Chapter

8

New Zealand families: Child-rearing practices and attitudes

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Introduction

Traditionally, the study of families has been the domain of sociology rather than of psychology. For sociologists the family is an important ‘institution’ because it is a key social structure that shapes the way society is organised. More recently psychology has been developing an interest in families.

Psychology and Families

For a psychologist, the family is the primary context where an individual it socialised. Therefore it is within families that a person ideally develops into a psychologically healthy, well-functioning adult Furthermore, families are a key site for the intergenerational transmission of cultural beliefs and values.

Within psychology ever major theorist from Freud to Skinner has included the family setting in their accounts of human beings. However, it is researchers interested in child development that most often consider the influences of families on a person's psychology. The approach taken in this chapter is a social psychological one. In particular, it is informed by my (Jane Ritchie's) research programme that has included cross-cultural family studies with a particular focus on the gender roles of parents and children.

James Ritchie and I have been studying Slew Zealand families since the early 1960s. When we began, little was known about families in New Zealand. Our first study interviewed mothers of 4-year-olds about their child-rearing attitudes and beliefs. At that time, few mothers of preschool children were in paid employment and mothers were expected to take the major responsibility for the children's Care and welfare. Families were larger then, than now, with an average at over three children, compared to the average of less than two today.

Characteristics of New Zealand families

Since the 1960s there have been many changes in family forms and structures. Women are more likely to live with a partner before marrying and are having fewer children and at a later age; there has been an increase in the number of single parents rearing children and an increase in what is sometimes known as blended families, that is when previously married partners join with their children to make a new family (Families Commission, 2004). Figure 8.1 illustrates changes in the types of families children are in.

In addition to the increase in one-parent families and the decrease in two-parent families, there has been a decline in the numbers of 'traditional' families. Historically a traditional family was father as sole income earner and the mother as sole care giver of children. However, more recently the Ministry of Social Development (2004, p. 49) reports:

> The single largest child rearing family type/labour arrangement today is that of couples with both partners in paid work (many of which, when children were young, consist of a father in full-time work and the mother working part-time).

Women today are more likely to be in paid employment than they were in the 1960s and more women than men work part-time. Women's participation in the workforce also increases as children grow older. Furthermore, there are more same-sex couples recorded than ever before, some of whom are raising children (Ministry of Social Development, 2004).

Maori families differ from New Zealand European families in several ways. Maori parents often have children at a younger age and they tend to have more children. There is a greater proportion of Maori sole-parent families although many children live with other family members. Grandparents and other whanau members are more involved in bringing up the children in Maori families than New Zealand European families (Ministry of Social Development, 2004).

Furthermore, traditional Maori child-rearing practices are distinct from those in New Zealand European families, which will be described in more detail below. Some principles that underpin traditional Maori child rearing are that children belong to the community as well as parents; children are linked by whakapapa (genealogy) to all those who have gone before; a child has many parents in so far as all relatives of the mother's and

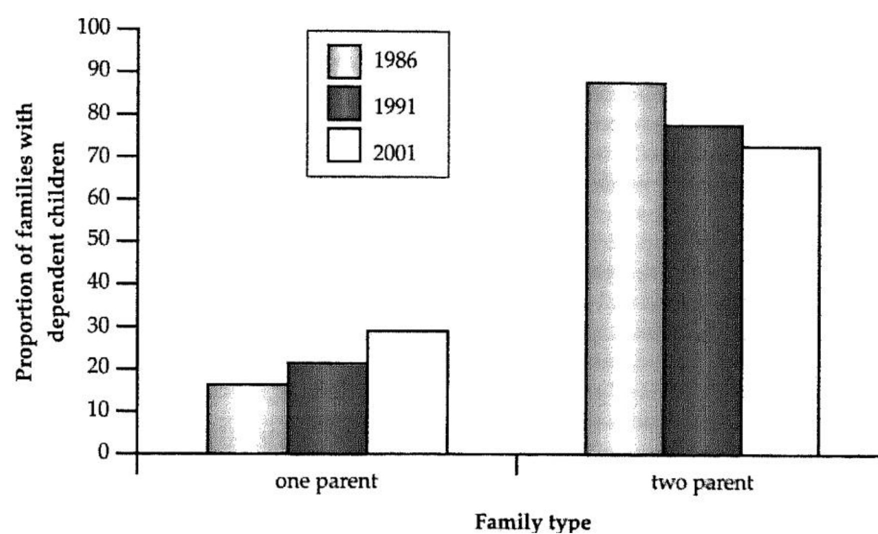

Figure 8.1 Changes in ramify types
Source: Statistics New Zealand,2004

Father's generation have responsibility for the well-being of the child, and babies are treated with great indulgence (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1979).Increasing urbanization has meant traditional Maori child-rearing patterns are declining.

