

**INFANT
COHORT**

AT 5 YEARS
NOV 2013



**Growing Up
in Ireland**

National Longitudinal
Study of Children

GROWING UP IN IRELAND

KEY FINDINGS: INFANT COHORT (at 5 years)

NO. 2 SOCIO-EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING OF FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

INTRODUCTION

This is the second in a series of *Key Findings* from the third wave of interviews with the Infant Cohort in *Growing Up in Ireland*. The families of around 11,100 children were initially interviewed in 2008/2009 when the Study Children were nine months old. They were re-interviewed between January and August 2011 when the children were three years of age, and between March and September 2013, when the children were five years old.

This Key Finding presents descriptive information on the socio-emotional well-being of the children and how this has changed or remained stable over time.

At age five, the development of children's socio-emotional well-being centres around how they feel about themselves and how they relate to others. Many children start school around this time, which means they meet lots of new children and adults with whom they need to work, play and negotiate. The adults in their lives have greater expectations of five-year-olds than of younger children, in terms of their capacity to manage their reactions and to have regard for the feelings of others.

Growing Up in Ireland records information on several aspects of the child's socio-emotional development between birth and five years, including behaviour, social skills and interactions with parents.



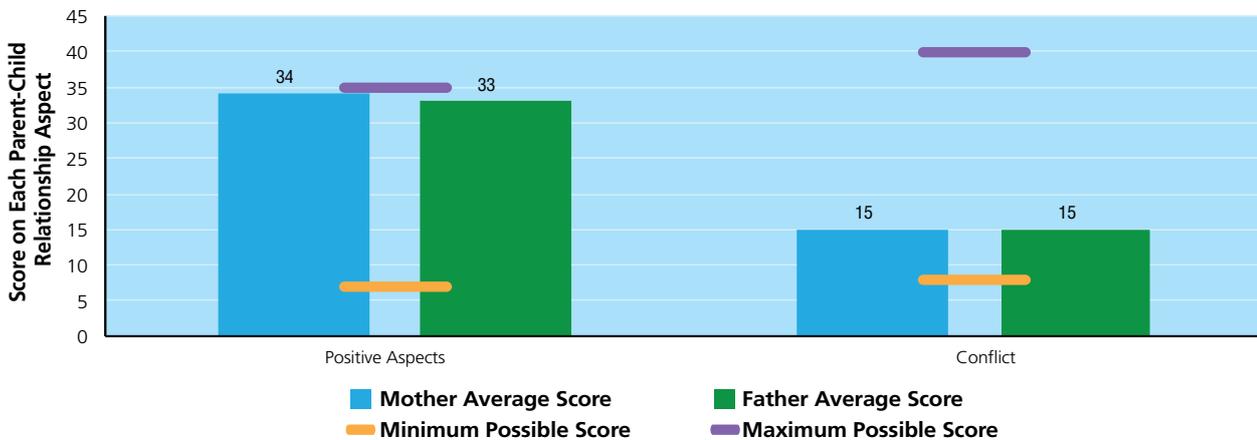
PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Most parents have a positive relationship with their five-year-old.

Both mothers and fathers completed a questionnaire on their relationship with their child. This produced scores on two dimensions: 'positive aspects of the parent-child relationship' – including items such as the parent and child *sharing a warm, affectionate relationship*; and 'conflict in the parent-child relationship' – including items such as whether or not the child *remains angry after being disciplined*.

- Both mothers and fathers tended to rate their relationship with their five-year-old as very high in positive aspects (Figure 1). The average score for both mothers and fathers was very close to the maximum score of 35: 34 for mothers and 33 for fathers. Parents also tended to report low levels of conflict (Figure 1). Average scores for both parents were close to the lower range of the scale (15 for both mothers and fathers in a scale with a minimum score of 8).

