



Big Parenting Survey Findings 2018



The Realities of Parenting in Northern Ireland

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Parenting NI

Parenting NI is the leading charitable organisation for supporting parents in Northern Ireland. Parenting NI have been supporting parents for 40 years in a variety of ways, including parenting programmes, family support services, parental participation, employee wellbeing service and online support.

Parenting NI has a vision of the future where parenting is highly valued and it is the charities mission to provide a range of accessible services and support to meet the needs of those in a parenting role.

In September 2018 Parenting NI undertook a first of its kind study about the realities of parenting in Northern Ireland. This report will detail the findings from the online survey which was carried out over a six week period.

Definitions^{*}

Parent

A person or persons with parental authority or responsibility. Refers to not only biological parents, but also those who are involved in caring for and raising children.

Parental Responsibility

The legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority a parent has for a child and the child's property. A person who has the right to make decisions about their care and upbringing. Important decisions in a child's life must be agreed with anyone else who has parental responsibility.

Kinship Carer

A situation where a child or young person lives full-time or most of the time with a relative or family friend rather than with their birth parents.

Foster Carer

A person providing care for children looked after by social services because they cannot live with their own families. This can be short or long term.

** Definitions taken from gov.uk website - parenting and parental responsibility and kinship care and foster care pages.*

Letter from CEO

Dear Reader,

Parenting NI has been providing support, advice and guidance to parents in Northern Ireland since 1979. What is perhaps most surprising in these 40 years is how much parenting has changed, and how much it has stayed the same.

Every year Parenting NI supports thousands of parents who contact the service via Freephone, webchat or email and who attend one of the broad range of parenting programmes and workshops on offer. Parents come to us with their concerns and are seeking support with diverse and varied challenges. Parents can be struggling with their young child's behaviour, working through a separation or supporting their child who is being bullied.

They can often find the transition for their child into the teenage years difficult and relationships may be frayed and additional pressures from peers and digital media is often adding considerable pressure. No matter the parenting concern Parenting NI is uniquely placed to be able to provide support and resources through a number of services.

Parenting NI understand that parents have a variety of concerns and worries that they don't necessarily contact a service for support with. After all, who do you call if you are worried that your son won't be able to find a good job after he graduates? Or if you are worried about changes in society affecting your parenting?

We hope that this survey is more than an interesting look into the current parenting landscape in Northern Ireland. We want this to be a call to action for those responsible for developing policy relating to children, young people and their parents.

When you hear the daily struggles of parents, you cannot help but be passionate about supporting them. That is why Parenting NI has been advocating on behalf of parents since its foundation. We aim to ensure that parents voices are heard at the very highest levels of decision making in Northern Ireland as they are key to supporting our next generation.

This is the reason Parenting NI have developed the "Big Parenting Survey". We want to hear from all parents, across all sectors of society and are pleased to note in the responses a good representation from parents across Northern Ireland.

We knew from experience that many parents were facing challenges on a daily basis. We knew that problems with technology, concerns about mental health and other issues were common. What the results of the Big Parenting Survey have shown is that those are even more widespread than they seem. I hope that you enjoy reading this report, and that you will support us in pushing the policy, practice and research towards being a society who is supportive and appreciative of the role of Parents.

Sincerely,

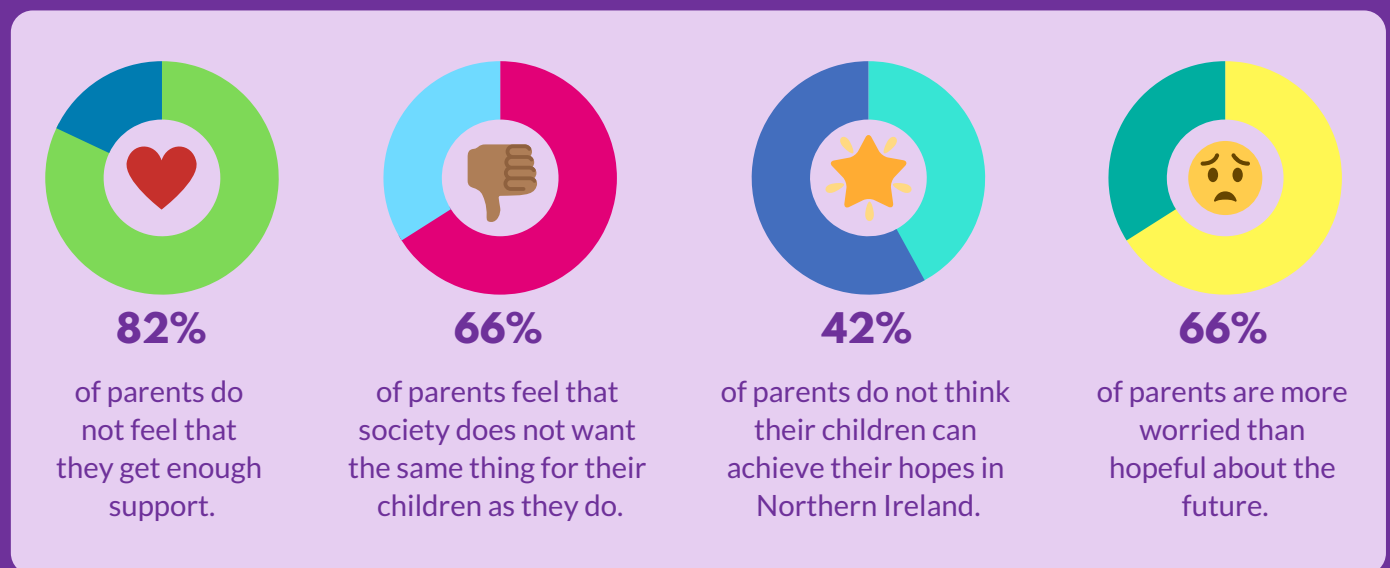


Executive Summary

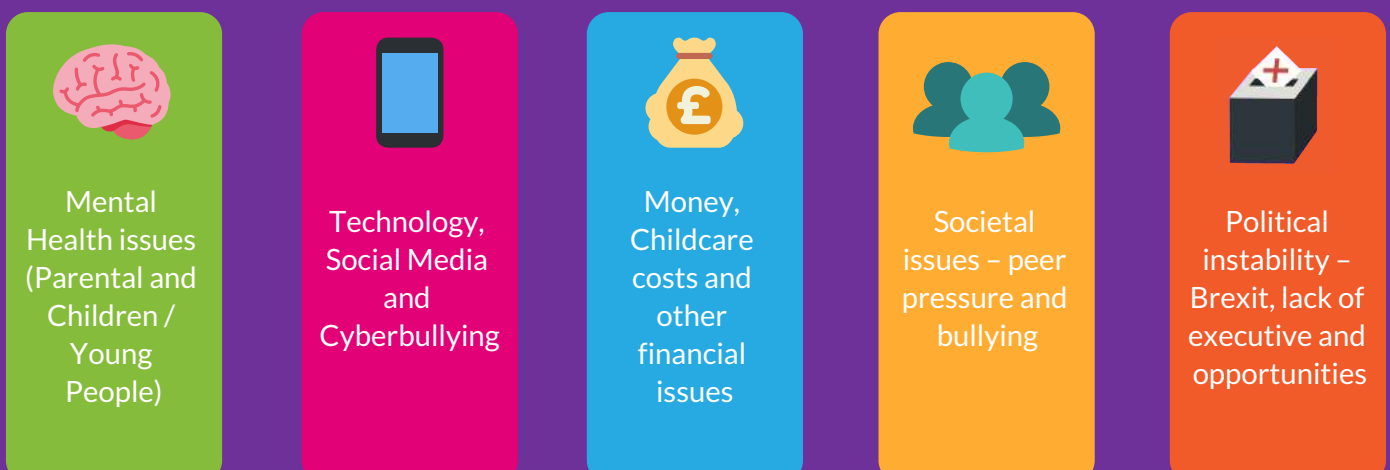
The “Big Parenting Survey” is a first of its kind study. Parenting NI wanted to get the real, unvarnished experiences and thought of parents from across Northern Ireland, so we sought out the views of parents from across the spectrum of age, geographical location, community and gender. As a provider of direct parenting support and advocacy for parents for almost 40 years, Parenting NI is very aware that parents have a range of views, struggles and concerns. However, we were keen to hear parents share these experiences and thoughts in their own words and we wanted to know what parents thought about issues that you might not call a parenting helpline about – job opportunities, Brexit, division in society and more. So, we asked parents to tell us what they thought.

