

# Child behaviour: How are Australian parents responding?



## Poll report

Poll 12, October 2018

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### Report highlights

- One in four parents (27%) report feeling stressed by their child's behaviour every day.
- The vast majority of parents report using positive strategies to promote good behaviour in their children, such as attention, praise and rewards.
- A significant proportion of Australian children have been physically disciplined in the past month according to parent report, with 4% being physically disciplined 'quite a lot or most of the time', 13% 'some of the time' and a further 24% 'rarely'.
- Many parents reflect critically on their own parenting strategies, with almost half (48%) saying they often become impatient too quickly and one in three (36%) saying they often lose their temper and later feel guilty.
- A third of parents (33%) said children should be on their best behaviour at all times, suggesting a lack of understanding about the range of normal childhood behaviours.
- Almost half (45%) of parents are not confident that they would know where to go for help if they had difficulty managing their child's behaviour.

In a survey fielded in August 2018, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their knowledge, attitudes and experiences in relation to managing child behaviour. Behaviour management is about guiding a child's behaviour so they learn the appropriate way to behave. Questions explored parent understanding of normal behaviours in children and the behaviour management strategies used by parents *in the past month*.

Across a sample population of 2044 parents, data were collected on 3545 children aged from 1 year to <18 years. This included 311 infants and toddlers aged 1 to <3 years, 531 pre-schoolers aged 3 to <6 years, 1519 children aged 6 to <13 years and 1184 teenagers aged 13 to <18 years. The median parent respondent age was 43 years and 55% were female. The median number of children per parent was two, and 53% of children were female.

## Managing child behaviour is stressful for parents

Two thirds (69%) of parents report feeling stressed by their child's behaviour at least once a week, with one in four (27%) parents saying their child's behaviour causes them to feel stressed every day. Almost half of parents (45%) say they spend a lot of time thinking about how to manage their child's behaviour and a third (32%) say they often feel overwhelmed by the issue. Parents of younger children report feeling stressed by their child's behaviour more frequently than parents of older children, with a third of parents of infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers

(36%) experiencing stress at least once a day due to their child's behaviour.

## Promoting positive behaviours

Parents report using a variety of positive strategies to manage their child's behaviour. The majority of parents report using strategies to promote and reinforce desired behaviour at least 'some of the time' in the past month, including giving their child praise or attention when they behave well (95%), rewarding good behaviour with an activity together (84%) and talking with their child about the type of behaviour they expect (93%) (see Figure 1).