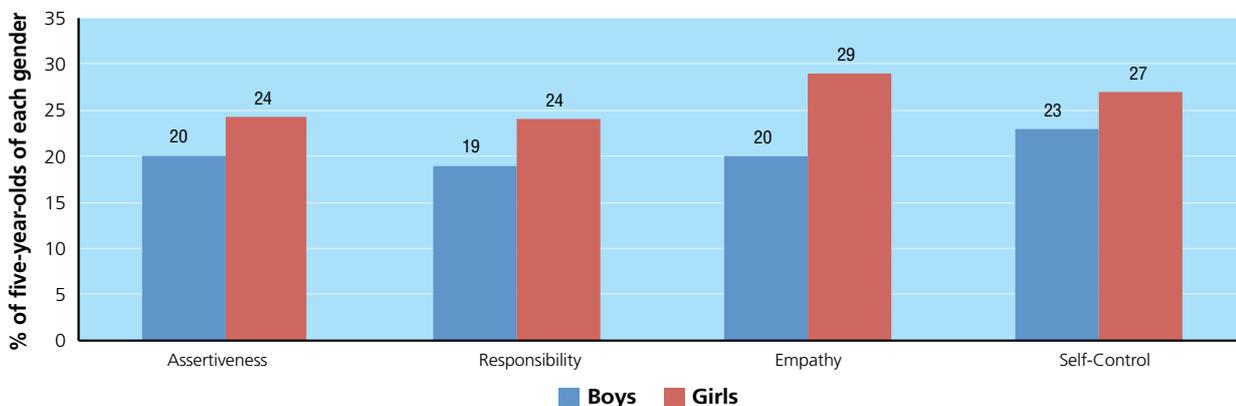
Figure 1: Average scores for mothers and fathers on the 'positive aspects' and 'conflict' dimensions of the parent-child relationship, with minimum and maximum possible scores for each scale also indicated



Being able to engage positively and confidently with other children and adults is an important life-skill that will likely benefit the child throughout the life-span. A detailed measure of the child's social skills was used to assess the child's **assertiveness** (e.g. asking for help from adults); capacity for **taking responsibility** for their own actions; being **empathetic** (e.g. showing concern for others), and **self-control** (e.g. staying calm when disagreeing with others).

- Social skills continue to evolve as the child gets older, but the pace can differ between individuals. At five years there were differences among children in relation to the four dimensions of social skills. Girls were more likely than boys to be in the top quartile (25%)¹ – indicating better social skills (on all four dimensions) (Figure 2). The greatest gap between boys and girls was in regard to empathy.

Figure 2: Percentage of boys and girls in the top quartile of each of the social skills



¹ Due to the distribution of scores in this and similar measures, there may not be an equivalent percentage of cases at certain cut-off thresholds.

Better social skills help children in negotiating their relationships with others. Using the 'conflict' scale described earlier, we can compare the social skills of children whose parents report the most conflict in the parent-child relationship (i.e. in the highest 10% of scores) with those who are below this higher range.

- Five-year-olds who scored in the highest quartile on the social skills measure were less likely to be in the group experiencing the highest level of conflict with parents (Figure 3).

- For three of the four skills measured (responsibility, empathy and self-control), children with scores in the top quartile were less than half as likely as their peers to be experiencing high levels of parent-child conflict. For example, among five-year-olds who exerted the highest levels of self-control, only 4% had high conflict with their mother and 5% had high conflict with their father. These figures contrast with levels of 14% among parents and children where the children had lower levels of self-control (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Comparison of children with the best social skills (i.e. in the highest quartile) and those with other (lower) scores, in terms of frequency of experiencing greater conflict (i.e. highest 10%) in their relationships with mothers and fathers