What we received was an astoundingly direct and challenging response from a wide and diverse range of parents.

1,191 parents responded to tell us about their hopes for their children, their fears and concerns, their views on society and more. We heard from parents who were coping well, and from those near breaking point. It was important to gather the views of all parents, and not only those parents who are currently receiving support. If policy makers are seeking to improve outcomes for children, and meet the Programme for Government Outcome 14 (“We give our children and young people the best start in life”), it is essential that they receive as full a picture of the realities of parenting in Northern Ireland in 2018.



In addition, parents told us that they had a number of concerns. Many parents specifically noted that they were worried about:



This paints a gloomy and disquieting portrait of modern parenting in Northern Ireland. However, parents were clear that nevertheless they enjoyed their parenting role. They spoke clearly about the love and joy that parenting brings them. They told us that, while many felt they did not get enough support, they were not necessarily without support. They told us that:

They often have good family support

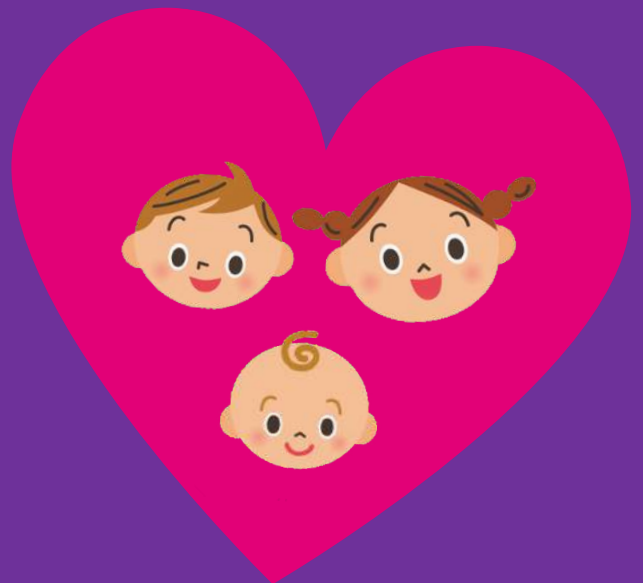
Many have schools that provide good support, despite budgetary issues

Many parents have strong social networks and support

More than anything else, the range of responses showed that parenting is unique in every family. There is no “one-size fits all” approach to supporting parents and children. The types, format and intensity of support varies not only from family to family, but from parent to parent and child to child. Policy makers should note the findings of this survey, and use it to improve engagement of parents. Parenting NI will continue to advocate for parents, and to champion the views expressed by parents in this survey and indeed all parents.

“I feel that my biggest achievement is that my child is happy and healthy, intelligent and well-mannered and just generally a good person. That is the thing that I am most proud of.”

“I have supported loved and listened to my children. I have kept them safe. I have struggled with worrying too much and trying to fix everything for them. I am getting better at trying to support them to find their own way. One of my kids is a happy proud member of the LGBTQ community. I have succeeded in creating conditions he can flourish in and teaching him about his human rights. I have struggled with fear of other people’s attitudes and how that might impact him and he has taught me to trust his strength and confidence. And that everything will be ok.”



A Background to Parenting in Northern Ireland

Parenting can be a challenging and exciting experience. Almost everyone will have some experience of being parented. This might be by your biological parents, adoptive or kinship carers or via a corporate parent (children in the care of the state). Despite this, every person's experience of being parented, and every parent's experience of parenting is unique. Even two siblings, born to the same parents (and in the case of multiple births) will have differences.

Parenting in a place like Northern Ireland has its own distinctive differences, challenges and opportunities. Northern Ireland's unique political, environmental and historical context means that parents here cannot be directly compared to parents anywhere else. Between 2000 and 2017 there have been 425,311 births registered in Northern Ireland. 21% of households in Northern Ireland are married couples with dependent children and 8% are single-parent households with dependent children.¹

Given the current estimate of population in Northern Ireland, this means that around 393,000 people are parenting as a married couple, and 150,000 people are single parents.² This is however an imperfect figure, as it does not necessarily account for people who are kinship carers, nor does it adequately explain the role of a non-resident parent as well as other issues. However, we can say that at least 543,000 people parent in Northern Ireland today. Many more will be parenting a child who could be a stepchild, or may be adopted from another country.

The family, centred on the parent-child relationship is one of the most fundamental building blocks of society. Almost all people in a parenting role will face a range of challenges in the process of raising their child. These could be fairly typical or mundane challenges like instilling respect or discipline. They might also be faced with more serious or difficult challenges, like substance abuse or serious physical or mental illness. Society understands that being a parent is difficult, and most people in a parenting role have family or friends they can rely on in time of concern.

Many parents however, do not have support, and every parent will experience challenges during their parenting journey, regardless of their level of support. Those who are socially isolated, newcomer families or those facing uncommon difficulties often require more specialist and targeted support. The Northern Ireland government recognised this, and has taken a number of actions in order to provide a statutory support around parents in Northern Ireland. This takes a wide range of formats, from general advice and information to highly specialised Early Intervention initiatives to tackle emergent problems. The format of this support had been driven by a number of important governmental strategy documents, and has evolved over time.

The Department of Health in 2006 published "Our Children and Young people – Our Pledge" which was a 10-year strategy for children and young people. This was NI's first major government-led strategy looking at supports for children and young people specifically. One of the main themes of this strategy was "securing and harnessing the support of parents, carers and the communities in which our children and young people live". This strategy recognised the important role parents play as the primary caregivers and first educators of children. Following the end of this strategy's implementation period, the Department of Education began the process to produce a new "Children and Young People's Strategy". Consultation on this document took place in 2017, and it is in the final stages before publication. It is currently awaiting executive approval to move forward.

This original strategy was followed up in 2009 by the Regional Family and Parenting Strategy, "Families Matter".

Families Matter went deeper in outlining the responsibilities of the government in providing particular support to parents. The then Health Minister, Michael McGimpsey noted in the strategy that:

"Parents are the people best placed to raise their children. Parents can give their children the emotional and physical care and support necessary for healthy development and well-being"

1. NISRA, 2018

2. NISRA, 2018

The aim of *Families Matter* was to move parents into a more vital policy position. As well as outlining the role of government, *Families Matter* also recognised the centrality of the community and voluntary sector. It embraced the need for integrated planning of services at local, regional and governmental level. This clarified the responsibilities of various bodies clearly, and the rights of children, young people and families.

It laid out the model that the Executive would use going forward to design and deliver services for children and parents, called the “whole child” model. The Whole Child model³ is a service planning model centred on an understanding of childhood focused on:

- a) An understanding of the important dimensions of a child’s development
- b) An understanding of the child as an active participant in his/her own world

This was combined with the Northern Ireland Family Support model. The strategy was a blueprint designed to help inform the public and civil servants on how parents would be supported. The primary aims of the model were to allow children and young people to:

- Be healthy, both in terms of physical and mental health
- Keep safe, being protected from harm and neglect
- Enjoy learning and achievement and reach their potential
- Have economic well being
- Enjoy their rights

The strategy had a number of key policy objectives, including supporting family mediation during separation and the establishment of “a fully responsive regional helpline”.

The new “*Family and Parenting Strategy*” is currently in development (2018). It is being designed to build on the strengths of *Families Matter* and reflect lessons learned from more recent developments such as the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) family support hubs and the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP). The government has been keen to build upon lessons learnt from the experiences of the previous strategy. The new strategy will also draw on the Programme for Government, including the important outcome that relates directly to such support:

Outcome 12: We give our children and young people the best start in life

In addition to these more wide-scope approaches looking at the issues of supporting children and young people via parental support, the government has produced more specific and targeted strategies. There are a number of relevant strategies but for the purpose of this report the three considered include:

- The Childcare Strategy <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/consultations/draft-childcare-strategy>
- The Child Poverty Strategy <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/child-poverty-strategy>
- The E-Safety strategy (currently in draft form)

The childcare strategy recognised the impact of childcare on both children and their parents. It had two primary aims:

- Child Development: to give all our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong wellbeing and achievement, thereby creating the basis for a better, more prosperous future.
- Parental Employment: to enable parents to join the workforce, thereby enhancing prosperity and to improve gender equality by enabling mothers to join the workforce, return to work and remain in work.

