




GROWING UP IN IRELAND

QUALITATIVE KEY FINDINGS



“I get on great with mummy ‘cause she is really nice to me and she does everything for me ... and she helps me sometimes with my homework.”

NO. 1 **NINE-YEAR-OLDS AND THEIR FAMILIES**

This is the first in a series of Key Findings arising from the *Growing Up in Ireland* Qualitative study. It summarises the findings of the in-depth study with nine-year-old children and their parents in 120 families selected from the 8,570 who had participated in the Quantitative survey and were subsequently interviewed about their views and experiences. Analysis of children's perspectives on their family lives is presented here.

IN BRIEF

- Relationships between children and their parents were broadly positive, characterised by open communication, more so with mothers, and shared activities mainly with fathers.
- Children frequently commented, however, on how they felt less close to parents who worked long hours and were less available.
- Parental separation had a considerable impact on children's routines and made for relationships with non-resident parents that were challenging to sustain though still valued.
- Children gave positive responses to household rules and the boundaries their parents placed on them, conscious of their parents' positive motivations.
- Other family relationships, with siblings, grandparents, and even pets, were significant in children's lives as sources of support and comfort.
- Sibling relationships were more mixed, oscillating between conflict and companionship.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

The relationships that children develop with their parents provide a blueprint for their future relationships. The report on the findings of the Quantitative survey, *Growing Up in Ireland – The Lives of 9-Year-Olds* (www.growingup.ie/childpublications), revealed that most children had good relationships with their parents. Over 80% of children said they got on very well with both their mothers and fathers. Less than 1% of children said they did not get on with their mothers or fathers. Similarly, in the in-depth interviews, children reported that they got on “grand”, “great” or “really well” with their parents, and described enjoyable activities and interactions with their parents.

Three themes emerged in children’s descriptions of their relationships with their parents: communication, shared activities and conflict. Typically, children spent more time with their mothers than fathers, and mothers were often at home when the child arrived home from school. Children described their mothers as being caring and supportive:

“I get on great with mummy ‘cause she is really nice to me and she does everything for me ... and she helps me sometimes with my homework.” [Girl]

Open and frequent communication emerged as a key feature of their relationships with their mothers:

“Really, really well. Every day after school we talk ... we have a chat.” [Boy]

Many children reported that their mothers were available to meet their emotional needs for comfort:

“She always makes me feel that I don’t have to worry to tell her about people in school that are bullying me or if I feel upset about everything.” [Boy]

Thus, most children appeared confident about their mother’s availability as a source of comfort and security, especially when they were upset.

Children’s descriptions of their relationships with their fathers were primarily focused on shared activities.

“I always practise rugby with him outside. And he cooks my favourite food ... spaghetti bolognese.” [Boy]


Many fathers appeared to be involved in their children’s sporting activities, such as practising sports skills and transporting them to training or matches.

“Yeah we get on good ‘cause he helps me with my sports and helps me get better with my hurling and soccer and all that stuff.” [Boy]

The significance of shared activities and of fathers spending time with their children was also highlighted in situations where fathers were less available to their children, giving rise to less closeness in the relationship. This boy explained why he did not feel as close to his father as his mother:

“I don’t talk to him ‘cause most of the time he’s in work.” [Boy]

The theme of conflict arose when children reflected on negative experiences in their relationships with their parents. Conflict is a common aspect of parent-child relationships. Two primary sources of conflict were identified. First, tension arose in parent-child relationships when parents were stressed or tired:



“Yeah we get on good ‘cause he helps me with my sports and to help me get better with my hurling and soccer and all that stuff.” [Boy]

“We don’t see him [father] as much and because he travels five days a week ... and the rest of the times he is travelling, and on the weekend he can be a bit grumpy and if myself and [brother] are shouting he can send us to our rooms a bit easy.” [Boy]

More frequently, however, conflict in the relationship was attributed to the imposition of parental restrictions around children’s activities and whereabouts:

“We sometimes fight. If I want to go out she gives out to me and if I want to do something she gives out to me.” [Boy]

In general, however, conflict was not a dominant feature of children’s relationships with their parents. Only a minority of children (10%) mentioned conflict as an aspect of their relationship with their parents.