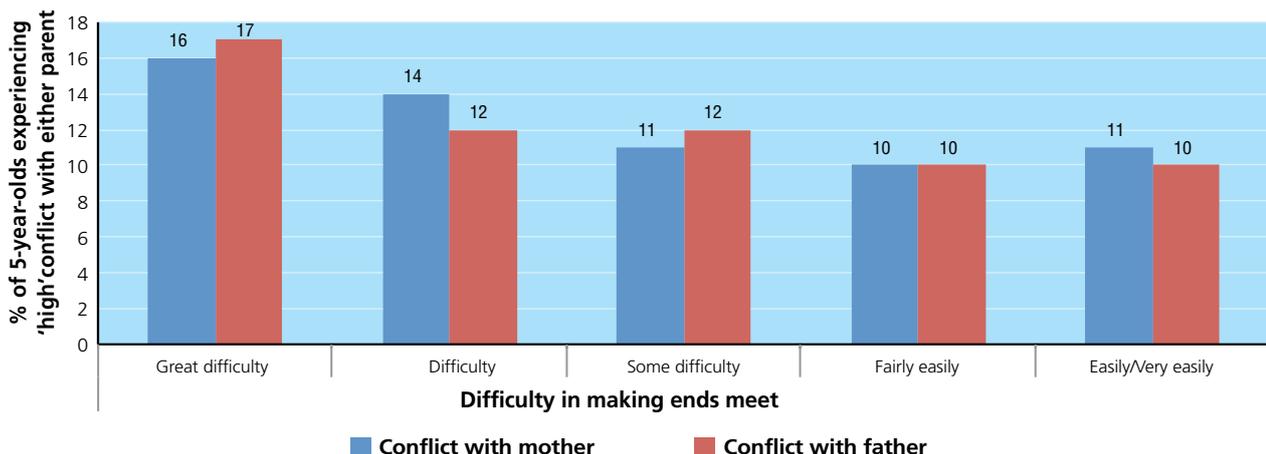
Having to cope with sources of stress such as financial worries can make parenting more difficult. Mothers were asked to rate how easy or difficult they were finding it to make ends meet financially. The scale ranged from with *great difficulty* to *very easily*.

- Families experiencing *great difficulty* in making ends meet were the most likely to have higher conflict in mother-child (16%) and father-child (17%) relationships (Figure 4). This is in contrast to families who were experiencing the least

economic strain, where only 11% of mothers and 10% of fathers were in the high parent-child conflict range.

- The generally high scores on the 'positive aspects' of the parent-child relationship appeared to be relatively more resistant to the negative influence of economic strain; there was little variation in the average score on that dimension for either mothers or fathers (not illustrated).

Figure 4: Association between economic strain and likelihood of the child being in the top 10% of conflict scores with mothers or fathers



DISCIPLINE

Parents were more likely to discuss misbehaviour than smack or shout.

Most parents used a range of strategies to discipline their children, including 'discussion of the behaviour' as well as punishments such as 'taking away treats' and the 'naughty step'.

- Parents reported frequent use of the preferable approach of calmly explaining why a particular behaviour was wrong; 90% of fathers and 93% of mothers did this *regularly or always*.
- Around 6 out of 10 parents said they never used 'smacking' as a form of discipline for their five-

year-old, and those who did tended to use it infrequently: 10% of mothers and 9% of fathers did so *now and again*, and hardly any used it *regularly or always*. Shouting was somewhat more common; around 40% of parents said they did so *now and again* (40% of fathers, 46% of mothers).

- Overall, mothers and fathers reported similar usage of discipline strategies (Figures 5 and 6). The main difference was that mothers (69%) were more likely than fathers (55%) to say that they *always* discussed or explained to the child why the behaviour was wrong.

