



Complete report available through  
[www.investinkids.ca](http://www.investinkids.ca)  
[www.investinkids.com](http://www.investinkids.com)

**A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN:**  
**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Description of the Survey**

**The framework.** Parents' knowledge about children and parenting is believed to play a key role in influencing how parents behave toward their children. Yet very little is known about Canadian parents' knowledge of relevant and key areas of parenting and child development, and their feelings about being a parent. Even less is known about how parents educate themselves about parenting and child development, and how competent they feel in the parenting role. To address these issues, *Invest in Kids* commissioned a national survey to explore the behaviour, knowledge and confidence of parents with young children, their efforts to learn about parenting and child development and the relationships among these factors.

The emotional well-being of parents also influences the way parents interact with their children. Considerable research points to the impact that emotions such as parents' perceived stress and depressive symptoms have on parenting behaviour. Likewise, supports to parents have also been widely implicated in the research, as a crucial factor in parenting behaviour. As such, the survey set out to learn more about the emotional well-being of Canadian parents, and to examine relationships between emotional well-being and parenting behaviour.

Finally, research, theory and common sense suggest that particular subgroups of parents experience important variations in how they raise infants and young children. These subgroups include mothers and fathers, single mothers and married mothers, parents with only one child and those with more, young first-time parents and older first-time parents, parents of infants and very young children and those with older preschoolers, parents with higher and lower levels of income and education and various types of employment status of mothers. The analysis of these survey results paid special attention to how knowledge, confidence and emotional well-being of these particular subgroups of parents varied in how they learn about and raise infants and young children.

### *National Parent Poll - Executive Summary*

To summarize, the present survey was conducted to better understand the context in which young children are being raised in Canada, by discovering how parents behave towards their children in the early years, and by exploring a variety of parental factors that may contribute to their behaviour.

**The methodology.** Data were collected via a Consumer Mail Panel (CMP) survey. Only households with children under the age of six were selected. Parents completed self-report questionnaires that were received and returned by mail. Participation was voluntary, and those who participated were entered into a prize draw. A two-stage sampling procedure was conducted: first, a random selection of households with children under the age of six, and secondly, a random selection to reach statistical representation of the Canadian population according to regions, and demographic variables, such as income, education, marital and employment status and family size. 4,300 questionnaires were mailed out, with a final return rate of 38.26%. Data collection was conducted between December 29, 1998 and February 12, 1999. 1,643 Canadian parents of young children participated in the survey. The results of this survey would be the same, plus or minus 2.4 percentage points, 95% of the time under the same methods. The respondents included 698 married mothers, 698 married fathers (but not married to survey respondents) and 247 single mothers. This survey is unique in its inclusion of such a substantial number of fathers.

### **Summary of Results**

**Parents value their role highly, and they enjoy it.** Ninety-two percent of Canadian parents think parenting is the most important thing they can do, and 94% enjoy being a parent most of the time.

**The vast majority of parents recognize the importance of the early years to a child's future development and the vital role of parents.** Seventy-nine percent of parents strongly agreed that, "The years from birth through age five are absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult." Eighty-four percent strongly agreed, "The influence of parents during a child's early years (birth through age five) is absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult." Eighty-two percent felt that the mother's influence was critical, while somewhat fewer parents (73%), but still a substantial majority, felt the father's influence was critical. These findings speak to the investment and commitment made by parents of young children to their role and responsibility.

**Yet parenting behaviour leaves lots of room for improvement.** The survey asked parents to respond to a standard series of questions frequently used in survey research to assess a variety of parenting behaviours with children. Based on factor analysis, three robust parenting dimensions were derived: positive/warm interactions; angry and punitive parenting; and ineffective child management. While the majority of parents reported frequent/positive interactions with their young children, 36% did not. Similarly, 34% were not effective in their child management; and 62% reported regular use of punitive/angry behaviour when their children misbehave. Nationally, there is a 50/50 split between parents who never use physical punishment and those who use it at least occasionally. But it was most disturbing to find a full 40% of the parents of infants under the age of one reported using physical punishment, at least occasionally, with their babies.

Given the literature supporting links between positive child outcomes and positive parenting behaviour, our findings underscore the conviction that efforts to improve parenting behaviour are necessary to improve the well-being of children. Given that so many of the parents surveyed

reported high levels of commitment to being a good parent, it is especially noteworthy that this high commitment did not directly translate into optimal parenting behaviour with children.

**Parents' knowledge about child development is not high.** The survey presented parents with twelve knowledge-testing statements about the importance of a child's early environment (the significance of providing stimulation to infants and being sensitive to a child's cues) and child development (the capabilities of infants and young children at various ages). Correct responses to these statements averaged only 36%. Parents were more knowledgeable about the vital influence of the environment (correct responses averaged 48%) and less knowledgeable about children's development (correct responses averaged only 23%). This means that less than half of parents are knowledgeable about providing stimulating, sensitive environments to their children -- a low level of knowledge by most standards. But they really do not understand what children are capable of at young ages. Why is this important? Because even if parents know the environment is important, if they do not know what children are capable of doing, parents won't know what to do to enhance their children's development.