The strategy sought to ensure that childcare was available, affordable and sustainable in Northern Ireland. It recognised the disproportionate impact on parents in comparison to childless adults of the current childcare system. In particular, it recognised the gender impact of this issue.

The child poverty strategy also had two primary aims. These were:

- Reduce the number of children in poverty
- Reduce the impact of poverty on children

Parents play an essential role in achieving these aims, and that is recognised in the strategy:

Actions to reduce child poverty must include actions focused on improving the economic well-being of parents, families and households with children

The strategy contains a number of key actions to support parents. It noted the impact of poor parental engagement in their children's education, as well as low levels of parental qualifications.

This strategy is due to be refreshed by National Children's Bureau (NCB) and then hopefully agreed ready for implementation. Finally, the E-safety strategy is currently in development. This strategy is focused on the important need for parents and other safeguarding bodies like schools to promote safe internet and technology usage. This is a significant issue, and comes up often in the responses by parents to this survey. Its aim is to:

Provide essential leadership and guidance to support children and young people to take full advantage of the online world while ensuring they are fully equipped to manage any risks they might face

The number of initiatives put together by the Northern Ireland government on the issue of children and young people's challenges clearly demonstrates its importance. There are also statutory bodies that provide direct support to parents and children, such as the work of social services, the Children and Young People's Commissioner (NICCY) and support provided in and by schools and medical institutions.

However, the statutory support is not the only source of parental support in the region. Northern Ireland has a uniquely vibrant and proactive community and voluntary sector. There are a range of charitable, faith and community based organisations that provide a patchwork of support aimed at children and young people.

The future of parenting in Northern Ireland is a decidedly mixed picture of challenges and opportunities. The dedication of the statutory and community/voluntary sector to ensure that parents are increasingly empowered and supported provides a basis for parents to be hopeful. The advent of communicative technology and the related ease with which parents can make their voices heard means that their own views and values will have more impact in policy making going forward.

Added to this, the relative peace in Northern Ireland means that many of the challenges that parents faced before 1998 are no longer as severe. While violence and sectarianism has not entirely disappeared (and this survey reflects that for some parents, these issues persist) it is not nearly as pervasive as it was.

Nonetheless, the difficulties of the future cannot be ignored. Parents continue to clearly express concern, they are worried about the pace of change, particularly regarding technology. There is a widening gap between the experiences of parents as children and of being parented, and their experiences of parenting their own children. The uncertainty of their political and social futures also worries parents. Their answers

suggest that they are concerned about the impacts of the political stalemate, Brexit and other issues. The policy making context will be more complex as a result of these issues.

In summary, parents in Northern Ireland have much in common with parents in the rest of the United Kingdom, with parents in the Republic of Ireland and with parents across the world. They are faced with many of the same issues and opportunities in many cases as American, French or Swedish parents. However, they also have a number of unique and atypical experiences and challenges. As such, it is essential that those seeking to support parents or to make policy that will affect their lives listen carefully to their stories.

Parenting NI is unique amongst these in focusing primarily on support for Parents. While other organisations provide services for children and families directly, Parenting NI provides a range of support services that includes programmes, advice and other provisions for those specifically in a parenting role.

Since its establishment in 1979 as the Parent's Advice Centre, Parenting NI has worked tirelessly not only to help parents directly, but to highlight the central nature of the role of the parent. This survey is the latest in a significant line of advocacy for parents, and was designed to gather the views and experiences not only of those parents who have sought or received help, but from those who have not.



Parents Hopes for their Children

What we asked parents

What are your hopes for your children, do you think society's hopes for your children are the same as your own, and do you think these hopes are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment?

We gave a couple of options for parents to choose from (and rank) which were based on what parents using Parenting NI services have been telling us. We also provided a space for parents to tell us anything else they had as a hope for their child.



Why we thought this was important

We understand that parents want the best for their children. However, what is “best” will be different for every individual family. We sought to ascertain what parents wanted for their children, and what was most important to them.

What parents told us

We asked parents to rank a range of seven “hopes” and they ranked them in the following order:



Be happy



Be healthy



Good education

Get a fulfilling job ranked 4th, have a family ranked 5th, earn a good salary ranked 6th, and go to university ranked 7th.

When parents were given the opportunity to note what else they hoped for their children a number of topics came through as regular themes. 280 Parents chose to give an additional answer. The most common response was that parents broadly hoped their children would grow up to be good people, with around 16% of parents giving this answer. The exact language varied, but many parents stated that they hoped their children would be kind, caring and empathetic. One parent said they hope their child would:

“Be the best version of himself that he can be. Be a kind person who treats himself and others well, have good character.”

Another common theme parents told us about was that they hoped their children achieved something. They hoped they would be afforded opportunities, and several parents made specific mention that they hoped society would be more equal for their children. About 15% of parents said this was a hope they had. One parent told us they hoped their child would:

“Achieve their dreams and do something they enjoy. Otherwise nothing will be fulfilling”

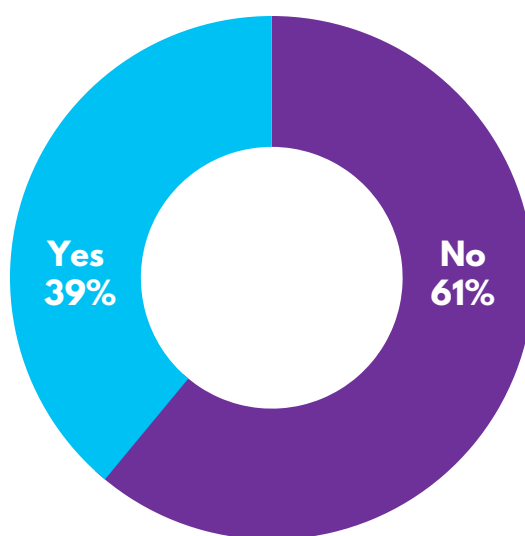


Perhaps unsurprisingly, parents were also very concerned about their child feeling safe. This took several forms. Some parents had a general hope that their child would be and would feel safe, while others made clear that they hoped Northern Ireland would remain peaceful. They also noted the dangers of poor mental health, and about 1 in 20 parents told us they hoped their children would have good mental health. For example, one parent specifically said they hoped their child would:

“Maintain good mental health, problem solve, and be resilient”

Parents told us they hoped that their children would have strong friendships and social networks when they grew up. Two additional themes that were noted, however less prevalent than concerns regarding character or mental health were hopes that their child would travel (around 8%), or that their child would hold on to their parent’s religious faith (9%).

Fig A: Do you think society’s hopes for your children are the same as your own?



We also asked parents if they felt that society’s hopes for their children were the same as their own. Parents were fairly emphatic in suggesting that they did not feel this was the case. More than 60% (Fig A) of parents said that their hopes were not the same as societies hopes for their children.

When parents were asked to explain their reasoning, there were a number of common responses. By far the most common (40% of all responses) was that parents felt that society was obsessed with material successes. One parent in particular noted that they felt:

*“Material wealth is seen as success.
Creativity is not valued.”*

The other very regular comment by parents was that they felt society had a dramatic over-emphasis on academic, particularly university-level achievement (around 38% of responses mention this).



**of parents felt that
society was obsessed
with material successes.**

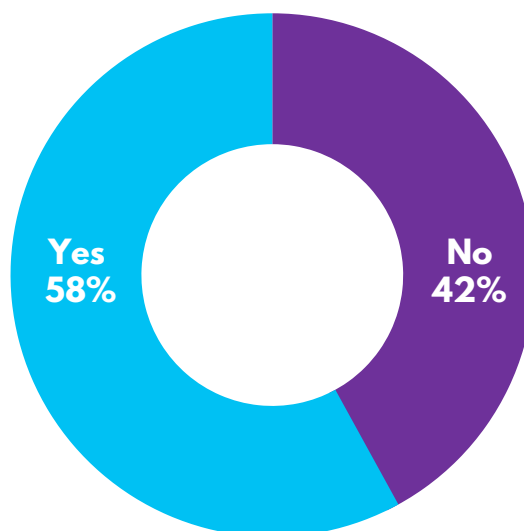


Many parents felt that society pushed children towards going to university even when it may have been inappropriate, and made those who did not attend feel like failures. As one parent described:

“We are led to believe that going to university is the only way to succeed in life, I don’t completely disagree, but an awful lot of successful people aren’t from that level of education. It’s about listen to children and making sure they are making the right choice for themselves personally - so I believe.”

