

## Parenting Norms and Practices in 2004

In 1999, Québec conducted its first population survey of family violence in the life of children.<sup>1</sup> This representative survey of all households with one or more children between 0 and 17 years of age provided the means of establishing for the first time the annual prevalence of physical and psychological violence inflicted on children. It filled the gap of population data on this phenomenon, adding data to those measured through the use of youth protection services, the only indicator available until then. It also provided an opportunity to measure mothers' attitudes on physical discipline and to explore the links between various forms of violence and certain individual and family characteristics.

In order to monitor trends in parenting behaviours in the population that could be characterized as violent, the *ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux (MSSS)* (Ministry of Health and Social Services) mandated the *Institut de la statistique du Québec* to conduct a second survey in 2004. It was done using a similar methodology to the first one in 1999. It covered a representative sample of 3,148 mothers, with the aim of documenting both the magnitude of the problem (annual prevalence) and the changes observed in parenting attitudes and practices since 1999. In addition, conscious of the need to observe differences in perceptions of parental violence by gender, the MSSS, in collaboration with the GRAVE-ARDEC<sup>2</sup> research team, funded a parallel survey on an independent and representative sample of 953 fathers (or acting fathers) of at least one child between 0 and 17 years of age. In addition to responding to the concerns expressed in the media and the population at large on the absence of father respondents in the previous survey on family violence, this second part of the 2004 survey revealed fathers' attitudes and perceptions of the phenomenon and the individual, family and social factors associated with it.

For methodological reasons of time comparisons, the results presented in this summary report mainly come from the survey conducted on mothers. They cover only the annual prevalence and trends observed over five years in

various behaviours, namely non-violent discipline, psychological aggression, minor and severe physical violence, and parenting attitudes on discipline and child-rearing. The complete results will be published in the final report of the survey in the fall of 2005. In the current context of debate on repealing Section 43 of the Canadian Criminal Code,<sup>1</sup> these results present an up-to-date provincial portrait of the attitudes and practices of parents with regards to discipline and corporal punishment of children.

### Why the Interest in Parenting Norms and Practices?

The 1999 survey showed that the mothers who strongly supported corporal punishment were most likely to report such behaviour toward their children. A number of studies have shown that child-rearing norms that favour spanking or other forms of corporal punishment are associated with physical and psychological violence. The 1999 survey also showed that corporal punishment was rarely used alone – parents who used it also reported behaviours such as shouting or yelling at, insulting or threatening the child. In addition, the results showed that more than 10% of mothers who reported using corporal punishment reported more severe forms of violence such as slapping the face or hand of a child, hitting the buttocks with a hard object such as a belt or stick, slapping the face, head or ears, grabbing by the neck or around the throat, or shaking the child when he or she was under 2 years of age. This raises the question of the downward spiral in parenting behaviours once corporal punishment is used and accepted, or at least perceived as child-rearing option.



t. Section 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada stipulates that "Every schoolteacher, parent or a person standing in place of the parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances."

## Violent Parenting Behaviours: A Threat to the Physical and Psychological Well-Being of Children

Violent parenting behaviours refer to acts perpetrated by an adult in the family, including anyone living in the household at the time of the survey – mother, father, step-father, step-mother, grandparent, older brother or sister 18 years of age or over, etc. – who, in a situation of conflict with the child, risks compromising the physical security or psychological well-being of the child. Studies have shown that acts that are by nature violent, whether physical or psychological, are related to the level of suffering and after-effects the child experiences. Some behaviours affect the child's quality of life while others, which are more serious, threaten his/her development over the long term. Physical safety, the feeling of physical and emotional security, self-esteem, and the ability of the child to bond with his peers, may also be more or less compromised. In addition, such practices can affect the atmosphere in the family when the parent-child relationship is very often an adversarial one. Furthermore, research shows that corporal punishment is not effective over the long term in modifying the undesirable behaviours of children.<sup>3</sup> In brief, it can create a lose-lose situation.

