

# Survey Highlights

## Nature of the survey

This survey, by the *Direction Santé Québec* (Health Québec Division) of the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* (Québec Institute of Statistics), funded by the *ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec* (Ministry of Health and Social Services), makes it possible for the first time to estimate annual rates of violent behaviour (psychological and physical) toward children under 18 by adults living with them. It also allows us to identify some factors associated with such conduct: income, parents' level of schooling, family size and structure, ages of the children and parents, disciplinary practices of grandparents, quality of relations in the couple, and the values and standards of Québec mothers concerning the use of corporal punishment in raising and socializing children.

## Key results

- *Peaceful means of resolving conflicts*

When they were asked about the strategies they use to settle problems with their children, nearly all (98%) Québec mothers said that adults in the household use non-violent disciplinary methods. Peaceful strategies, such as explaining things to the child, withholding privileges and distracting the child, are universally used by adults. This does not preclude recourse to other strategies as indicated below.

- *Aggressive and violent means of resolving conflicts*

Conflict resolution strategies may also involve aggression or violence. In all, 80% of Québec women said that psychological violence had been used (e.g. yelling at the child, shouting or swearing at him or her, calling the child names or threatening him or her). Close to half reported at least one episode of minor physical violence (48%) in the 12 months preceding the survey (e.g. pinching or shaking the child, hitting him or her on the buttocks). Based on the survey results, we can estimate that 1 out of 15 children (7%) was probably subjected to at least one episode of severe physical violence in the same period (e.g. shaking a

child under two years old, hitting the child on the face or head, punching, kicking or slapping the child or hitting him or her with some object).

This does not mean that such methods are necessarily the usual disciplinary approach adopted by adults in the household where such incidents were reported. The rate of children subjected to psychological aggression three or more times in the year preceding the survey is 44%, as opposed to 16% for episodes of minor physical violence and 1% for severe physical violence (see the table below).

## Prevalence of violent parental behaviour toward children 0 to 17, expressed as an annual frequency (%), 1999

	In the 12 months preceding the survey...	
	At least once	3 or more times
	%	
Psychological aggression	78.6	43.7
Minor physical violence	47.8	16.4
Severe physical violence	6.6	1.3

Source: *Institut de la statistique du Québec, La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 1999*

- *Québec women's attitudes concerning corporal punishment*

Generally speaking (79%), mothers find that Québec parents are too easy on their children. Although a large majority (73%) admit that it is possible to injure a child by doing so, close to half of mothers claim that it is nevertheless the parents' duty to strike a child if necessary. In fact, over two-thirds disagree with a law to prohibit corporal punishment, as is the case in Sweden, for instance. They do not necessarily disapprove of parents (or other adults) who spank children, but rather (93%) are concerned about the long-term results of repeated psychological aggression toward children. The study shows that children whose mothers believe in more traditional values and are less concerned about the possible adverse effects of corporal punishment and

psychological aggression experience a larger number of violent episodes in the home.

- *Violence by grandparents and violence by their children toward their own children*

A significant proportion of Québec mothers describe their own mothers (18%) or their spouses' mothers (12%) and their own fathers (26%) or their spouses' fathers (21%) as having been very strict or violent parents during their own childhood. The study shows that the rates of all forms of violence, including severe violence, are higher among children whose maternal and paternal grandparents are described as violent or very strict; the children's parents may have experienced such violence directly or may have witnessed it. For example, severe physical violence experienced by a mother during her childhood is also associated with higher rates of psychological aggression toward her own children (90% vs. 78%). Similarly, the proportion of children subjected to severe violence in the 12 months preceding the survey is 1.8 times higher in those cases where the mother said that she had witnessed family violence during her own childhood.

- *Characteristics of children and violence toward them*

*Sex of children.* Rates of violence - of all kinds - are higher for boys. This difference seems to be particularly marked for severe physical violence (8% for boys, as compared with 5% for girls). *Age of children.* Minor physical violence decreases with the child's age.

- *Characteristics of parents and violence toward children*

*Age of parents.* Mothers and fathers aged 35 to 44 are the most likely to resort to forms of psychological aggression. The children of parents over age 45 are less frequently subjected to minor physical violence. The age of the children may be a factor in this case. There does not appear to be any link between severe physical violence and the age of the parents. *Language.* Respondents who choosing to be interviewed in English reported higher levels of severe violence toward children (14% vs. 6%).