**Parents are not confident of their knowledge.** Parents were not certain about the signs to look for to indicate that their child's physical, emotional, social or intellectual development is healthy or about right for his/her age. While about 60% of parents were "pretty sure" across all four domains, with the exception of physical development, significantly more parents reported low confidence in their knowledge (on average, 25% across the social, emotional and intellectual domains) than those who reported high confidence (on average, 14%). Physical development was the one area in which parents' confidence in their knowledge was reasonably high, with 29% reporting high levels of confidence, and only 7% feeling they had low knowledge.

**Parents lack confidence in their parenting skills.** With such low levels of knowledge, as well as low confidence in their knowledge, it is not surprising that only a minority of parents feel confident as parents. Before their first baby was born only 44% of parents felt prepared for parenthood; after their first baby was born their confidence plummeted to 18%; and only 43% of parents reported feeling confident in their current parenting skills, their ability to handle difficult situations and to understand their child's feelings and needs.

**Parents' lack of knowledge and confidence is pervasive.** Quite unexpectedly, no parent subgroup stood out as notably high, or even high relative to other groups, in either their knowledge of child development or their confidence in their role as parents. These findings run counter to prevailing views which hold, for example, that mothers know more about child-rearing than fathers, experienced parents know more than inexperienced, and parents with more education and income know more about child development than parents with less. Further, in this survey, no one group came anywhere close to the levels of knowledge and confidence we would want in parents of young children, and no one group represents a "gold standard" by which other groups of parents should be compared.

**Parents face a dilemma - they know little about social and emotional development, yet think they have the most influence in these areas.** Parents were asked about their understanding of and influence over the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of their young children. The majority of parents (55%) chose physical development as the area where they had the most knowledge, yet only 6% felt they had the most influence over this area. The pattern was

### *National Parent Poll - Executive Summary*

reversed for the areas of emotional and social development. More than twice as many parents report these as the areas where they have the greatest influence (44% - emotional development;

32% - social development), compared to parents reporting these as the areas where they have the most knowledge (18% - emotional development; 12% - social development). In other words, parents quite clearly recognize their influential role in the social and emotional domains, yet do not know what to expect or do to facilitate their children's development in these areas. In essence, parents are telling us that they are struggling.

**Importantly, good parenting is related to knowledge and confidence.** Knowledge and confidence were found to be significantly related to parenting behaviour: The more knowledgeable parents were about child development, and the more confident they were in the parenting role, the more likely they were to have positive, effective and less punitive interactions with their young children. (Knowledge correlates with Confidence:  $r = .27$ ; Confidence with Positive/Warm parenting:  $r = .26$ ; Confidence with Punitive/Angry parenting:  $r = -.31$ ; Confidence with Ineffective parenting:  $r = -.23$ ; Knowledge with Positive/Warm parenting:  $r = .22$ ; Knowledge with Punitive/Angry parenting:  $r = -.18$ ; and Knowledge with Ineffective parenting:  $r = -.17$ ). These relationships suggest that if we increase parents' knowledge about child development, we will increase their confidence in the parenting role, and most importantly, higher levels of confidence and knowledge are likely to improve parenting behaviour.

**Parents' emotional well-being is under siege.** While the survey found that higher levels of emotional well-being were associated with better parenting practices, too many parents do not enjoy emotional health. The rates of depressive symptoms were very high among this sample: 19% of married fathers, 28% of married mothers and 48% of single mothers. Thirty-nine percent of families are not functioning at a high level. The respondents reported substantial marital conflict around parenting: 40% feel pressure from their spouse/partner to change how they parent, and 56% wish their spouse/partner would help more with the parenting. Using the Statistics Canada Time Crunch Instrument, 23% of parents were classified as highly time-stressed. Forty-eight percent agreed, "I feel that I'm constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than I can handle," and 63% of parents agreed, "I don't have enough time for me anymore." Depressive symptoms correlate with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .22$ ) and Ineffective parenting ( $r = .23$ ). Conflict between the Spouses correlates with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .23$ ) and Ineffective parenting ( $r = .24$ ). Time stress correlates with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .14$ ) and ineffective parenting ( $r = .14$ ). Thus, data show unacceptably high negative emotional states that are associated in the less than optimal parenting behaviour displayed by many parents of young children.

**Parents do not feel supported in their role as parents.** The period of time immediately following the birth of one's first child is clearly very stressful for many parents, and a time when parenting confidence is at an all-time low. How supported do parents feel during this stressful time? Not very. Forty-five percent of parents did not feel they received enough "emotional support" nor enough "practical support" following the birth of their first child. And when asked whether they agreed with the statement, "I think Canada values its young children," only 42% agreed. The remaining 58% do not believe that Canada either values its young children or, by extension, their role as parents.