### The Magnitude of Violent Parenting Practices in 2004

First, the results of the 2004 survey showed that virtually all mothers reported that adults living in the household (with a child 0 to 17 years of age) had used non-violent child-rearing strategies based on withholding privileges, on communication, or distraction (Table 1), three or more times in the year preceding the survey. A large majority (80%) also reported at least one episode of psychological aggression towards the child, the rate dropping to 52% for three or more such episodes in the year. At least one episode of minor physical violence was reported by 43% of Québec mothers. The rate dropped to 17% for three or more such acts in the year (e.g. slapping the child's buttocks with the bare hand, slapping the arm, hand or leg, grabbing the child to punish him or shaking a child 2 years of age or over). At least one episode of severe physical violence was reported by 6% of mothers, and three or more episodes of this in the year by 1.5% of mothers.

Table 1  
**Prevalence of Certain Parenting Behaviours,  
Québec, 2004**

	At least once in the 12 months preceding the survey	Three or more times in the 12 months preceding the survey
	%	
Non-Violent Discipline	98.3	93.1
Psychological Aggression	79.6	52.4
Minor Physical Violence	42.9	17.1
Severe Physical Violence	6.3	1.5 *

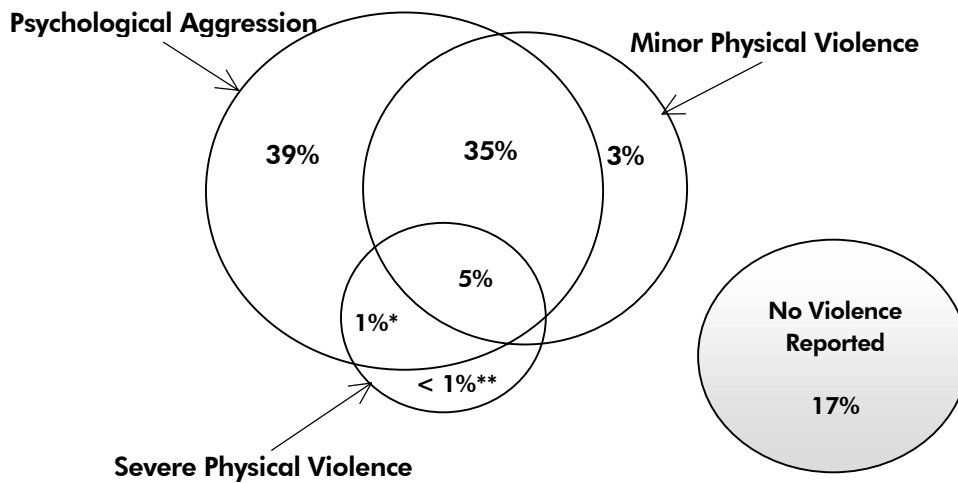
\* Coefficient of variation between 15% and 25%; interpret with caution.

Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 2004*.

Along with severe physical violence, recurring psychological aggression and minor physical violence, the combination of these practices is itself another indicator of coercive discipline being experienced by a large percentage of Québec children. Indeed, it was observed that 41% of children were victims of psychological aggression and minor (35%) or severe (1%) physical violence, or all three (5%) in the year preceding the 2004 survey (Figure 1). This was also observed in the 1999 edition of the survey, namely that children are rarely victims of physical violence without also experiencing some form of psychological aggression. In addition, very few victims of severe physical violence in 2004 did not experience at least one form of minor corporal punishment (0.4%), indicating that the vast majority did.



Figure 1  
**Coexistence of Physical Violence and Psychological Aggression Towards Children, Québec, 2004**



\* Coefficient of variation between 15% and 25%; interpret with caution.

\*\* Coefficient of variation higher than 25%; imprecise estimate for information purposes only.