Overall, these findings suggest that most children enjoy good relationships with their mothers and fathers, facilitated by shared activities and open communication where children can access support in dealing with issues. Time spent with fathers was frequently activity-based. Positive relationships were constrained when parents had less time to spend with their children. A minority of children mentioned conflict in the relationship, but this did not appear to undermine the closeness of the parent-child relationship.

NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

The significance of parents and children spending time together enjoying shared activities was further emphasised in the narratives of children who did not live with their fathers. In the large sample, 17% of children were living apart from their fathers; of these, nearly one-quarter had daily contact with their fathers and 35% had contact at least once a week. The 120 families in the in-depth study were chosen to represent different family types; one-quarter (30) were one-parent households, all headed by mothers.

Contact with non-resident fathers among this group was very regular; just over half had at least weekly contact. Research suggests that children and non-resident parents often engage in recreational activities when together. This finding was borne out in these interviews, as much of the time spent with non-resident fathers revolved around leisure and having fun:

“I get to go to the pet farm which is my favourite place because they usually have kittens and guinea pigs and bunny rabbits and stuff like that there. We get to go swimming and do all the fun stuff.” [Girl]

Almost one-third of the children had infrequent contact with their non-resident fathers. For some, their father’s absence was a source of sadness:

“My dad and mum split up and I only get to see him once a month ... I would love to see him every day. Most of the time I feel upset because he is not here.” [Girl]

Other children whose contact with their fathers was infrequent characterised their relationship in less positive terms:

Interviewer: “How do you get on with your dad?”

Child: “Not very good. I barely see him.”

Interviewer: “And do you ever do anything with your dad?”

Child: “Not anymore.” [Girl]

These findings reinforce the idea that spending time with children and sharing activities is the foundation on which a close emotional bond can develop. It may be a challenge to sustain a positive relationship where fathers are non-resident and contact is infrequent.

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“Making sure you don’t get hurt and making sure you don’t run with scissors and stuff like that.” [Girl]



PARENTAL DISCIPLINE STRATEGIES

An important aspect of effective parenting involves setting and enforcing rules and limits for their children, though it is important that the relationship is also warm and loving. By combining discipline and emotional support, parents strive to teach children about appropriate behaviour and social norms and values.

Children described a range of rules which parents enforced. These included helping in the house, not fighting with siblings, having good manners, and keeping parents informed of their whereabouts.

“No messing or fighting or hitting or no giving out, or shouting, and that is all really.” [Boy]

“No playing on the internet without permission, no sneaking sweets and going to friends’ houses without permission.” [Boy]

Most of the children valued the boundaries that parents kept them within, and appreciated that their parents were motivated by their desire to protect them from harm and keep them safe:

“Making sure you don’t get hurt and making sure you don’t run with scissors and stuff like that.” [Girl]

In the large survey, the majority of parents said they used inductive discipline strategies that involved discussing with their child why their behaviour was wrong. Other reported discipline strategies included shouting at the child, sending them to their bedroom, telling them off and denying them treats or pocket money. Smacking was reported as being rarely or never used.

The children in the in-depth study predominantly described strategies that involved scolding, restricting privileges and being sent to one’s bedroom.

“You get shouted at or you get grounded.” [Girl]

C: “Sent to my room or something.”

I: “And what do you think of that?”

C: “Bad, because I have to stay in my room and do nothing, just lie there.” [Girl]

Children did not give examples of parents’ use of inductive strategies. The minority of children who had been physically punished described their experience:

“It is bad news ... and you say, ‘oh no, here comes the pain’. It does get sore but it goes straight away.” [Girl]

Children’s reflections on what worked best in terms of discipline highlighted the potential for the benefits of inductive forms of discipline and the reinforcement of positive behaviour.