Figure 5: Mothers' use of discipline strategies for five-year-olds

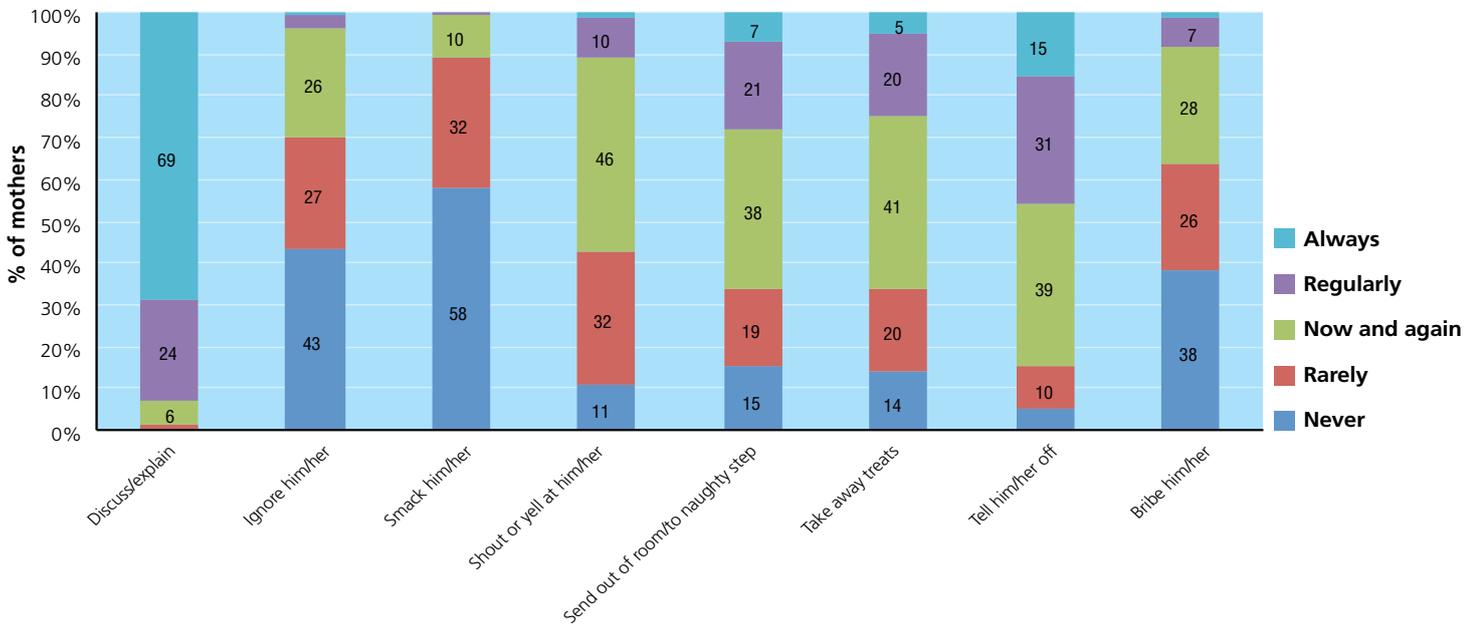
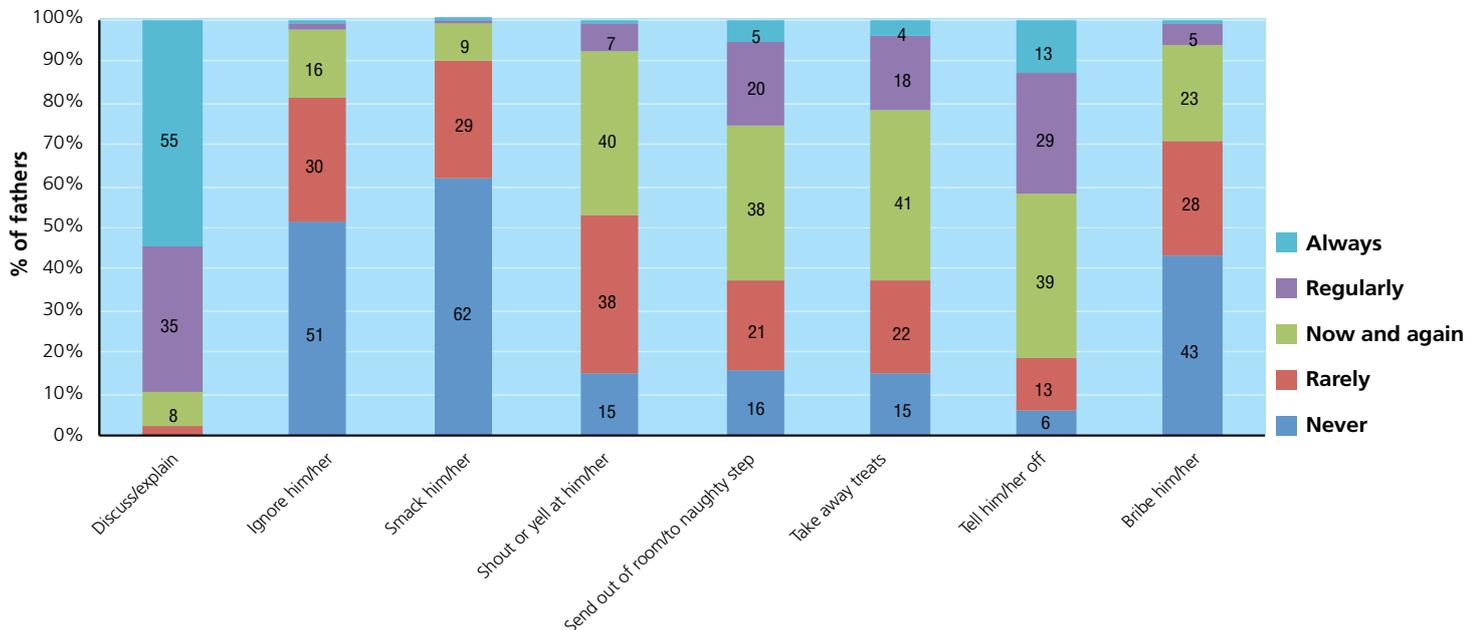