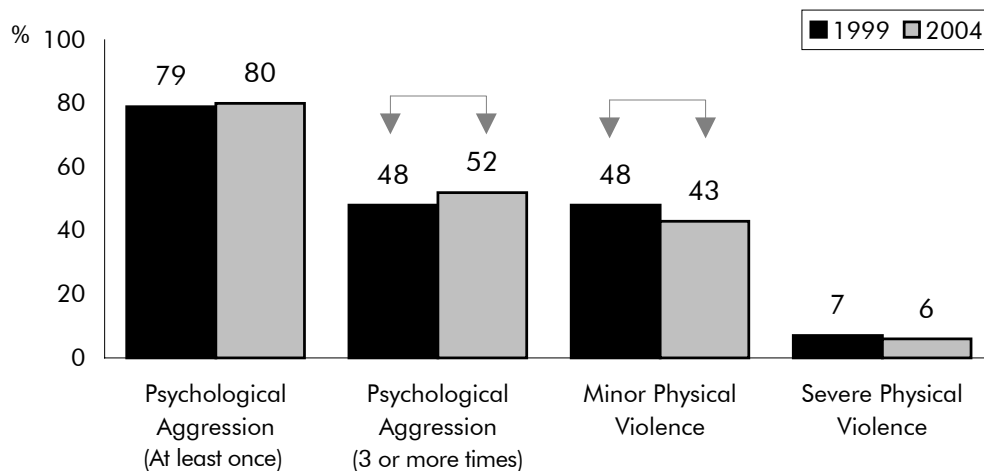
Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 2004*.

### Trends in Parenting Practices: 1999 to 2004

In 2004, mothers reported less minor physical violence towards children on the part of an adult in the household compared to 1999 (Figure 2). Approximately 43% reported

corporal punishment in 2004 compared to 48% in 1999. However, this decrease in minor physical violence was counterbalanced by more frequent episodes of psychological aggression. Indeed, 52% of mothers reported three or more episodes of psychological abuse in the year preceding the survey compared to 48% in 1999.

Figure 2  
**Comparison of Violent Parenting Behaviours, Québec, 1999 and 2004**



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 1999 et 2004*.

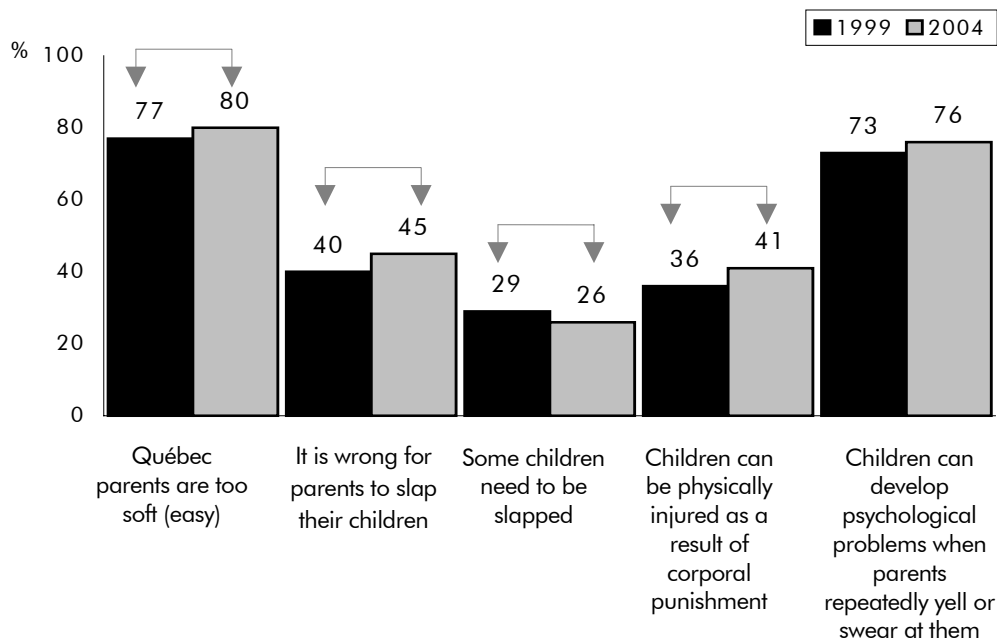
## Parental Norms with Regards to Child-Rearing and Discipline