## Child behaviour management strategies used by parents in the past month

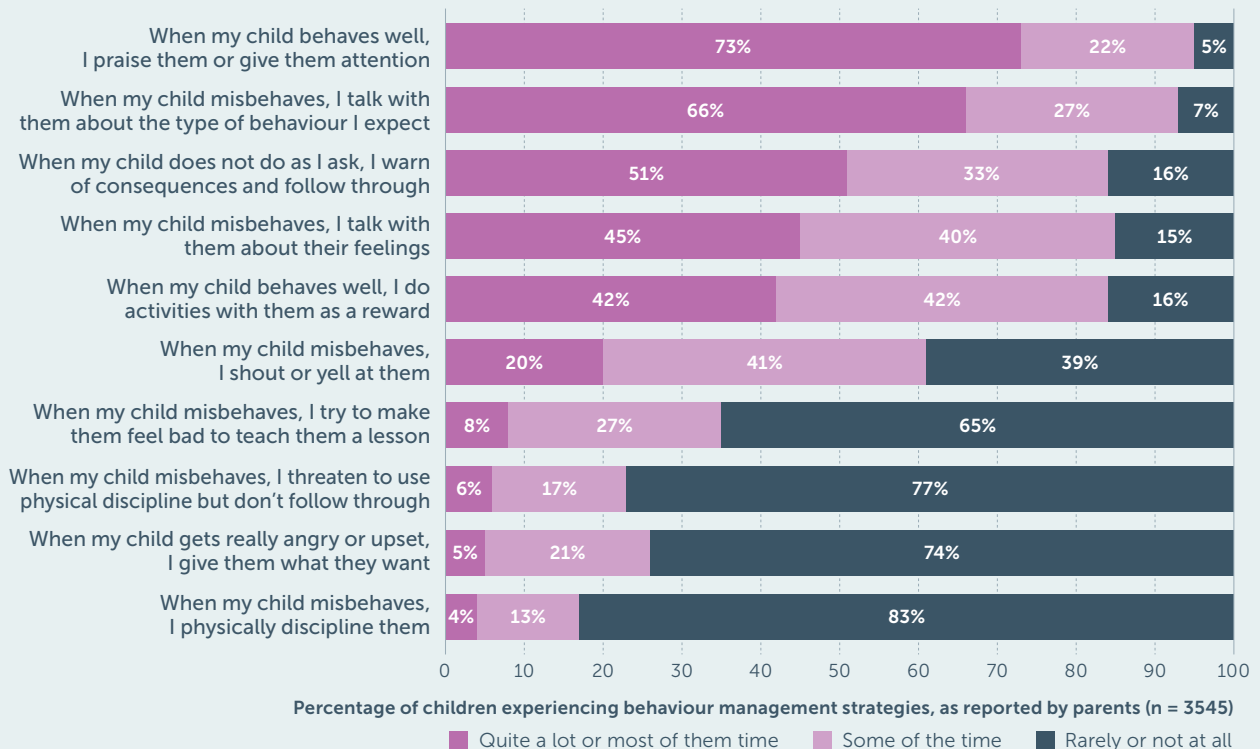


Figure 1.

## Dealing with challenging behaviours

Children behave in different ways depending on their age, developmental stage, temperament and the situation, and some of these behaviours can be challenging for parents to manage.

### Use of positive strategies

Many parents report using effective and constructive strategies to manage their child's challenging behaviour at least 'some of the time', including talking with their child about the behaviour they expect (93%), talking with their child about their feelings when they misbehave (85%) and implementing age appropriate non-physical consequences such as 'time out' or withdrawal of privileges in response to problematic behaviour (84%) (see Figure 1).

### Use of negative strategies

A number of parents report using negative or punitive discipline strategies at least 'some of the time' over the past month when they felt their child misbehaved, including shouting or yelling at their child (61%), making their child feel bad to teach them a lesson (35%), threatening physical discipline (23%) and using physical discipline (17%) (see Figure 1). Research shows punitive strategies are ineffective in the long term in teaching appropriate behaviour because while they may stop a child from expressing unwanted behaviour at the time of the punishment, they don't help a child learn the more desired behaviour. This can result in children showing patterns of repeated unwanted behaviours despite repeated punitive discipline. Research also suggests that punitive discipline strategies may cause a child physical and psychological harm in the long term.

### Use of physical discipline

In this study 'physical discipline' was defined as anything done to cause physical pain or discomfort to a child in response to their behaviour, including smacking, hitting, spanking, slapping, pinching or pulling. Research shows that physical discipline may be harmful to a child's wellbeing in the longer term. Research also shows that children who experience physical punishment are more likely to develop aggressive behaviour themselves and to use aggression as a way to solve their own disputes. According to parent report, in the past month 4% of Australian children were physically disciplined by their parents 'quite a lot or most of the time', a further 13% were physically disciplined 'some of the time', and a further 24% 'rarely' (see Figure 2). Younger children were more likely to experience physical discipline more often, with 7% of toddlers and preschoolers being physically disciplined 'quite a lot or most of the time' in the past month compared with 2% of teenagers.

Factors that increased the likelihood of a parent using physical discipline with one or more of their children at least 'some of the time' included being male, being a sole parent, reporting a greater number of children and having been physically disciplined at least 'some of the time' as a child. Parents who reported using physical discipline at least 'some of the time' in the past month were also more likely to report using other punitive discipline strategies such as threatening physical discipline, yelling, and inducing guilt in their child, compared with those parents who reported using physical discipline 'rarely or not at all'.