- *Family characteristics*

*Family size.* Psychological aggression is more prevalent in families with more children. The rate is lower in families with a single child. The rate of physical violence, on the other hand, remains constant regardless of the number of children in the household. *Relations between the parents.* The quality of relations between the parents is closely linked with the rate of violence. Children whose mothers stated that their marital relations are hostile or violent (6% of couples) are proportionately more likely to experience violence, and in particular severe physical violence (19% vs. 5%). *Family structure.* The rates of violence reported do not vary with the mothers' marital status or with family structure (single-parent or two-parent family).

- *Socio-economic characteristics*

The use of severe physical violence toward a child is reported twice as often by women who *consider themselves poor or very poor*, as compared with those who consider themselves financially well-off (12% vs. 6%). The *duration of poverty* also appears to be linked with the use of severe violence (14% vs. 6%).

- *Relation between types of violence*

The rates of minor physical violence and severe physical violence are much lower in families in which the adults do not resort to psychological aggression toward children. In these families, the rate of severe violence is almost nil, whereas the rate of minor violence is almost four times lower than the rate in families in which there is psychological aggression toward children. Inversely, the rate of psychological aggression is higher toward children who are also subjected to severe physical violence (98% vs. 77% where there is no severe physical violence). Moreover, we found that children subjected to severe physical violence are proportionately more likely to experience minor physical violence (86% vs. 45%).

**In short**, the probability of showing up in the statistics as a victim of aggression increases if the child belongs to a family that has been living in poverty for some time. It increases for a young child, particularly boys, if the

parents are young, and if their own relationship is difficult or hostile. The probability is also high for children in large families, and in families where the respondent use English during the interview. The survey reveals that there is a higher probability of aggression for children whose grandparents used violence in dealing with their own children. Finally, these results appear against a complex cultural backcloth of Québec mothers' awareness of the harmful consequences of physical and psychological violence, their belief that parents should be firmer toward children and, simultaneously, considerable disagreement regarding social standards governing the use of corporal punishment on children.

### ***Interpreting the statistics***

*One of the primary issues raised by these findings has to do with respect for children's rights.* Nearly 80% of mothers said that they had witnessed (or carried out) an incident of psychological aggression, and close to half of Québec women reported an incident of minor physical violence. A non-negligible percentage of the mothers said that many such incidents had occurred more than once. For instance, 41% of Québec women said that children had been shouted or yelled at three or more times in the 12 months preceding the survey, and 20% of them said it was six or more times. Similarly, close to 8% of children were sworn at three or more times during the same period. In addition, 7% of children were hit on the buttocks, and 11% were slapped on the hand, arm or leg three or more times a year. There is no unanimity in the scientific community regarding an acceptable level of corporal punishment or other forms of "normal" violence toward children. This remains a judgement that can be made only by all the social players —those who are concerned with children's day-to-day well-being, their safety, health and comfort, and those who analyse the issue not only from the viewpoint of psychological or health consequences, but also in terms of children's fundamentals rights. After all, striking another person to achieve one's ends raises the question of basic rights.

Furthermore, the findings concerning the rate of severe violence (6.6%) raise concerns not only about respect

for rights, but also regarding children's development and safety.

*A second concern relates to the possibility of escalation in hostile environments.* One form of violence may well lead to another, and a child subjected to "minor" physical violence is seven times more likely to experience severe violence, as we saw above. The likelihood of psychological violence also increases (6.6 times). This may mean that for a very high number of children, episodes of minor violence in a hostile environment are more likely to lead to harsher blows.