Child-rearing attitudes and practices

Our first study of New Zealand families was conducted in the early 1960s and involved interviews with 150 mothers who lived in three different locations; Wellington, a small Bay of Plenty town and the rural area around the Bay of Plenty. Fifty of those mothers were Maori. The mothers were all (except two) happy to talk to us; in fact, they welcomed our visit since it was rare that they had visitors interested in the details of their daily lives with their children. Our interview involved questions on the care of the infant, the child's feeding and sleeping routines, growth into toddlerhood, toilet training, rules and expectations and how the mothers, and through them, the fathers, felt about parenthood(Ritchie & Ritchie, 1970).

The mothers in the 1960s were earnest and dedicated to their task. They willingly accepted the burden of responsibility for the care of their children. Most of them had little choice since they often had no close family support and, since the fathers frequently worked long hours, many of the mothers felt unsupported and, sometimes, unappreciated. Few had access to outside help, or to child care. Eighty percent of the mothers reported that baby care was entirely their responsibility.

Mother's unquestioning acceptance of sole responsibility for their children reflected the prevailing social attitudes about motherhood. Those attitudes were based on the work of a British psychiatrist, John Bowlby(1953), who coined the phrase 'maternal deprivation' to describe a social attitude or ideology that considered the mother's physical presence as absolutely essential for a child's social, emotional and intellectual development. This sounds like rather an extreme view today, but as a young mother in the 1950s and 1960s I can attest to its powerful influence on my attitudes towards my children and on my parenting practices.

Another influence of child-rearing attitudes in the 1960s was that of the Plunket Society(Chapman, 2003). Founded by Dr Truby King in 1907, Plunket recommended an organized household regime. Plunket instructed that babies would develop best if fed on strict four-hour schedules and that, after feeding, babies should be held out over potties to move their bowels. However, now it is accepted that strict feeding schedules are not the best way to encourage successful breast feeding and that babies do not have sufficiently developed nervous systems to be toilet trained.

So, the mothers we interviewed in the 1960s were what we might regard today as strict in their requirements for their 4-year-old children. The mothers had high standards for obedience, quietness and neatness.

Discipline

How were the mother's high standards of behaviour enforced? Our interviews included a number of questions on discipline. We asked about positive methods such as praise, reward, reasoning and explanation and negative methods such as scolding, shouting, threatening, punishing by withdrawing privileges and by use of physical punishment. Positive methods are far more effective forms of discipline than negative methods. However, the 1960s mothers tended to rely on the negative methods. They thought that praise and rewards would make children vain and conceited and that their 4-year-old children would be unable to understand adult reasoning and explanations. The most prevalent disciplinary techniques were scolding, shouting, withdrawing privileges and smacking.

When we compared the child-rearing attitudes and practices of Maori mothers with Pakeha mothers, we found that the Maori mothers living in rural settings were following the traditional pattern already outlined. However, those who were living in small town or city environments were affected by this move and their child rearing seemed to us to be less warm, less indulgent and more stressful. The Maori mothers reported being very conscious of the scrutiny of their Pakeha neighbours (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1970).

The next generations

In the late 1970s, at the instigation of our students who desired more recent data on New Zealand families, we made use of their assistance to repeat the child-rearing study. This time we interviewed.

both mothers and fathers living in Hamilton and the surrounding areas.

The 1970s sample reflected demographic changes that had occurred in the intervening time between the two studies. Families were smaller, having around two children on average, a drop from an average of around three children in the 1960s. Fathers seemed to be spending more time with their children and mothers reported more satisfaction with their maternal role. Mothers were less likely to adhere to four-hour feeding schedules and were more successful in breast feeding. Mothers were less insistent on neatness and tidiness.

The ideology of maternal deprivation and its heavy burden of maternal responsibility prevalent in the 1960s had been influenced by liberalism and feminism. The 1970s mothers were less likely to feel the need to be constantly present for their children. Mothers who also worked outside the home (about a third of the sample) reported more positive attitude towards their children and said that the child's father was often involved in caring for them. Overall, gender roles within the family were less marked in the 1970s than they had been in the 1960s (Ritchie, 1978).