## Attitudes towards physical discipline

This poll suggests that a significant proportion of Australian parents hold attitudes and beliefs in support of physical discipline. While half of Australian parents (51%) think it's never okay to use physical discipline with a child, a further half (51%) believe it is unrealistic to think that parents should never use physical discipline. Some parents subscribe to myths such as physical discipline teaches a child to respect their parents (23%) and physical discipline teaches a child self-discipline (23%). A quarter of parents (26%) think children can become unmanageable without physical discipline. Research shows that physical discipline can reduce self-esteem and make children

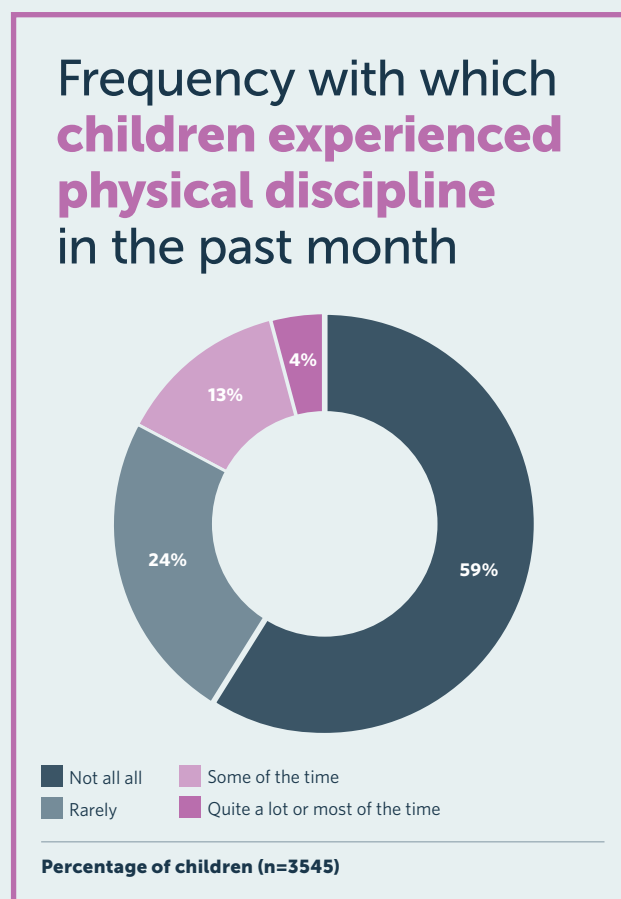


Figure 2.

fearful of their parents, and less likely to trust them. It also sets an example to a child that physical punishment, such as hitting or smacking, is a way to solve problems and settle conflicts. Children can then be more likely to use these means to settle their own conflicts with others, perpetuating patterns of problematic behaviour.

## Parents' own experience of physical discipline

The majority (88%) of Australian parents report being physically disciplined themselves as a child by their own parents; 7% 'most of the time', 14% 'quite a lot', 38% 'some of the time', 29% 'rarely'. Parents who reported physically disciplining their own children at least 'some of the time' in the past month were more likely to report having been physically disciplined at least 'some of the time' themselves as a child.

## Parents' insights and reflection on their own parenting

Consistency is important when it comes to effective parenting. Most parents (86%) report that they are usually consistent when managing their child's behaviour. Many parents reflected critically on their own parenting strategies and experiences, with half saying they often become impatient too quickly (48%) and are often too critical of their child (43%). A third (36%) say they often lose their temper and later feel guilty (see *Figure 3*). Parents who reported using physical discipline at least 'some of the time' were more likely to report feelings of

remorse about how they deal with their child's behaviour, with more than half saying they often lose their temper and later feel guilty (53%).