“What works best would be apologising for doing it and not doing it again.” [Boy]

“If you make a deal ... I’ll give you this and I’ll give you that.” [Boy]

These findings suggest that parents are using a range of discipline strategies, some of which are known to lead to the internalization of social standards of conduct and an understanding of right and wrong.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIBLINGS

Relationships with brothers and sisters are different from all other relationships. They are characterized by strong uninhibited emotions, of a positive, negative or ambivalent quality. They are noted for their intimacy, as siblings spend large amounts of time playing together and are well known to each other. Furthermore, birth order and age gaps between siblings can bring to the fore issues of power and rivalry.

In the large survey, one-quarter of children said they always got on with their siblings, while a similar proportion never got on. The remaining children sometimes got on, revealing a combination of positive interactions as well as conflict. In the interviews with the children, two themes emerged: conflict and companionship. Typically, sibling relationships were not uniformly positive or negative; they tended to be a mix of both:

“We do get along but we don’t always get along, but I still love him.” [Girl]

“Most of the times we fight, though, but we get along as well.” [Girl]

The theme of companionship was reflected in how children talked about the range of activities they participated in together. Brothers and sisters played together and were good company for each other:

C: “Good, well, my brother, I play soccer quite a lot, and my sister, she’s nearly all the time at my friend’s house.”

I: “Would you and she ever play together?”

C: “She likes to play stuff like when she’s pretending to be little objects and I’ll just play along with that.” [Boy]

Siblings who shared common interests were likely playmates for each other. For example, this boy described why he got along better with one brother than another:

“Because we do most stuff with each other and we’re more into sport. We both like sports a lot and we like playing with each other.” [Boy]

Alongside the theme of siblings as companions, most children described at least some conflict with their sibling. Overall, it appears that fighting and being mean was an aspect of the sibling relationship.

“Play football and play the PlayStation and sometimes we would read our books together and watch programmes although sometimes he is quite mean ... he says mean things about me or kicks me.” [Girl]

Conflict with siblings involved verbal as well as physical fighting. One of the boys spoke about physical fights with his brother:

C: “We don’t really get along that well ... We mainly fight.”

I: “And what happens when you have a fight?”

C: “He’d start pushing me around.”

I: “And what would you do?”

C: “Push him back.” [Boy]

Older siblings were sometimes admired but, more often, relationships with older siblings could be strained as a result of the authority roles that they adopted in relation to their younger siblings:

“Sometimes I would fight with him and sometimes he thinks he is a big adult and he thinks he is my dad and bosses me around. But sometimes, twice we went to the cinema together.” [Boy]



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“We get along great and very good but at the same time he can be really, really annoying. He always takes my stuff and hits me and he screams and shouts.” [Boy]

“Sometimes when she is minding us and we want to do something she won’t let me and I carry on and she acts like a mother ... Like she would shout really loud and she would tell us to go to bed and drags us up.” [Girl]

Some children also felt that older siblings sometimes rejected them, especially when playing with their friends.

“Because if he is out playing with his friends and I see him and go over he gets embarrassed and he says like ‘go away’.” [Girl]

Reflecting these experiences, children with younger siblings reported that they were annoying and immature:

“We get along great and very good but at the same time he can be really, really annoying. He always takes my stuff and hits me and he screams and shouts.” [Boy]

Children who had younger siblings highlighted the sense of responsibility they felt towards them. They were involved in looking after them and were expected to set a good example for them:

I: “Do you like being the oldest?”

C: “It has its ups and downs ... You get to stay up later, you get to do more things than your younger brother and sister.”

I: “What would be the downs?”

C: “If you do something naughty you’re the oldest and you shouldn’t be doing it like.” [Boy]

Sibling relationships are an important source of fun and companionship for children. These findings highlight how birth order and the age gap between siblings shape children’s experiences with their brothers and sisters. The age difference between siblings often makes issues like power, control and rivalry a source of conflict for children.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents are important sources of support and influence for children and their parents. Grandparent involvement with grandchildren is also positively associated with well-being and satisfaction for grandparents.

In the Quantitative survey, nearly two-thirds of children had quite a lot of contact with grandparents, while 13% rarely or did not have contact with grandparents. Similar levels of contact were reported in the in-depth study. The majority of children said they enjoyed close relationships with their grandparents; for those whose grandparents lived nearby, contact was very regular.