Figure 6: Fathers' use of discipline strategies for five-year-olds



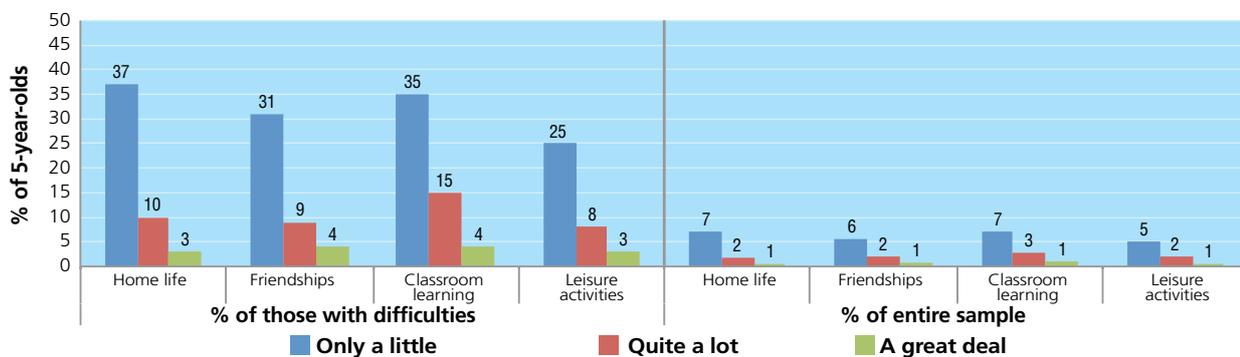
EMOTIONS, CONCENTRATION AND BEHAVIOUR

Most mothers with concerns about their child's behaviour, attention or sociability reported 'minor difficulties'

In the course of her interview, the child's mother was asked to record if her five-year-old experienced any illnesses, conditions or disabilities (selecting from a pre-coded list of 21 items) and, if so, whether or not the problem had been diagnosed by a medical professional. This list included diagnoses relating to emotional and behavioural conditions. Later in the interview, the child's mother was asked whether or not she thought her child had any difficulties in terms of '...his/her emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with others'. Response categories were: *no*; *minor difficulties*; *definite difficulties*, and *severe difficulties*.

- Very few five-year-olds (1%) had a doctor-diagnosed condition related to problems with attention, behaviour or autistic-spectrum disorders, although 4% of mothers said they had consulted a psychologist or psychiatrist about their child in the previous 12 months.
- Just under 4% of five-year-olds were reported by their mothers to have *definite* or *severe* difficulties with 'emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people'. A further 15% were described as having *minor difficulties* in one or more of these areas. A total of over 19% of all five-year-olds were reported by their mothers as having some difficulties.
- 18% of children whose mother indicated that they had any level of socio-emotional difficulties were upset or distressed *quite a lot* or *a great deal* by these difficulties. These children represent 4% of the entire sample².
- When asked if these difficulties interfered with various aspects of the child's life, 19% said they interfered *quite a lot* or *a great deal* with classroom learning - which was more than with home life, friendship or leisure activities (Figure 7).
- 16% of mothers whose children had difficulties said these were a burden on the family *quite a lot* or *a great deal* (3% of the entire sample).