Finally, in this section, we asked parents to tell us if they felt that their hopes for their children were achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment. A narrow majority felt that they were, with a significant number suggesting they did not (Fig B)

Fig B: Do you think these hopes are achievable in Northern Ireland at the moment?



Parenting Support

What we asked parents

Do you think that Parents get enough support, if you were looking for parenting support which of the following would you most like to receive, what do you have currently to help?



Why we thought this was important

There is a plethora of anecdotal evidence that there is not enough support for parents. We wanted to know however, just how widespread is this feeling? We also wanted to ask parents where they wanted to access support when they needed it and we wanted to hear about what parents felt the challenges for parents were.

What parents told us

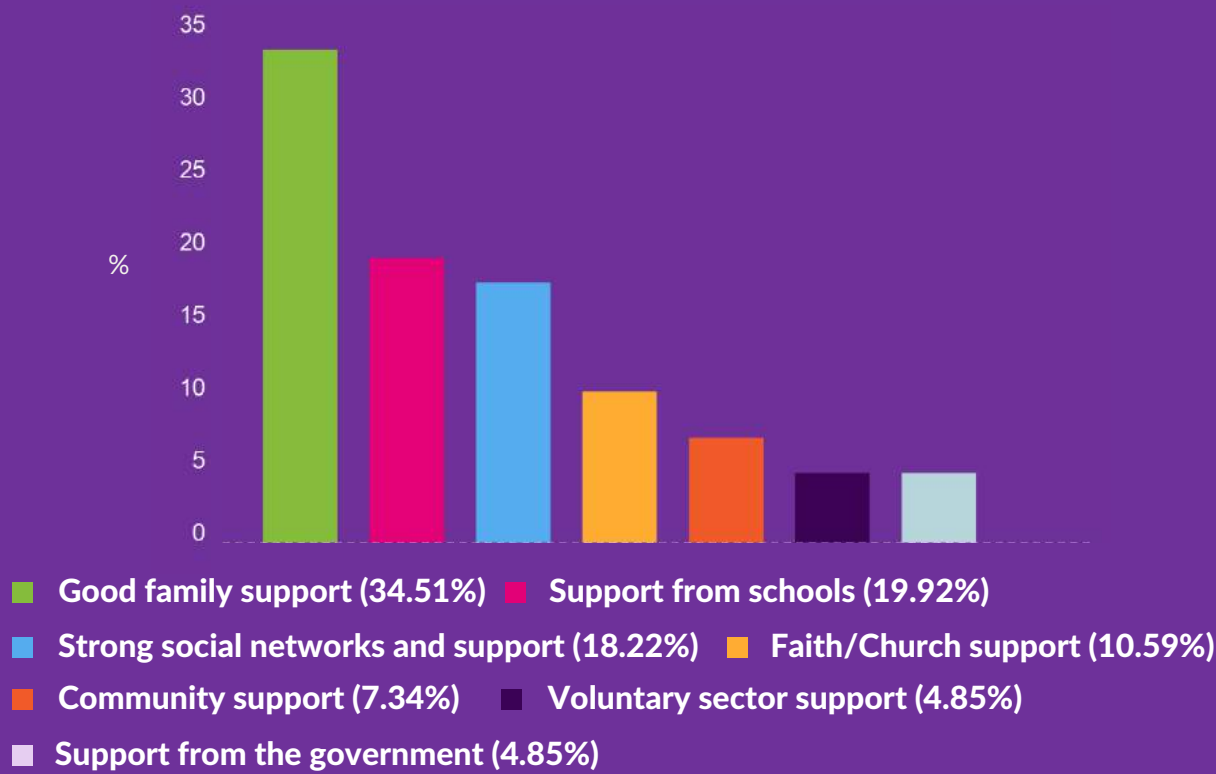
The single most important figure regarding parental support is that an enormous majority of parents who answered the survey did not feel there was enough support for parents in Northern Ireland.

We asked parents to tell us where they get their existing support from. The most common answer (34%) was that they had good family support, followed by just under 1 in 5 saying their schools provided good support. Almost the same number said that they had strong social networks, including friends that helped. Only 2.12% said they get support from the government (Fig: C).



4 out of 5
parents said they do not feel parents get enough support.

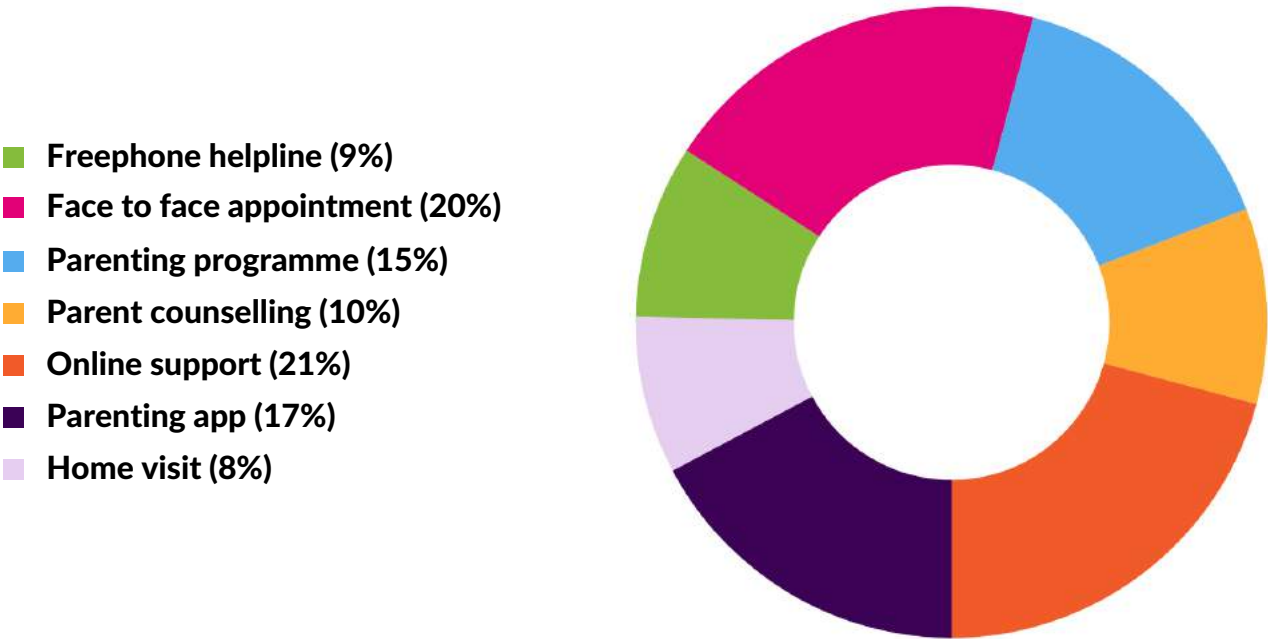
Fig C: What do you have currently to help achieve your hopes for your child?



We also asked parents if there were any other areas they got support from. Around 2.5% told us that they did. Those parents mentioned a number of other supports, like their own resilience, financial security and paid for support.

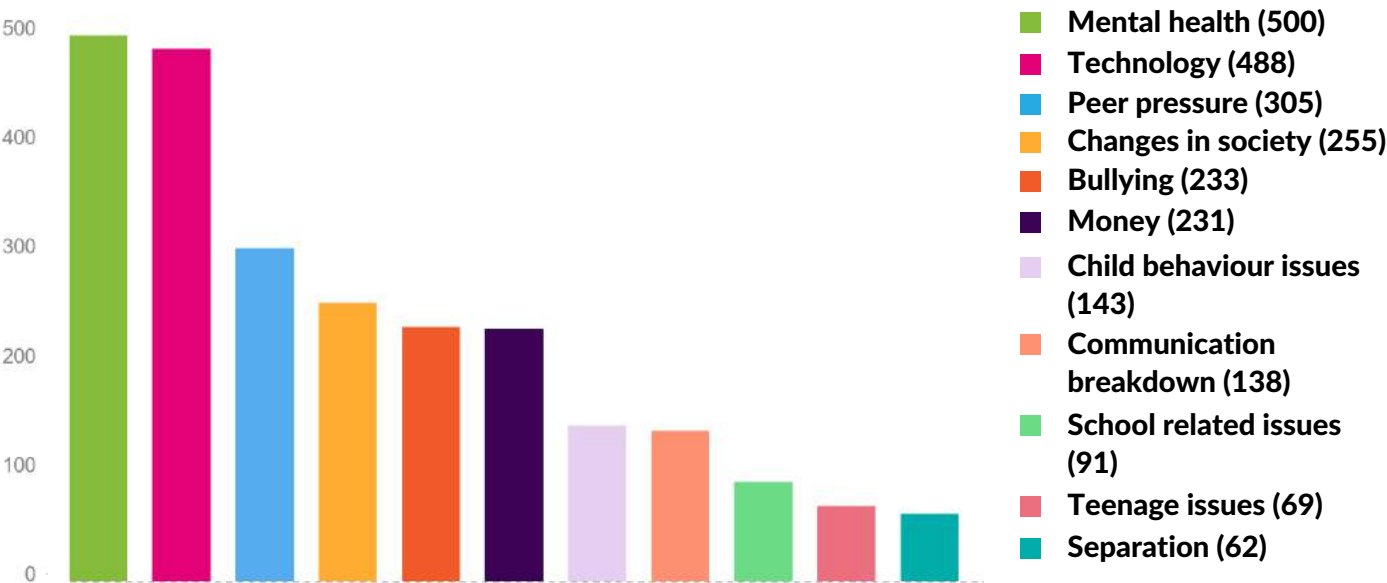
In addition to asking parents where they got support, we also wanted to get an understanding of what they would like in terms of seeking support. We asked parents to tell us what – if any – of the following sources they would utilise themselves.

