greater number of parents in Northern Ireland feel confident about monitoring their children's use of the Internet and in using regulatory software. The reason for this finding needs further examination.

## **Recommendations**

- *As part of the transition towards the SBNI, ACPCs should develop a regional subgroup on Internet safety which complements other developments in Northern Ireland and dovetails with the awareness raising work of CEOP (Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre).*

### **3.6 Bullying**

Bullying is not classified as a form of child abuse although it is consistently the most prevalent form of harm experienced by children, a fact confirmed by this Survey. At an extreme level bullying may constitute serious harm and children who are susceptible to bullying may be at risk of other forms of abuse or self-harm.

The Survey found that bullying is most likely to occur at school, in the local community (parks, streets etc), or on the way to and from school. A quarter of those respondents with children aged 12 to 17 years reported that their children had been bullied in the previous twelve months. One in six reported that their children had been verbally bullied, while one in ten mentioned physical or social bullying. Three per cent reported that they were aware that their children had been electronically bullied. As these results rely on parents being aware of the bullying, it is possible that the actual extent of the bullying is under-reported within this Survey. The level of electronic bullying reported by parents was also low relative to what might be expected from media reports and research; for example, some researchers (National

Children's Home, 2005; Li, 2006) have suggested a significant growth in cyber bullying via chat rooms, mobile phones and email.

Three in five parents who reported their child had been bullied at school had discussed the issue with the school and most were satisfied with the school's response. A small group of parents reported bullying to the police; this was in respect of particularly serious cases. Fewer than half of the parents were satisfied with the outcome and had wanted more done to follow it up.

Other parents handled bullying by advising their children to stand up for themselves or fight back. While there are likely to be many reasons why parents take different courses of action it was surprising to find that almost two-fifths of parents did not approach teachers when bullying happened in school. This may indicate a need to provide advice for parents on how to handle bullying in school. It is also a possible indication of the need for further guidance and support for schools in this area.

Encouragingly, a high number of parents had received a copy of schools' anti-bullying policy (83%), where they existed, although fewer had been consulted in the development of this policy (29%).

Given the possible impact of bullying on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people these findings are further evidence of the need to adopt strategies and policies to tackle it.

## **Recommendations**

- *The ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should keep under review the operation of the ACPCs' Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures. ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should also liaise with the Department of Education and the Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Federation (NIABF), where appropriate, to ensure key messages on bullying in schools are disseminated.*

### **3.7 Keeping Safe Curriculum**

There is currently a positive climate within which to further develop safety programmes in schools in Northern Ireland. There is a growing body of evidence that preventative education has been effective in helping children develop the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to recognise and manage risky situations and seek appropriate help, (Finkelhor, 2007; Boyle and Lutzker, 2005). Involved and informed parents are more likely to model, repeat and reward positive self protection behaviour (Hawkins and Briggs, 1999) and significantly they are more likely to react in a more supportive manner towards a child or young person who discloses sexual abuse (Wurtele et al, 1992). Parents need appropriate access to resource material

and/or training to facilitate them to promote their children's self-protection skills effectively and consistently.

Most parents surveyed were supportive of children being taught in school how to keep themselves safe; with 7 out of 10 parents thinking it was acceptable for schools to teach children how to stay safe from sexual abuse. A majority of respondents said they would be willing to help children with safeguarding themed homework and were willing to read related information or attend an evening class to get information about helping their child to stay safe.

## **Recommendations**

- *ACPCs and the proposed SBNI should continue to liaise with the Department of Education in relation to the development of a preventative curriculum to ensure that children are informed about how to keep safe.*