**Parents want to know more.** A full 91% of parents agreed that, "There is always room for improvement in parenting skills." As well, 70% of parents reported that "Before our first baby was born, I tried to prepare for parenthood by reading and asking advice." Thus, it is not that parents do not want to learn, or have not sought advice and support in the parenting role - they have.

**However, high levels of information-seeking do not appear to contribute to greater knowledge or confidence.** While it was found that parents turn to a number of sources for advice and support around parenting, the problems prevail. Indeed, those parent groups who were found to be the highest information seekers (i.e., mothers, inexperienced parents, young first time parents, highly educated parents and mothers working full-time) were not noticeably any more knowledgeable or confident in the parenting role than those parents who were low in their information-seeking efforts. Using an information-seeking composite score, analysis showed reasonably low correlations between parents' information-seeking efforts and their overall 12-item knowledge score ( $r = .13$ ), and their current level of confidence in the parenting role ( $r = .08$ ). In other words, information-seeking tendencies on the part of parents of young children only modestly related to enhanced knowledge about child development and confidence in the parenting role. An extremely small amount of the variance (less than 2% in knowledge, and less than 1% in confidence) was accounted for by parents' information-seeking efforts.

**The top sources of information are insufficient.** Sixty-one percent of parents turn most often to their child's doctor/pediatrician for advice about parenting. Given the amount of time spent consulting a child's doctor/pediatrician is typically limited to short, infrequent appointments, where the bulk of the discussion revolves around the child's physical health, it is hardly startling that this source of information might not satisfy the needs of parents revealed in this survey. Further, there is no reason to expect that other main sources of information (i.e., 58% turn to their spouse, 58% to friends, and 57% to their own mother) are any more informed about child development and parenting than are parents themselves. A recent American parenting survey found that grandparents were even less informed about appropriate child rearing practices and child development facts than were parents of young children (Zero to Three, 2000).

**Some main sources of information about parenting are also sources of conflict and pressure to change parenting behaviour.** This survey showed that while grandparents and spouses are considered a primary support for parents, they are also clearly regarded as very real sources of pressure and conflict in the parenting role. So, for example, of the 55% of parents who answered "yes" to the question, "Is there someone besides yourself or your partner, who takes care of young youngest child on a regular basis," 45% indicated they used the child's grandparents (clearly a substantial source of support), and 95% of those parents were very satisfied with the care. Yet, 34% of parents report receiving the most pressure to change how they parent from their own mothers, 17% from their own fathers, and 32% from their in-laws. Similarly, 40% of parents reported feeling pressure from their spouse to change how they parent, 37% did not agree with their spouse on how to parent and 56% wished their partner would help more with the parenting.

## **Conclusions**

Developmental science tells us the early years are important because they lay the foundation for the future. The environment is crucial in early child development and parents are pivotal in shaping those environments.

The bottom line from this survey is straightforward: Across the board, parents need help -- ALL parents.

- Too few parents use the positive parenting practices which promote healthy social, emotional and intellectual development.
- Too many parents lack knowledge about child development and confidence in the parenting role; they are emotionally worn-out and stressed; and they are not receiving sufficient support.
- The current strategies on the part of parents to seek parenting information and support leave little reason to expect their knowledge, confidence and parenting behaviour will improve in any meaningful ways.

Parents are truly in a quandary. They all want to do the right thing; they just do not know what to do.

And they are not being supported in their efforts to learn. The results from a 1997 Maclean's Magazine Poll indicated that 95% of all Canadians aged 15+, be they parents or not, believed that being a good parent was what was most important to them. Thus, in a society that purports to value the role of parents, we provide woefully few opportunities for parents to learn about parenting and child development. The main venues of parent training (high school courses, prenatal classes, community parenting programs, television, the internet, books and magazines) provide a superficial level of information, but not real education. And because these are largely unevaluated we know very little about who they reach and whether they are effective. We have not created an environment that is conducive to enhancing parenting skills. That only 42% of the parents surveyed felt that Canada values its young children attests to this reality.

Those who are interested in reaching parents with much-needed information about parenting and child development must recognize and take into account the emotional state in which parents are receiving information. While parents may, on the one hand, acknowledge they need and want information, on the other, such information could easily be perceived as a further burden to a parent who is already stressed and stretched to the limit.

The last thing parents need is a more of the same. Imaginative and thoughtful efforts are greatly needed to reach out to all parents, to educate all parents about child development and parenting in meaningful and useful ways, to recognize the emotional experiences and stresses inherent in modern parenting, and to support on all levels, the important responsibility parents of young children have undertaken - to raise healthy and adjusted children, who will grow to be the next generation of healthy and adjusted adults/parents.