Fig D: If you were looking for parenting support which of the following would you receive?



The most popular is the “online support”, which when taken with the 17% for a parenting application suggest more than a third of parents would prefer digital support. This was followed by face-to-face appointments. However, there was a great deal of diversity in the responses. Parents indicated that they would seek support in a wide range of manners depending on the issues they were facing (Fig: D).

Fig E: What, in your opinion, are the biggest or most serious hurdles for parenting today?



The biggest hurdles for parents, with nearly 1 in 5 parents selecting them, were technology and mental health. Peer pressure came in third, and changes in society fourth (Fig: E).

For the parents who gave additional answers (53 parents), the most prevalent was time related. This was expressed in terms of parents not having enough time. Parents told us they struggled with work-life balance and having enough time for family.



Another common issue was childcare, which several parents felt was prohibitively expensive. A number of parents expressed concerns relating to the usage of drugs both in society and by children.

Finally, we asked parents to tell us where they saw gaps in support. There were numerous answers, often highly specific and relating to individual needs and experiences. However, there were also a range of consistent areas where parents felt that there was a lack of support. First and foremost, parents simply are not aware of the support that does exist. Parents told us that they struggled to know where to get support, in particular if the issues or questions were not emergencies. One stated:

“If parents need help, I am not sure they know where to find it”

In addition to this, a significant number of respondents suggested that even when parents know of services they could be reticent to access them due to stigma. Some parents told us:

“Support is there. It is often not utilised at the fear of social services being involved and the stigma of which is attached to that.”

“When a problem arises there is too long a waiting time before help kicks in.”

“If a child or teenager is going through behavioural issues or suffering from mental health I don’t think the child or family get enough support for this. If they do get support they are usually on waiting lists for very long periods of time.”

"Our son has ASD. Waiting lists for support services are ridiculous. Our boy struggles daily with chronic anxiety and we are 3 months for a 1:1 to even get on waiting list to help. He is 5"

Another common concern for parents revolved around finances, childcare and support for parents who work. Several respondents suggested that there was a "squeezed middle" of parents who work, but are unable to access benefits. They told us that they felt there was little to no support for working parents, and that financial support was lacking. There was a direct link between many of these comments and the costs associated with childcare.

Parents said:

"Lack of effective financial support for working parents including inadequate maternity pay and serious lack of holiday childcare provision"

"Sufficient financial help for working parents, in particular regarding childcare costs, especially difficult for those with little family support in the way of childcare"

Parents also felt that there are issues regarding who is able to access the support that does exist. Many parents felt that services like Sure Start were excellent, but emphasised the inaccessibility for many families. They also noted that support reduced dramatically when their children reached their early teens. A number of parents felt that more supports such as parenting programmes should be more widely available, and not linked to the financial circumstances of their parents. They told us:

"We are not in area for sure start but would value their services."

"Once my children outgrow sure start I believe I won't have any further parenting support available in my area"

"Parenting programmes targeted across all of society"

"Lack of support for parents with young teenagers"

Parenting and the Future

What we asked parents

Are you more hopeful or worried regarding parenting in the future?

Looking ahead to the future, what do you think will be the biggest opportunities and challenges for parents and parenting?



Why we thought this was important

We wanted to gain a fuller understanding of the worries that parents have about the future, as well as hearing about what opportunities they believe are open to them and their children.

What parents told us

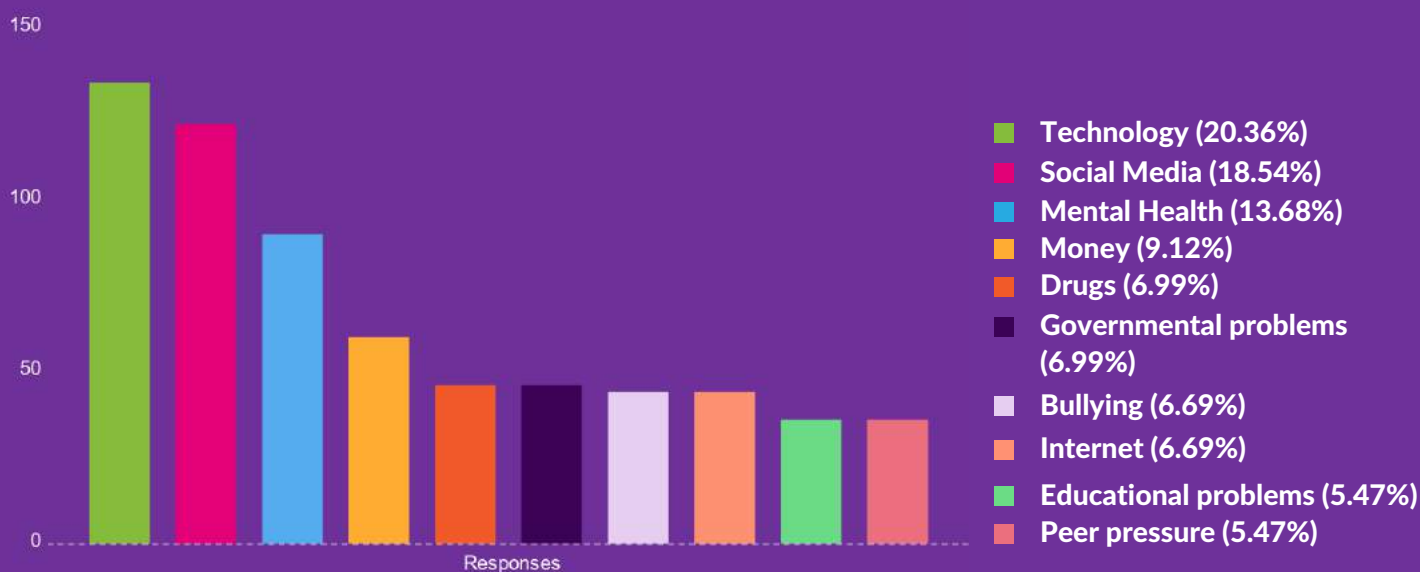
When we asked parents to tell us what challenges and opportunities they foresaw, they overwhelmingly identified more challenges than opportunities. Additionally, with the exception of technology, which was identified as both a challenge and an opportunity, parents were typically more specific and descriptive of challenges than opportunities.



66%

of parents said they were more worried about parenting in the future than hopeful

Figure F: The Biggest Challenges for Parents & Parenting



Parents were deeply concerned about the impact that technology, the internet and social media would have on parenting in the future. Parents often linked these issues with a decline in social skills, an increase in bullying (in particular cyber-bullying) and peer pressure.

"Trying to keep up with technology and the latest 'cool gear' - having the income to support this."

"Trying to control how much 'social media' access children have - I believe this can have a detrimental effect on kid's mental health."

Parents spoke in great detail about the challenge they say in the form of mental health issues. While some parents did point out that the decline in the stigma meant that more people were talking about mental health, many others were very concerned.

"Mental health as problems seems to be increasing and no-one seems to know why exactly or be able to reduce it. But fortunately there is a lot more awareness than there used to be."