Despite many positive changes found in the 1970s, one aspect of child training had not changed. Mothers continued to make frequent use of physical punishment; 55% smacked their 4-year-old once a week or more often. However, they recognised smacking as ineffective and they felt guilty about the practice. The 1970s mothers were also more likely than the 1960s mothers to praise their children for good behaviour and to make a point of explaining to their children the reasons they approved or disapproved of their behaviour (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1981).

In the late 1980s and 1990s we repeated the study again (Ritchie & Ritchie, 1997). Many of the changes that we had noted in the 1970s had continued. Fathers were even more involved in the core el their children, although if there was a messy job to be done, both fathers and mothers agreed that mothers were more likely to do it. Mothers were more relaxed than previous studies had shown in their feeding and toilet training schedules and more pleased with their role as mothers. Mothers in paid employment continued to be more satisfied with their lives than full-time mothers.

Both parents were more likely to use praise and reason with their children, but physical punishment Continued with 55% of children still being smacked once a week or more often. Bothe parents said that they smacked because they did not know what else to do; this finding indicates a need for more widely available and effective parent education and support. Fathers were more likely than the mothers to find physical punishment effective; mothers were more likely to feel guilty when they smacked their children.

From research to advocacy

Researcher's primary role is to report findings. However, I believe that researchers can, and should, go further than merely publishing data. My collaborator, James Ritchie and I bot believe that there are important lessons to be learnt from our data on parental use of physical punishment. In 1981 our book, Spare the Rod, detailed some of the consequences of physical punishment, which are all harmful. In later writing (Ritchie & Ritchie 1990, 1997, Ritchie, 2000) we describe the frequent use of physical punishment as 'the dark stain' tat permeates New Zealand child-rearing particles. Our views are strongly supported by studies on the harm of physical punishment (Smith et al., 2004).

The established negative effects of parental use of physical punishment include that:

- It models the use of physical force to resolve human conflict
- It establishes the moral rightness of the us of physical force
- It establishes an association of love and pain, which has implications for adult relations and adult sexuality
- Children who are hit are more likely to act aggressively to their peers; they may have difficulty making friends
- In the long term, it is generally ineffective in teaching good behaviour; it does not, of itself, teach good behaviour; it teaches a child nothing about how to handle similar situations in the future
- It generates anxiety; it can interfere with learning; children are more likely to fail at school
- Children who have been physically punished have less-well-developed consciences
- It often escalates: more and more is needed with a real risk of injuring the child
- Adults who were hit in adolescence are more likely to hit their partners and to abuse their children.

The right to smack?

Article 19 of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child states that governments:
'shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.'

New Zealand signed the convention in 1993 meaning that the state agrees to abide by the principles and guidelines set out by the committee. However, New Zealand for parents or guardians to use '… force by way of correction towards a child, if that force is reasonable in the circumstances.' (section 59 of the Crimes Act). New Zealand has been criticized by the UN for failing to amend this legislation; it claims that the use of force toward a child is an act of violence and therefore New Zealand does not conform to the convention.

In 2000 the government launched a campaign to increase public support for the repeal of section 59 but failed to garner the kind of support it wanted to introduce the change in legislation. In 2005, Green MP, Sue Bradford, introduced a private member's bill to repeal the Stature.

The possible repeal of section 59 has attracted considerable public debate. Those in favour of deleting section 59 say that it implicitly sanctions violence towards children and regard it as infringing on children's rights to be protected form assault/ Why, pro-repeal advocated ask, should children who are more weak and vulnerable, compared to adults, have less protection in law? Those wishing to retain section 59 say that removing it would reduce parent's ability to discipline their children, thus reducing parental authority. Anti-repeal advocates also argue that mild smacking does not constitute abuse. Both groups say they are concerned about child abuse and both groups endorse parent education as a necessary prerequisite for the reduction of abuse.

Ritchie and Ritchie(1981) first proposed the repeal of section 59 in 1978. This proposal was based on an increasing body of evidence showing that smacking can and does result in harm to children. Furthermore, any time an adult smacks a child, they are modelling for the child the message that 'might is right'. Opponents continue to dispute the veracity of the research findings and argue that state interference infringes on parents' right to discipline their children.

A New Zealand organisation which has long campaigned against parental use of physical punishment is EPOCH (End Physical Punishment of Children). EPOCH is a charitable trust established in 1997 by Beth Wood and others in order to change attitudes about parental use of physical punishment and to repeal section 59 of the 1961 Crimes Act. Beth Wood now works for UNICEF New Zealand but retains close ties with the Commissioner for Children. Beth says that 'ending violence to children is one of UNICEF's priorities and ending physical punishment is a critical part of reducing child abuse'.

they are also more likely as adults to seek abusive relationships

- There are many emotional side effects; withdrawal, reduced self-esteem, feelings of loneliness and alienation, depression, suicide, alcohol abuse, eating disorders
- It is contrary to the ethos of parenting: it interferes with the bond between parent and child.