Figure 7: Children whose mothers reported that socio-emotional difficulties interfered with other areas of life expressed as a percentage of (a) the 19% with difficulties (left) and (b) the entire sample (right) ('not at all' category is not illustrated)



At both age five and age three, mothers completed a detailed questionnaire – the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) – about their child's socio-emotional and behavioural development. Four negative aspects of the child's behaviour – *peer problems*, *conduct problems*, *hyperactivity* and *emotionality* – were measured. When combined, these four dimensions produce a 'total difficulties' score. The children who scored in the top 10% of this measure (i.e. in the 'problematic' range) were those with the highest level of socio-emotional and behavioural problems compared to other children. In addition, at nine months of age the children had been measured as being 'fussy/difficult' on a temperament scale.

- 39% of children who scored in the 'problematic' range of the SDQ at age three years were in the problematic range again at five years (Figure 8). This compares with only 8% of the children who had not been in the 'problematic' range at age three years.
- Looking back even further to when the children were infants, Figure 8 also shows that nearly twice the percentage of children who had the highest scores (i.e. in the top 10%) on the temperament measure of being 'fussy/difficult' at nine months were in the 'problematic' range of the SDQ behavioural measure at age five (21% compared to 11%).

² 18% of the 19% of children who were reported by their mothers as having difficulties.

Figure 8: Percentage of children who had behavioural problems at three or were the most fussy-difficult infants and also had behavioural problems at age five

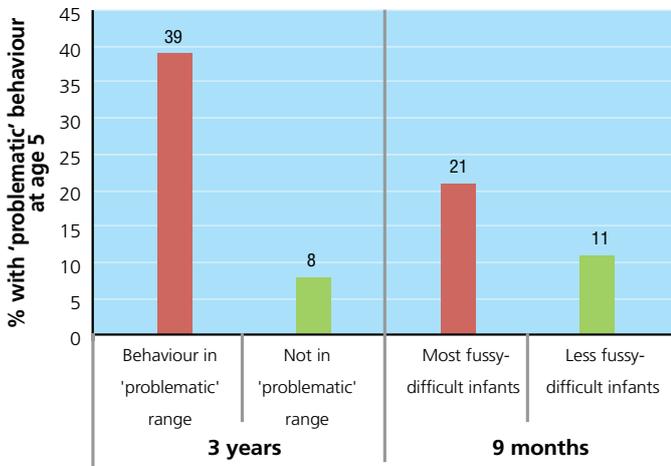


Table 1 shows the percentage of children who were having socio-emotional/behavioural problems at all three waves (1%) compared to those who were never in the 'problematic' range (73%) or who met the threshold at some waves but not others.

Table 1: Percentage of children scoring in the problematic range/top 10% on the main socio-emotional/behavioural measure on all, some or none of the three waves of the Infant Cohort up to age five years

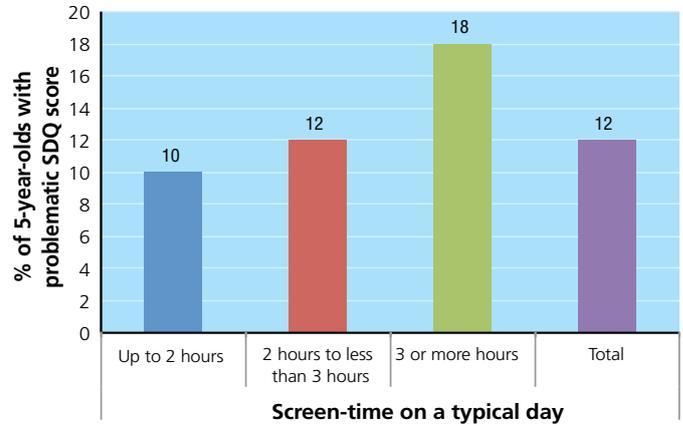
No. of waves in problematic range (top 10%)	% of five-year-olds
No wave	73
One wave	20
Two waves	7
All three waves	1
Total	100

Children who had long periods of 'screen-time' were more likely to have emotional/behavioural problems.