Parents also made clear that they were very worried about the impact that drugs and alcohol have on children and young people. Several parents spoke to us about their worries about the pressures put on young people to experiment and take narcotics and alcohol. They also linked the use of drugs to poorer mental health outcomes.

"The increase in young people taking their own life is daunting. Not enough is being done NOW to help those who will be affected in the future. Drugs related issues also need tackled now to help our young people to move to the future. Failure to act NOW will result in a bleak future."



Finally, many parents expressed frustration and worry about the current political system. They felt this was having a deleterious impact on health and education budgets. This in turn has put pressures on schools which are being passed on to parents. Parents felt that important decisions were not being made, and that a poor example was being set for their children by leaders.

"We have no government in place and therefore budgets for education etc. worry me especially the crisis we are having presently with school places."

"The fact that there has been no government for over a year gives me little faith of any opportunities for us or our children. I also think that Brexit could have an effect."

"Having no government in NI, Has caused our family to struggle with school placements, special school funding and accessing mental health services for our child and children."

By comparison, the opportunities were more limited. Several parents expressed in very direct terms that they saw very few opportunities.

"I see more challenges than opportunities."

"Opportunities: None spring to mind."

"Challenges lie in the obsession over technology among children and young people. Not sure about opportunities."

Parents did identify that technology and to a lesser extent social media present opportunities as well as challenges. Other opportunities mentioned were the chance to not repeat what parents perceived as mistakes or biases in their generation. For example:

"I think we are a more open generation, more at ease talking about issues such as sexuality, gender etc. Also hopefully more aware of mental illness and can work on destigmatising this."

"Opportunities, we will learn from our children."



Parents Experiences - In Their Own Words

What we asked parents

Parenting NI understands that parenting can be extremely rewarding, but also at times very challenging. The purpose of this survey is to hear real life experiences from parents who are currently parenting in Northern Ireland.

We asked parents to tell us about their own personal experiences of parenting. We suggested to parents to mention what they have succeeded in, what they have struggled with and make suggestions as to what needs to change to help support parenting.



Why we thought this was important

We wanted parents to tell us their own personal stories and experiences. We wanted to provide an open format question for parents to tell us anything that they wanted, without having to relate to any specific areas.

What parents told us

We received hundreds of responses to this question. Individual answers ran from a few short sentences to almost a full page. Parent's replies covered a diverse and multi-faceted societal experience. The most common issues raised in the parent's experiences were:



Mental Health



Technology



Society, stigma & peer pressure



Money & Childcare costs





Much of what was spoken about reflected earlier answers, talking about issues like childcare, technology and educational worries. However, this question gave parents an opportunity to expand on earlier answers and be open and honest about their experiences. For example, one parent spoke about their personal challenges relating to childcare, stemming from having triplets:

"I have been caring for 10 month old triplets. As yet I haven't had to face the same struggles as others. My main struggles have been to find adequate childcare that can cater for my 3 children together to enable me to return to work on a part time basis.

There is limited support emotionally or practically unless you are deemed a 'family in need'. I only received the same maternity allowance as a mother of one child and the financial and psychological impact of that on me personally and us as a family has been horrific.

Triplet families are more likely to experience medical issues and mothers are more likely to suffer PTSD and post-natal depression due to these factors, however the government has yet to acknowledge this and provide the additional financial support and extended maternity leave to enable a mother to develop secure attachments with her children."

Parents also spoke to us about the realities of children with additional needs. Several parents told us about their experiences parenting children who are on the autism spectrum, for example:

"I have 6 children, 4 on the autism spectrum. I feel I never have time to myself and am only here to raise and care for them. To keep them safe from others and at times each other as due to their Autism they can be violent."

"Every day is a battle. I love them all but they are hard work."

Parents also spoke in great detail about the worries around mental health, both for themselves and their children. One parent told us about their particularly challenging experience*:

"[My young son attempted to take his own life.] There was no immediate help for him for 18 weeks. There was a long wait for CAMHS, and 12 weeks for Relate. It would cost £1500 for private assessments with 16 week waiting list. GP services and Lifeline telephone were the only services we could access immediately. I supported him through his mental break down with very very little help."

Parents also talked about their own mental health, and one parent gave us their story of co-parenting with an ex-partner with severe mental health problems:

"[Parenting] continues to be the best experience of my life and so rewarding and enjoyable. My child's father and I are separated, he suffers from serious mental health problems and at times is very withdrawn. Managing mine and my child's relationship with him has and will continue to be my biggest challenge."

* Quote edited slightly to protect parents identity.



Parents also shared stories of long waits for health and other support services. They told us that they often felt unsupported and that issues were made worse due to this lack of support. Parents told us that they were waiting for very long (sometimes without a clear end date) for a range of vital services.

"There is no support for transgender issues, only one centre to deal with whole of Northern Ireland, currently no staff so waiting list has no time frame."

"The process to obtain a statement of special educational needs is long and difficult. There is little support or guidance from EA. The proposed changes to the special needs school estate is worrying and parents are not being kept informed. The wait times for assessment for autism are shocking."

"My teenage son has had depression and there is no help on the NHS for him. I wanted to pay privately – still he had to wait months for this. It was a very difficult time."



Many parents also spoke about their own feelings of guilt or isolation. They told us that they often struggled with comparing themselves to other parents. Even when they were aware that the images projected by social media were not true, they still had feelings of inadequacy or shame regarding their own parenting:

"My husband and I both work full-time and commute 3 hours per day to and from work. We both feel so guilty all the time that family members are raising our children but we just couldn't afford childcare for them. I personally struggle with managing both my children's attitudes. Society needs to make it more acceptable for parents to ask for and get the help they need."

"I am struggling with feeling isolated. I feel there needs to be more support online with likeminded parents. I am an advocate for respectful parenting but find that our society doesn't often share these values."

"I have succeeded in being around for my children in their early years and after school to do crafts/play/read/etc. However, this has come at a cost as I am trying to work a full time flexible job while not availing of childcare. It means I am working any hour that my children are out of the home at school or asleep. I feel hugely stressed as I can't keep up with housework but cannot afford to pay for childcare, nor do I not want to be around for my children."

"I think social media has had a huge impact in how our society is shaped today and I feel that despite many positives of technology it has left us quite disconnected as a society."



Parents also shared many hopeful stories about how much they loved being parents. They told us that parenthood was rewarding, and that they were fiercely proud of the successes they had in raising their children.



"Being a mother is the most wonderful, exhausting, joyful, mind altering experience. It has definitely been a journey for me and I honestly credit my eldest with changing my life and along with her sister, they have taught me so much about myself and give me a strength that is indescribable. It is my duty to ensure that they reach adulthood with a happy heart, a healthy mind and the support to follow their dreams.... no matter how random they may seem!"

"I am one of the lucky ones - I was brought up in a secure family home surrounded by love. My parents were married for 67 years and raised 12 children. I am trying to give the same to my daughter - security and love."

The wide and varied detailed responses to this question shows that every family, parent and child is different. Parents gave a wide range of real and important views on issues that affect every strata of society.



Analysis and Conclusions

There were a number of thematic findings from this survey. Many of these findings will not surprise those working in the statutory or voluntary/community sector. Nevertheless, the primary results should be the cause of great concern for anyone seeking to support parents via policy or service provision.

A 4:1 ratio of parents indicating that they do not think parents get enough support is deeply troubling. This suggests that the respondents felt that as a whole parents do not get enough backing from society. While this may not be the personal experience of the respondent, it is a reflection of how they feel society treats those in a parenting role.

The answers to this suggest that many of those parents who feel under-supported feel unable to financially or emotionally provide what they wish to for their children. This is despite a large number of such supports being available in both the statutory and community/voluntary sector.

Respondents also suggested that they felt parents as a whole were not sufficiently aware of services that might support them. The most common gap in support identified by parents was a lack of knowledge of services (15% of all responses mentioned this). This suggests that parents felt that regardless of the efficacy of services that do exist, parents were not currently in a position to access them due to this lack of awareness. For policy makers, this presents a challenge to the manner in which they raise awareness. A further aspect of this was that there was a perception among parents that support was more limited for working parents. Many such services are provided by (relatively) small charities or community groups. As such, we feel it is unlikely that funding for such marketing will be available from the service providers directly. Instead, the statutory sector, which is often indirectly providing funding for such services in the first instance is not getting the proliferation of support that they desire. It would, in effect, be a win-win situation for the statutory sector, community-voluntary sector and parents. This is the most obvious way to reduce the levels of parents who feel under-supported in the first instance.