*A third concern relates to the possible transmission of violent behaviour from one generation to the next, in today's precarious economic context.* Childhood episodes of humiliation, spankings and harsh discipline experienced by mothers and fathers are link to higher levels of psychological and physical violence toward their own children. The link with harsh psychological violence in these parents' childhood and the fright that they may have felt as children upon witnessing severe violence toward the people around them is particularly clear in this case. Accordingly, the rates of violence recorded in this survey point to more than escalation in conflict resolution between parents and children today. They could be related to the parents' own childhood experiences, a link that brings us to a form of learned violent behaviour through direct experience or observation. Such learning seems to increase the probability the these individuals will resort to violent behaviour in adulthood. This comes on top of the finding that economic hardship as perceived by Québec women and the duration of poverty are associated with the use of severe violence. We must conclude that there is a pattern of interaction between parents and children that emerges when they are overwhelmed by circumstances: the parents learned violent behaviour in their own childhood and the acceptability of such behaviour, and all this could be exacerbated with greater contemporary social, economic and family pressures.

*A fourth concern has to do with the discriminatory nature of violence toward children.* Violence toward children is discriminatory in several respects. Children of younger parents or who are in large families, whose

parents see themselves as being in difficult economic straits, and those in families where the relations between the parents are marked by conflict or violence are more likely to be subjected to all forms of violence. This violence toward children can also have a *sexist* dimension, for it is boys who experience the most severe violence. It also has an *ageist* aspect, but in this case it is the youngest children who pay the cost.

### ***What can be done?***

The findings of this survey underscore the need for a wide-ranging and rigorous debate in Québec concerning values, attitudes and practices surrounding the use of corporal punishment against children. We think it important that Quebeccers develop specific goals in terms of the desirable changes in parental attitudes and practices and any appropriate statutory changes.

The survey findings also point to the need to make young parents, and those parents whose behaviours are rooted in more-traditional cultural learning, more aware of alternative, non-violent ways of disciplining their children and to encourage them to adopt such practices. These alternative solutions should take account of the consensus among Québec mothers regarding the need for a firmer approach (doubtless based on clearer values and principles) toward children, and should enable them to learn the necessary skills so that they can act firmly, but at the same time with affection and with respect for children's rights and safety. The combined contribution of local community resources, family support services, guidance and support services working with higher-risk parents (for instance, when they are subjected to intense economic pressures) and the major media able to reach the most vulnerable members of the public will doubtless be necessary in the circumstances. Parents of young boys should receive special attention.

It is also certainly worthwhile to note the very important role that can be played by major public policies and services to support employability, income maintenance and support for changing parental roles when it comes

to reducing parental violence toward children, especially younger children.

This survey by *Santé Québec* gives Québec society a useful tool for regularly evaluating the level of violence toward children. The *ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux* would doubtless be well advised to instruct the *Direction Santé Québec* of the *ISQ* to carry out a similar survey every three years, so as to keep Quebeccers informed of trends in parental standards and behaviour toward children. On the basis of these data, the *ISQ* could also develop an indicator for children's safety, protection and well-being, as part of a more general overview of trends in Québec society. Finally, since there are limits to the methodology employed, we suggest that data on confirmed reports of child abuse received by the *Direction de la protection de la Jeunesse* (Youth protection branch) be maintained and regularly published, to give the public a clearer picture of trends in our behaviour toward our children and young people, as shown by different sources of data. Finally, a systematic follow-up of efforts to prevent violence toward children and their success would show the effectiveness of steps taken in this regard and help to better identify areas for priority investment.

### ***Some details on methodology***

This telephone survey was conducted on a representative sample of 2,469 mothers of children aged 0 to 17, between February 8 and May 26, 1999, by the *Bureau d'interviewers professionnels (BIP)* survey firm. The interviews were conducted mainly in French (n=2,245), with the rest in English (n=224). The sample consisted mainly of two-parent families (78%). At the time of the survey, 77% of the households said that salaried employment was their main source of income; 6% of the households were receiving social assistance. The average annual family income reported was generally in the vicinity of \$35,000 (65%). Over one in 10 respondents considered herself poor or very poor (12%). There were from 1 to 8 children per family, with an average of 1.8 children (standard deviation=0.86).

The computerised questionnaire comprised 71 questions on four themes: 1) parents' attitudes toward corporal punishment; 2) measurement of use of discipline; 3) parents' childhood disciplinary experiences; and 4) quality of relations in the couple. In closing, some socio-demographic information was collected. The interviews lasted an average of 15 minutes.

To be able to generalize the sample data to the target population, each respondent and each child selected was assigned a "weight" that she or he "represents" in the population.