Parents were asked about the amount of time their five-year-old child spent on 'screen-time', such as watching television, playing video games or being on the Internet, on a typical weekday.³ The international literature suggests that prolonged screen-time can affect child development, even when the content is suitable for young children.

- On average, children had less than two hours of 'screen-time' on a typical weekday (58%), although substantial minorities had between two and three hours a day (29%) or even longer (14%).
- Five-year-olds who typically spent three hours or more a day in front of a screen were more likely to be among those children in the 'problematic' range on the SDQ socio-emotional/behavioural measure⁴: 18% were in the problematic behaviour range compared to just 10% for children with the lowest levels of 'screen-time' (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Association between 'screen-time' and being in the 'problematic' range for socio emotional/behavioural problems (as measured by the SDQ)



The most common stressful event for five-year-olds was the death of a family member.

Mothers were asked about potentially stressful events which their child had experienced in their lifetime. The types of events included in a list of 13 presented to the mother in the course of her interview ranged from 'Death of a parent' to 'Moving house'. The impact of these events may be influenced by the timing of the event relative to the child's age, how other family members coped, and the change in circumstances that the event brought about.

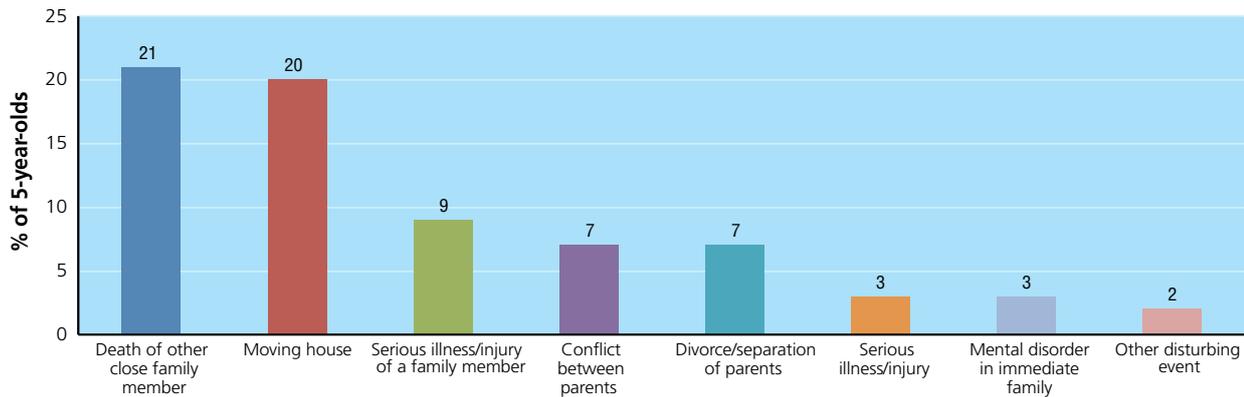
- In total, just under half of five-year-olds had experienced at least one of the events on the list. Figure 10 shows eight of the more common events experienced. 'Moving house' was one of the more frequent events at 20%.
- Most of the other stressful events primarily involved other family members. These included 'death of a close family member (other than a parent)', many of whom were grandparents. This was experienced by 21% of five-year-olds. Serious illness or injury of a family member was experienced by 9% and conflict between parents by 7% (Figure 10).



³ Some of the details on amount of 'screen-time' are summarised in Key Finding No. 3 of this series on five-year-olds.