In line with the decrease in corporal punishment, attitudes in favour of this method of discipline have also declined (Figure 3). In 2004, approximately 45% of mothers believed that parents who slap or hit their children are wrong to do so, compared to 40% in 1999. In addition, fewer mothers thought that some children need to be slapped to learn how to behave. However, more mothers believed that Québec parents are too soft on their children. These apparently contradictory results suggest that mothers seem to distinguish between firmness and coercion. They were more

likely in 2004 to be aware of the potentially negative effects of corporal punishment, perhaps indicating that they are exploring disciplining strategies that are simultaneously firm and non-violent, yet effective.

Although we are witnessing a decline in parents' attitudes that favour corporal punishment, opinions remain divided on the question. In 2004, over a quarter of Québec mothers believed that some children need to be slapped to learn how to behave. More than half believed that parents who hit their children are right in doing so. Therefore, different social norms regarding child-rearing still seem to coexist in the minds of Québec mothers.

Figure 3  
Comparison of Mothers' Attitudes Towards Discipline, Québec, 1999 and 2004

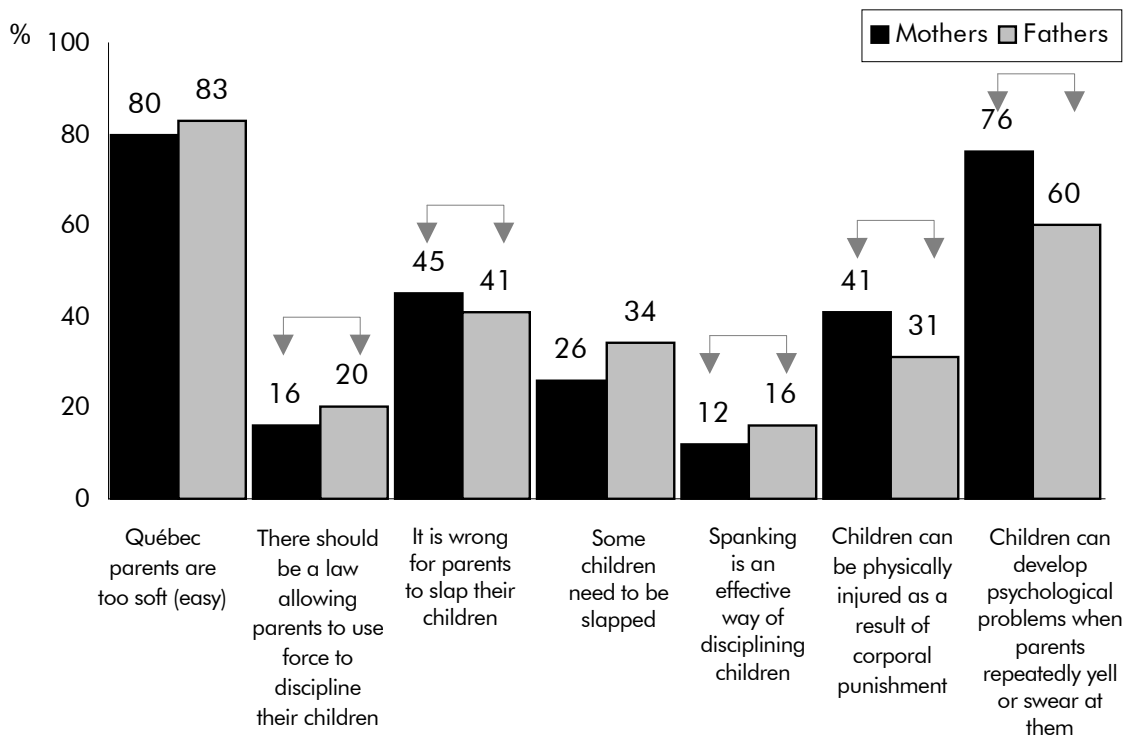


Source : Institut de la statistique du Québec, *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 1999 et 2004*.