However, the comments from parents suggest that further awareness of existing services may not be sufficient to reduce the levels of worry or concern. Numerous responses drew specific mention to the burdensome costs related to childcare in Northern Ireland. There was a feeling among parents (12% identified it as a gap in support) who responded that childcare was a major negative pressure on parents today. Several parents specifically noted that they had to reduce work hours, or even give up work entirely as a result of the financial realities of childcare.

The situation in Northern Ireland was also compared to England, and judged to be inadequate by comparison. There is a clear, pressing and urgent need from any reasonable reading of this survey to review the support provided to parents of all means levels in relation to childcare.

There is also a perception amongst some parents that services that exist in some areas – such as SureStart centres – should be rolled out to the wider public (1 in 20 parents mentioned sure starts specifically). Those with experience of using services were highly complementary (though they noted a large drop in support once their children “aged out”). Those who were unable to access such services felt aggrieved by their lack of inclusion.

Another finding that should cause unease in policy makers is that 45% of parents who responded to the survey do not feel that they can achieve their hopes for their children in Northern Ireland at this time. This is a symptom of a much wider societal issue, and the blame (and thus, remedy) cannot be simply laid at the doorstep of one department. Governmental policy and legislative change needs in this instance to be matched by good will from businesses and other sectors, and wide-ranging sustained investment in schools to provide them with the capacity to work in partnership with parents.

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Many parents felt that not only the government, but also employers could do more. They reported feeling that levels of flexibility for parents were lower than they should be. Parents suggested that such practices made it more challenging for them to continue in employment. A longer-term issue for employers is that parents felt that there were too few opportunities in terms of jobs for their children going forward. Some parents directly stated that they expected – or in some cases, actually hoped – that their children would leave Northern Ireland. The loss of such individuals cannot be argued to be a societal good. The results of this survey should be understood by those seeking to create such opportunities as a challenge, therefore.

While parents felt that services such as schools and the NHS by and large are doing the best they could, they felt that the outcomes for their children were sub-optimal. Many parents felt that schools (and society at large) were overly focussed on academic achievement, often to the detriment of those who did not fit what they perceived to be a narrow definition of success. This issue links in with governmental and job market concerns, as those children who did not achieve particular successes at school were, in the view of some parents, discarded. Additionally, those parents who had children with additional educational needs felt that schools did not do enough to ensure a well-rounded experience for their children. They felt that less was given to SEN children, and that there was little replacement for activities such as after-school clubs that such young people could not access. The challenge, therefore, to schools from this report is to drive parental engagement. If the presumption is made that significant economic investment in schools is not forthcoming in the near future, the only effective way to address these concerns is collaboration.

The NHS, and related medical services on the other hand are viewed by parents to be mostly excellent but underfunded. There is palpable frustration among respondents regarding waiting lists for support. In particular, parents are upset about the length of time it takes for them to access autism/ASD diagnostic services, mental health services (both for themselves and for their children) and other more routine help. A number of parents mentioned feeling compelled to seek private medical support, and lamented the incurred cost.

This range of issues results in a society where more parents are worried about the future of parents than are hopeful. It is difficult to see how those responsible for instilling hope in society could see this as anything short of a substantial failure. While much has factually been done to improve the living circumstances of parents and children, it is clear from these results that it has not resulted in a current state of hopefulness or optimism. Given the likelihood that these feelings and viewpoints will be passed on to children by their parents, this situation demands dynamic action. A possible result of inaction, or inadequate action is a society that is increasingly worried and hopeless. The atmosphere of uncertainty around the political and economic situation of Northern Ireland is also a contributing factor, one which is less easily influenced.

Attitudes towards parents, parenting and children are also a consistent source of difficulty for parents. Many parents expressed dissatisfaction with the feeling that society expects parents to be “perfect” at all times. Parents talked about consistent feelings of guilt – primarily if they were working parents. They felt that they were somehow failing their children if they spent time away from them, and that society was especially critical when they sought support. Working parents often felt that to ask for help was a “failure”, because as financially stable, employed people they “shouldn’t need help”. They felt that it was discouraged socially for parents to admit to having problems, and to seek help. Naturally, a change in social views is not something that can be done overnight. It can, however, be done. Recent initiatives to reduce the stigma associated with mental health problems could provide a useful template for action. A reduction in the “soft” social barrier for reaching out for support, particularly before issues become very challenging could potentially have a dramatic positive impact. One benefit that such a campaign would have is the universality of parenting issues. It is reasonable to suggest that most, if not all parents will at some point in their parenting journey be in need of support. This provides a wide range of possible avenues for the statutory and community/voluntary sector to raise awareness.

It is also important to highlight the challenge posed by rapid technological advancement. At all levels of this survey, parents were emphatic that they are worried by the risks posed by technology, social media and other digital forums. The gulf between even relatively young parent's experience of the internet and the realities that their children face is growing. The pace of change means that by default government and the community/voluntary sector will always be playing "catch-up" in supporting parents with this. Of course, this does not absolve them from action (and indeed, both sectors have worked tirelessly to improve the provision of services to parents in this area). However, this particular challenge is international in scale, and the key players are tech firms such as Facebook, Twitter and others. Strong partnerships and open forums need to be established with these leaders in the sector, to ensure that they understand and are sensitive to parents concerns. More information and advice for parents, which can be provided by the community/voluntary and statutory sectors is a strong starting point. However, to affect real change and at assuage real and genuine concerns direct action by those providing platforms is an essential element.

Parents also expressed serious and wide-ranging concern about mental health issues. This was not limited to children and young people's mental health, though that was a large element. They specifically and repeatedly spoke about their own struggles with mental health issues. Parental mental health, including issues such as post-natal depression and anxiety were seen as serious barriers to effective parenting. Respondents suggested that they did not feel that mental health challenges were being met, and often described feeling isolated or unsupported.

The responses to the "Big Parenting Survey" showed more than anything that parenting in Northern Ireland is challenging. While most parents did suggest that they were able to provide adequate support to their children, they did not feel society as a whole is a positive environment for parents. Policy makers should be conscious of the results of this survey, and keep in mind the feelings of parents when seeking to improve the situation and standing of parents.

Data Limitations

There are of course limitations to this data. As noted in the demographics, there is an underrepresentation of men in the respondents. This is regrettable, as anecdotal and academic findings suggest that parenting experiences do differ based on gender. This is a pervasive issue in the sector, encouraging fathers or men in general to participate in conversations regarding parenting can be challenging. In future surveys, particular effort will be made to increase male participation.

Secondly, parents were able to self-identify with regards to both community background and ethnic minority status. While a reasonable spread of both was achieved, there can be no guarantee that how parents chose to identify would match the statutory definitions of community background or ethnicity. We do not feel that this is a significant issue in the data, but simply one that should be acknowledged and kept in mind when inferring trends. In future surveys, the wording of the questions identifying these categories will be made clearer.

In addition, parents were allowed to drop out of the survey at any question. As such, while the majority of parents who answered the first question did complete the survey, not all chose to do so. Therefore, demographical information is not necessarily 100% reflective of earlier answers. We were aware of this potential problem in the formation of the questions, but consciously chose not to make it necessary to answer the full survey for results to be included, due to the number of individuals this approach would disregard. As such, in future surveys efforts will be made to encourage fuller participation, but no significant changes will be made in terms of "mandatory" questions.

Recommendations

There are a number of challenges that present from this report. Generally, the responses suggest:



Parents are not getting enough support



Parents are more worried than hopeful about the future of parenting in NI



Technology – in particular social media is seen as a source of concern



Mental health needs to be a higher priority for society as a whole

In order to address these concerns, a number of changes need to be enacted. Some of these are for policy makers such as politicians or departmental officials, while others are wider societal changes that involve everyone.

Firstly, parents do not feel that society has the same hopes for children as they do. This is a multi-faceted issue, and cannot be resolved with simple legislative or policy changes. Parents told us that they feel that there is an over-emphasis on particular pathways (university education, high paying jobs). They felt this was out of step with their desire to see children grow up happy and fulfilled. Therefore, **there should be an effort to align expectations of society and parents for children.**

This involves educational changes to reward and value creativity, as well as ensuring that children are taught that non-university options are equally valid.

Secondly, parents told us that childcare costs are a massive challenge for them. They told us that it is felt unfair that working parents had to spend significant amounts of money to pay for childcare, and were sometimes left feeling that they worked just to pay a childcare facility. As such, Parenting NI recommend that **more needs to be done to reduce the financial burden of childcare.**

This is largely a policy related change, but presents a challenge for employers as well.