Two themes emerged in children’s descriptions of their grandparents. First, grandparents were primarily characterised as informal providers of childcare. Grandparents were frequently involved in children’s daily routine and looked after them after school:

“Well, my nana takes me everywhere because she minds me after school.” [Boy]

Having regular contact fostered close relationships with grandparents:

“I get on brilliantly well with my grandparents and I see my grandparents here very much, nearly every day.” [Girl]



My Family and Me

“We go to their house every Friday for lunch and they come to our house every Tuesday and Thursday for dinner ... and they would go to the ends of the earth to get us, if we asked for anything they would go to the ends of the earth to get it.” [Boy]

Secondly, in addition to being involved in daily care-giving routines, grandparents were also identified as sources of fun and companionship:

“We go to the park and she takes us to fun places and the shops and cinemas and stuff.” [Girl]

“I just like spending time with them, cooking with them because my granny makes the best apple tarts in the world and I like cooking apple tarts with her.” [Girl]

These findings highlight the role that grandparents play in buffering families from stress, by caring for and nurturing grandchildren and thereby supporting parents in their parenting role. For the majority of children, grandparents represented positive influences in their lives.

PETS AS FAMILY MEMBERS

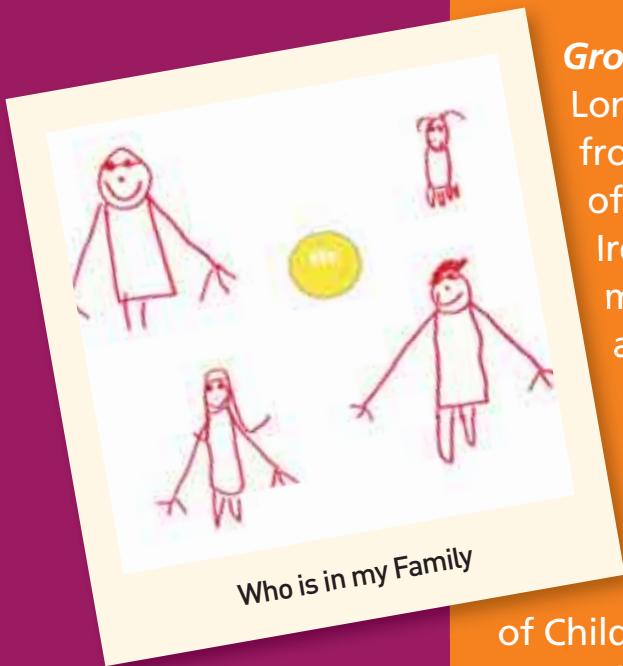
Almost half of the children had pets and most considered their pets to be a member of their family. Some children described the pleasure they experienced playing with their pets and the affection they felt for their pets:

“Bring him for walks, play with him out the back, bring him on my trampoline.” [Boy]

A few children also described their role in caring for their pets, while one child talked about the death of a pet. These findings suggest that having a pet confers benefits for children in terms of companionship and affection, teaching them about caring and responsibility, and introducing them to mortality.

“I just like spending time with them, cooking with them because my granny makes the best apple tarts in the world and I like cooking apple tarts with her.” [Girl]





Growing Up in Ireland is the National Longitudinal Study of Children. It aims to track, from infancy through to adolescence, the lives of two representative cohorts of children in Ireland: an infant cohort (recruited at nine months of age) and a child cohort (recruited at nine years old).

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is funding it in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is overseeing and managing the Study, which is being carried out by a consortium of researchers led by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) and Trinity College Dublin.

The first wave of quantitative fieldwork surveyed 8,570 nine-year-old children and their parents. Following this, 120 families who had participated in that survey were selected to be interviewed as part of a qualitative study. This study complements the quantitative survey by using interviews to explore in more depth children's and parents' perspectives on some of the issues examined in the main survey. This document is one of a series that summarises some of the key findings arising from these interviews.



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
Study of Children

If you would like further information about
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