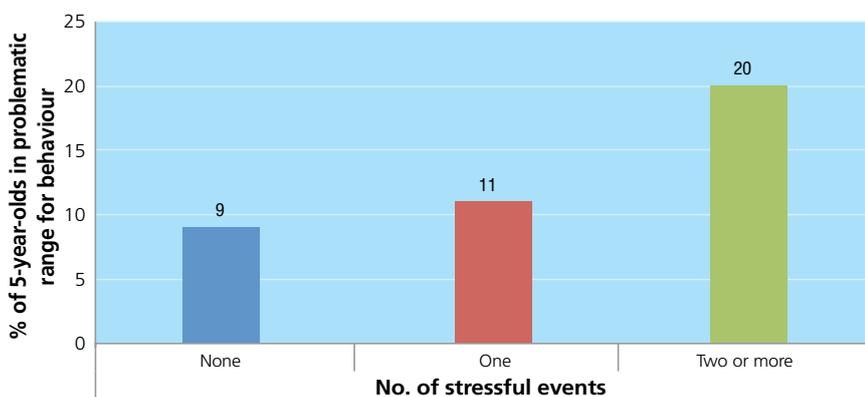
⁴ This association was not explained by differences in maternal education.

Figure 10: Percentage of five-year-olds experiencing a range of stressful life events (eight most common categories)



- Children who had experienced multiple stressful events were more likely to have behavioural problems, as demonstrated by their increased frequency of being in the problematic range on the socio-emotional/behavioural measure (i.e. the top 10% of the SDQ) (Figure 11).

Figure 11: Association between the number of stressful events and the likelihood of having behavioural problems



SUMMARY

Five-year-old children are at a stage in life where their social and spatial world is enlarging, and the potential for further social and emotional development is great. Many of the children had already experienced important transitions such as starting school, changes in their family's structure and possibly other potentially stressful events such as moving house.

Parent-child interactions are an important influence on the child's socio-emotional development, such as learning to self-regulate behaviour even when he or she is not being monitored. The results of this Key Finding suggest that parents are more likely to use positive discipline strategies such as explaining why a particular behaviour was wrong, and use more aggressive punishment (like 'smacking' and 'shouting') less frequently.

Overall, parents tended to report high levels of positivity and low levels of conflict with their five-year-old, although economic strain in the household was associated with a greater risk of higher levels of such conflict. In contrast, children who seemed to be progressing well in their development of social skills – such as assertiveness, empathy, responsibility and self-control – were the least likely to have a problem with conflict in their relationships with their parents.

Only a small minority of children appeared to have serious problems with their emotions, concentration or behaviour. However, some mothers had concerns about how these problems were compromising the child's wellbeing in areas such as home life, classroom learning and friendships. Associations were identified between a child's behavioural difficulties and factors such as long periods of 'screen-time' and experience of multiple stressful events.

Considering the child's socio-emotional well-being over time, there was some evidence that, for a small minority of children, persistent problems in this area are detectable as early as infancy (nine months), while other children can be difficult at some ages but less so at others. Further analysis may be able to identify other longitudinal indicators of persistent versus temporary socio-emotional and behavioural problems.



Growing Up in Ireland is the National Longitudinal Study of Children. It tracks the development of two nationally representative cohorts of children: an Infant Cohort, interviewed initially at nine months and subsequently at three and five years of age, and a Child Cohort, interviewed initially at nine years of age and subsequently at 13.

The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. It is being carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin (TCD).

The first wave of fieldwork with the families of the Infant Cohort involved around 11,100 nine-month-olds, their parents and carers. Interviews began in September 2008 and were completed in March 2009. The second wave of interviews with this cohort (at three years of age) took place between January and August 2011, and the third wave of interviews (at five years of age) was completed between March and September 2013. The response rates in both the second and third waves were 90%.

Access to *Growing Up in Ireland* data

An anonymised version of all quantitative and qualitative data collected in *Growing Up in Ireland* is being made available through the Irish Social Science Data Archive (ISSDA)

(<http://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/growingupinireland/>)

and the Irish Qualitative Data Archive (IQDA)

(<http://www.iqda.ie/content/growing-ireland>).

Thank you to all participants

The success of *Growing Up in Ireland* is the result of contributions from a large range of individuals, organisations and groups, many of whom helped to recruit the sample and collect the data. We are particularly grateful to the thousands of families from every part of the country who gave so generously of their time on three occasions to make this study possible. A very big 'thank you' to the children and their families.

(The figures presented in this Key Finding are purely descriptive. They do not control for potential interactions or confounding effects. All figures are preliminary and may be subject to change.)



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