Parents who reported using physical discipline at least 'some of the time' were more likely to say they often find it difficult to manage their child's behaviour (49%) and often feel overwhelmed (51%) compared with those parents who report using physical discipline 'rarely or not all' (21% and 27% respectively).

## Understanding reasons for a child's behaviour

Understanding child behaviour is an important part of knowing how to manage it well. Most parents (81%) understand that a child's behaviour is mostly driven by their thoughts and feelings. Frequently, when a child misbehaves it is a response to feeling anxious, angry or overwhelmed. Understanding this, and addressing the underlying reason for the behaviour, is the most effective way to address the behaviour and stop it from happening again.

Half of parents (48%) said that the main reason children misbehave is to get attention. Children need attention and feedback from their parents and carers to form attachment and emotionally thrive. The best type of attention for a child to receive is positive attention in response to desired behaviour, as this will reinforce that behaviour. At times children engage in undesired behaviours that gain negative attention and responses from parents, such as shouting or physical discipline.



Figure 3.

By responding to challenging behaviours with negative attention parents may reinforce undesired behaviours, because negative attention is preferable to no attention at all for some children. Ignoring problematic behaviours and providing lots of praise and positive attention in response to desired behaviours is a more effective way to improve child behaviour.

A third of parents (33%) believe children should always be on their best behaviour, suggesting they have unrealistic expectations about a child's capacity to behave in certain ways. Children behave in different ways at different times, depending on their age and developmental stage, their temperament and the environment they are in. For example, it is normal for a toddler to have difficulty regulating their emotions and to have tantrums in response to overwhelming situations. Testing limits, such as having strong opinions about eating or resisting bedtime, is a normal developmental stage for toddlers and preschoolers. As teenagers journey towards becoming independent, it is normal for them to challenge parent opinion and to negotiate around decision-making. This is how they learn the skills required to be an independent and responsible young adult. Understanding that these sorts of challenging behaviours are a normal and healthy part of childhood and adolescence can help parents to respond positively and effectively to these situations.

## Help-seeking and support

Being well supported and having opportunities for self-care can help equip parents to respond positively and effectively to their child's behaviour. Most parents with partners report working well with their partner to manage their child's behaviour (88%), but one in five (21%) parents report often arguing with other family members about how to manage their child's behaviour.

Almost half (45%) of parents are not confident that they would know where to go for help if they had difficulty managing their child's behaviour. Among those parents who did identify potential sources of help, the most commonly identified sources were friends and family (62%), followed by the GP (43%) and online information (43%).

## Implications

Children behave in different ways depending on their age, developmental stage, temperament and the situation at hand. Exhibiting challenging behaviour at various times is a normal part of childhood and adolescence. Parents and carers use various ways to respond to and guide their children's behaviour. Research shows that some methods of behaviour management are more effective than others. This study shows that many parents regularly use positive parenting strategies to guide their children's behaviour, but a concerning number also use negative punitive

strategies, including physical discipline. Physical discipline is less effective than other methods of discipline in the longer term, and it can cause physical and psychological harm to children.

These results suggest that a concerning proportion of parents lack understanding about what drives patterns of child behaviour and what works well when it comes to managing behaviour. The implications of this knowledge gap are significant, with the potential for negative psychological impacts for children both now and into the future.

This poll also found that managing child behaviour is frequently a source of stress for parents, with many saying they often feel overwhelmed and unsure of where to go for help. Many parents were critical of their own parenting strategies, in particular those parents who reported using physical discipline and other negative punitive strategies more often. Parents want to do the best for their child and these findings suggest a need and appetite among parents for more assistance and guidance. In order to shift problematic attitudes and improve understanding, investment is needed in targeted and tailored strategies to educate parents about why children behave the way they do and to equip them with the practical skills and hands-on support needed to effectively and positively respond to and manage their child's behaviour.

## Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from August 17 to August 28, 2018, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2044). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between one year and less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 77%.

## References

For full reference list please contact:  
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The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2018). Child behaviour: How are Australian parents responding? Poll Number 12. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.