In general, mothers and fathers in 2004 agreed on the importance of imposing certain limits on children. However, mothers had attitudes that were less favourable towards corporal punishment, and were more likely to perceive it as having a negative impact on children. This finding may in part be due to the distinct contexts that characterize mother-child and father-child interactions, such as the amount of time spent together, types of activities in which they engage, age and sex of the child.<sup>4</sup> Further analyses will help reveal the nuances of these

results by exploring associations with other variables documented in the survey. There is no data from fathers in the survey conducted in 1999; therefore it is impossible to examine trends in paternal norms with regards to discipline and child-rearing between then and 2004.

Figure 4  
**Comparison of Mothers' and Fathers' Attitudes Towards Discipline, Québec, 2004**



Source: Institut de la statistique du Québec, *La violence familiale dans la vie des enfants du Québec, 2004*.

### Indicators of Severity

The results of the survey show that in most cases, episodes of psychological aggression and minor physical violence seemed to be mainly situational and isolated, probably related to a specific context in which the child was exhibiting a behaviour especially undesirable for the adult, rather than an ongoing strategy in the parent's child-rearing repertoire. However, in 2004, behaviours such as spanking the child with a bare hand, grabbing him/her or slapping on the hand, arm or leg were reported by 17% of Québec mothers to have occurred three times or more in the year preceding the survey. This reveals a mainly coercive approach to discipline that can present serious risks to the well-being and development of a child. In addition to recurring use of such strategies, the combination of physical and psychological violence in child-rearing also bears witness to a more authoritarian approach to discipline, supporting the hypothesis of potential escalation in the severity of parenting practices used in situations of parent-child conflict.

In the same vein, severe physical violence represents a particularly damaging form of corporal punishment that can seriously affect a child's safety, sense of security, and development. Consistent use of this type of violence by an adult in the household was reported by 1.5% of mothers in 2004. This is particularly worrisome, since it is an indicator of physical abuse. This means that there were 10 times more children repeatedly suffering from such episodes than there were cases substantiated by Youth Protection Services.<sup>5</sup> This clearly reveals the necessity of devoting time and effort to detecting and helping families in which this is occurring, most of whom are unknown to child protection services.

### Less Corporal Punishment, More Psychological Aggression – Good or Bad News?

The decline in corporal punishment as a child-rearing strategy matches trends observed in other countries.<sup>6 7</sup> On the one hand, it is possible that mothers in 2004 were more reticent to report such behaviours towards their children. Although these are legally acceptable behaviours,

recent public and scientific debate indicate decreasing tolerance of these disciplinary practices. On the other hand, it is also possible that we are witnessing a real decline in parental violence in the Québec population, a finding that could be attributed to a change in people's attitudes with regards to methods of disciplining children.

In spite of the decrease in the use of physical violence, mothers reported more recurrent episodes (three or more times in the year preceding the survey) of psychological aggression in 2004 than in 1999. This finding is at the very least surprising. It could be due to either a greater ability to recognize this type of aggression when it occurs in the family, or to a decrease in physical violence that may be compensated for by using verbal coercion as an alternative child-rearing strategy.

## The Importance of Helping Parents in their Child-Rearing Strategies

The results of this second edition of the survey on family violence in Québec are encouraging. An increasing majority of mothers disapprove of corporal punishment in child-rearing and report it is being used less and less with children. This trend seems to indicate that there is an increasingly negative social norm in terms of violent discipline, thereby reflecting certain legal and policy provisions implemented in Québec in the past decade.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, Québec differs from other provinces in this regard. Recent surveys show that Quebecers report less use of corporal punishment in raising children compared to people in the rest of Canada.<sup>9 10</sup> Québec is also the province with the highest percentage of people in favour of a law against spanking children.<sup>11</sup> In the 2004 Québec survey, 84% of mothers and 80% of fathers reported they would not support a law allowing parents to use reasonable force to discipline their children. The trend in Québec social norms regarding corporal punishment underlines the relevance of the debate on abolishing Article 43 of the Criminal Code of Canada.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, the results of the survey clearly reveal the need to help parents with their child-rearing strategies. Even though coercive methods meet with increasing disapproval in society, child-rearing that is too permissive also meets with disapproval. Parents seem to distinguish between the need for parental authority required to foster child development, and the use of violence in conflict management. Promoting alternative methods of firmness in discipline that do not involve violence should mobilize