The parental use of physical punishment is not only ineffective as a disciplinary technique. It can also have undesirable consequences for children including injury and, sadly on occasion, death. It has been estimated that between 70 percent and 900 percent of child abuse is caused by ordinary parents going too far in the course of what they regard as normal discipline (Kempe & Kempe, 1978).

In 2005 there were over 53 000 notifications of possible child abuse to CYFs (Children, Youth and Family); over 10, 000 were established as child abuse (Cuumming, 2005). In New Zealand each year between nine and 12 children are killed by parents and caregivers. Sweden, a country with twice our population, suffered only four such child deaths between 1990 and 1996 (Durrant, 1999). There are many differences in social and economic structures between New Zealand and Sweden but one that may be relevant to the present discussion is the fact that Sweden passed a law in 1979 forbidding parents to use any form of physical punishment.

In 2003 UNICEF compared the rates of child homicides (child deaths from maltreatment) in industrialized countries. In comparison with 26

other developed countries, New Zealand has the third-highest rate of child deaths from maltreatment. Only USA and Mexico have higher death rates for children under the age of 15 years (see Figure 8.2).

Child abuse is a complex problem involving personal, social, economic, legal and cultural factors. Nevertheless, there is one action that, on the basis of our research, we strongly advocate New Zealand take, that may substantially reduce the number of children injured or killed by their caregivers – that is to repeal section 59 of the Crimes Act, 1961 (see text box opposite).

Concluding comments

Since our first study of child-rearing practices and attitudes in the early 1960s there have been many changes in New Zealand families. Family structures have changed; women and men marry at a later age or else do not marry at all; families have fewer children, mothers are more likely to be in paid employment; blended families rear the offspring of previous relationships. Family practices and attitudes are more relaxed in many ways; breast feeding is less scheduled and more successful and children are toilet trained when they are ready. However, physical punishment as a disciplinary technique continues in spite of its harmful consequences. James Ritchie and 1, as long-time researchers on New Zealand families and the harmful effects of physical punishment on children, continue to advocate the repeal of section 59. We also support parent education and media campaigns that promote positive forms of discipline.

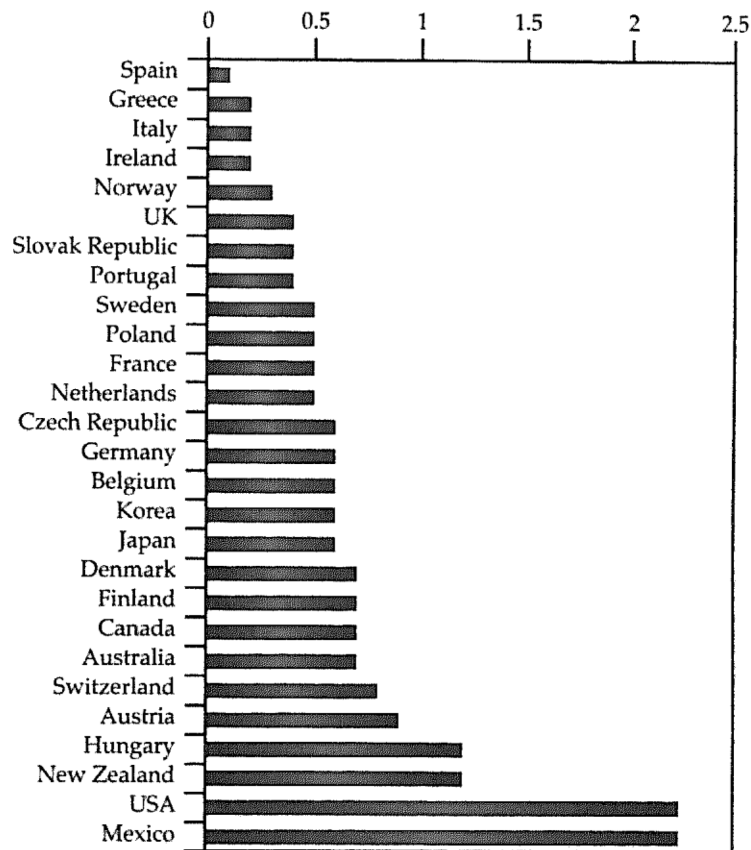

Figure 8.2 Child maltreatment deaths in rich nations