Thirdly, parents felt that while there were good supports available for some parents that are not universal. Parents told us that they would like to access support online, face-to-face or via programmes in particular. Working parents told us that they wanted to see more services and support made available to them. So, Parenting NI recommend that providers should consider options to **expand availability of parenting support like SureStart, programmes and other help.**

Fourth, parents made clear that challenges associated with technology and social media caused them concern. They felt that the increasing presence of electronic media was having a mixed effect, and were worried that not enough was being done to address this. Many parents were also concerned about mental health-related issues. As a result of this, Parenting NI would recommend that **more should be done to help parents understand and address the impacts of technology on their parenting and their children.** This should also include the role of technology on mental health.

This is a whole-society issue that involves action by policy makers, technology companies, educators and communities.

Despite the seriousness of these concerns, parents also often said there was a stigma around asking for parenting-related help on these and other issues. Therefore, Parenting NI would recommend that **action is taken to mainstream parent support services.** Only by making it as “normal” and well-known as going to a GP can the stigma be addressed.

Appendix - Methods

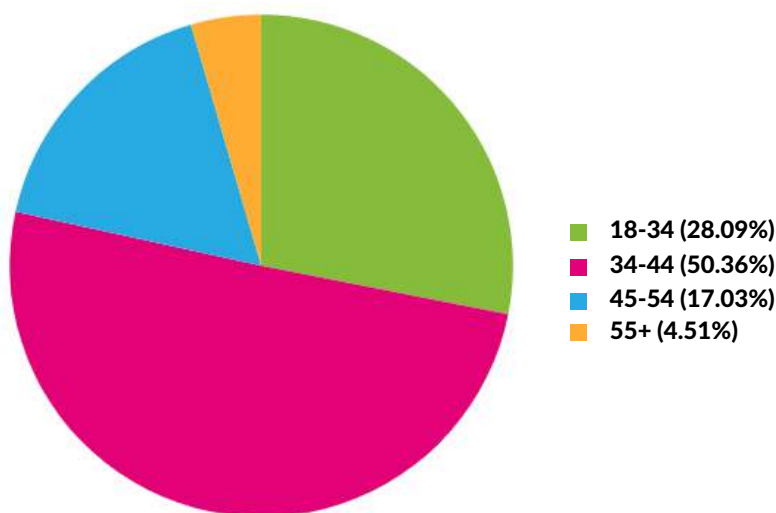
Demographic Responses

Over the 6-week period that the 2018 “Big Parenting Survey” was run, we received 1,192 responses in total. The overwhelming majority of these originated in the UK, with >2% having been identified as coming from an ISP outside the UK. While we cannot be certain that the UK-origin responses were based entirely in Northern Ireland, the text-based responses suggested that they were. No specific responses suggested a non-UK base of response.

The majority of respondents that gave their gender were female. Around 6% indicated that they were male. One respondent stated that they were non-binary.

The largest single age bracket was 35-44, with around half of all responses (50.36%) followed by 18-34 (28.09%) and 45-54 (17.03%). A small percentage indicated that they were over 55 (4.51%).

Parent's Age Range



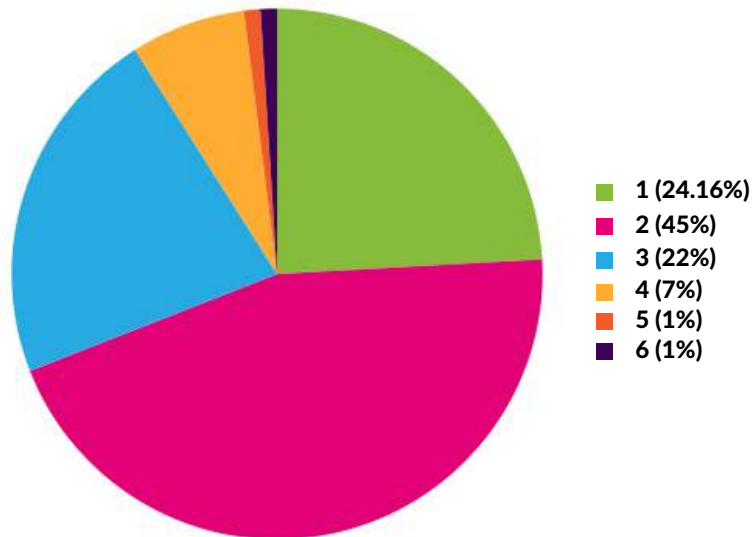
Most of the responses indicated that they were not a part of an ethnic minority (86.94%).

The community background of respondents was roughly equal, with a slight plurality indicating that they were Catholic (42.02%) in comparison to Protestant (36.16%) or Other/None (21.82%).

The most common number of children was 2, with nearly half of all responses (44.98%). Around a quarter (24.16%) had one child, and a similar proportion had 3 (21.40%). Considerably fewer had 4 (7.13%) with very few indicating 5 (1.02%) and 6+ (1.31%).



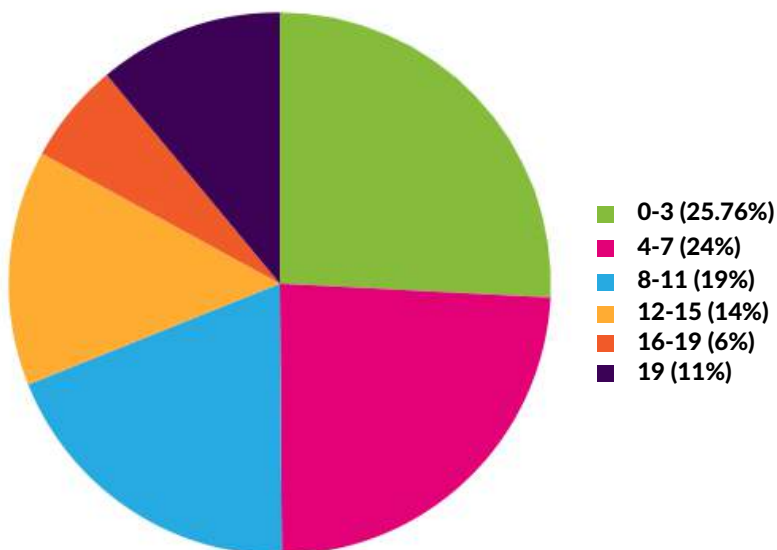
Number of Children



Around one in five parents told us that they had at least one child with special educational needs, a disability or additional needs (20.26%). The most common additional need was an ASD disorder, followed by dyslexia and ADHD. Many additional needs were co-occurring.

The most common age range for children was 0-3 years (25.8%) followed closely by 4-7 years (23.87%). 8-11 years was around a fifth (19.33%), which was higher than the 12-15 age range (13.54%). Interestingly, there were almost double the number of 19+ year olds (11.31%) than older teens ages 16-19 years (6.31%).

Age of Children



In terms of where children are attending school, these broadly reflect the age range responses. The largest single group attended primary schools (30.72%) followed by preschools (18.63%). A considerably smaller number attend secondary (7.42%) and grammar schools (11.41%). A percentage that roughly mirrors the 19+ age range (11.31%) are not currently attending school (12.42%) with the extra most likely explained by very young children and a small number who are NEET. An interesting response is that despite the larger numbers of parents with children with additional or special educational needs, only 1.25% of parents said their children attend special schools. This suggests that most children identified by parents as having additional needs are in more mainstream provision.

12.15% of parents said that their children are on free school meals. This is less than half of those entitled to free school meals in Northern Ireland (29.9%). However, uptake of free school meals in 17/18 was 80.8%, narrowing the gap between this figure and the national figure somewhat.

Geographically, Antrim had a plurality of respondents (42.19%) but not a majority. This was followed by Down (29.43%). The other four counties had smaller response rates, with Armagh (10.06%) leading, followed by Tyrone (8.41%), Derry-Londonderry (7.51%) and finally Fermanagh (2.40%).

We feel that these results represent a fair and reasonable approximation of parents in Northern Ireland. There is a good level of coverage in terms of parental ages, ages of children/young people, geographical, community and other factors. What is striking from the data, is that most of the issues identified are cross-sectional. There are specific issues that are reflective of circumstances, for example rural-based parents being concerned about relative distance to services. However, the most common issues are present regardless of other controlling factors.



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