concerned stakeholders in the coming years, the goal being optimum child protection and development – an important issue in Québec society.

## Further Analyses...

Further in-depth analyses of the data from this survey will provide more detailed information on the individual, family and social factors associated with attitudes and behaviours regarding violence in parenting practices. For example, it will be possible to document the magnitude of domestic and parental violence in the population. It will also be possible to explore factors associated with parenting norms and practices, such as stress induced by a child perceived as being difficult, physical and psychological violence experienced by the parents in their own childhood, and parents' assessment of the help and support they get from family and friends. Finally, it will be possible to explore in greater depth the differences in perception and attitudes between mothers and fathers with regards to discipline and child-rearing.



# Methodology in Brief

## ◆ Target Population

For purposes of comparability, the first part of the survey aimed to reach a sample similar to that of 1999, namely children 0 to 17 years of age living in private households in Québec with a woman (mother or step-mother of the child, new spouse/partner of the father, guardian, etc.) at least 50% of the time. A second independent sample was added, comprising children 0 to 17 years of age living in a private household in Québec with a man (father or step-father of the child, new spouse/partner of the mother, guardian, etc.) at least 50% of the time.

## ◆ Sample Frame

The sample frame used in the two surveys comprised randomly generated telephone numbers, with invalid data banks being eliminated. The sample frame covered 95% of the target population.

## ◆ Sample Size and Selection

For the mothers, a sample of 35,895 telephone numbers was selected at random. For the fathers, the sample was 15,977. The telephone numbers were proportionally distributed according to the sizes of the following three sub-populations: the Montreal Census Metropolitan Area (CMA), other CMAs in Québec, and the rest of the province. For each household, one child was selected at random.

## ◆ Weighting

Each respondent was given a weight corresponding to the number of people he/she "represented" in the population. Therefore all results were weighted to allow for inferences to be made to the population.


## ◆ Response Rates

In total, 3,148 interviews were conducted with mothers and 953 with fathers. The weighted response rate was 57% for the mothers and 44% for the fathers. Although these rates were somewhat low, the results are considered to be representative of the target population, given various adjustments made in weighting the data.

## ◆ Instrument and data collection methods

Telephone interviews were conducted in French and English between February and September in 2004. Anonymity was strictly observed. Most questions related to attitudes came from the 1999 survey and American population surveys,<sup>13</sup> while others were developed to fulfill the objectives of the 2004 survey. Violent parenting behaviours were assessed using the Parent-Child Conflict Tactics Scales.<sup>14</sup>

## ◆ Presentation of the Results

In the figures, significant differences ( $p < 0.05$ ) between 1999 and 2004 or between the mothers and fathers are indicated by the following sign for the variable being presented: 



### For further information:

This summary report can be accessed on the ISQ website at [www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/publications/sante/pdf2005/fasc\\_violence\\_enfant04\\_an.pdf](http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/publications/sante/pdf2005/fasc_violence_enfant04_an.pdf).

If you would like further information, contact Jacinthe Aubin at (514) 873-4749 or 1-800 463-4090 (toll-free in Canada and the U.S.).

**Suggested reference :** CLÉMENT, M.-È., C. CHAMBERLAND, J. AUBIN and D. DUBEAU (2005). *Disciplining Children in Québec: Parenting Norms and Practices in 2004*, Québec, Institut de la statistique du Québec, 8 p.

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