



# A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

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## A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN:

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## 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 and support systems of Canadian parents, and to examine relationships between emotional well-being, support 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.

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. This sample is accurate within 2.4

percentage points 95% of the time. 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.

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## SUMMARY OF RESULTS

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### **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 parents' interactions with their children leave 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 reported that they never used physical punishment and those who used 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.

The survey also assessed ‘Family functioning’ — how families get along, how they resolve problems, communicate their feelings and relate to one another. The more positive and healthy these patterns of behaviour within the home, the more positive the outcomes for children in the areas of social, emotional and intellectual development. Given the documented advantages of growing up in family environments deemed “high functioning,” it is concerning that 39 percent of families surveyed were not functioning at a high level.

### **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 will not 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 reasonably confident 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 confidence in their 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 reported feeling confident as parents. Before their first baby was born only 44% of parents felt prepared for parenthood; after their first baby was born the percent of parents who felt confident 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 represented 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 reversed for the areas of emotional and social development. More than twice as many parents reported 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 correlated 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 positively affect 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. The respondents reported substantial marital conflict around parenting: 40% felt pressure from their spouse/partner to change how they parent, and 56% wished 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." Of most concern, 68% agreed, "I do not spend as much quality time with my child as I'd like to. Depressive symptoms correlated with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .22$ ) and Ineffective parenting ( $r = .23$ ). Conflict between the Spouses correlated with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .23$ ) and Ineffective parenting ( $r = .24$ ). Time stress correlated with Punitive/Angry parenting ( $r = .14$ ) and ineffective parenting ( $r = .14$ ). Thus, data show unacceptably high negative emotional states that are associated with 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% did 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 turned 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% turned 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 reported 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.

#### Highlights of selected subgroup findings:

- **Mothers and fathers** were about equal in managing children's behaviour, equally low in knowledge about child development, and equally low in their confidence in their roles as parents. However, fathers were less warm and positive in their parenting, and less confident in dealing with emotional issues with their children, whereas mothers experienced more stress and pressure in their lives, and reported high rates of depressive symptoms.
- **Socio-economically disadvantaged parents** (subgroups with low income or low education, those who were single mothers or young parents) - reported the highest levels of having knowledge about, influence over and confidence in their handling of their children's emotional development, and concurrently reported high rates of depressive symptoms.
- **Single and married mothers** did not differ in their levels of punitiveness and effectiveness with their children; the only difference actually favoured single mothers (i.e., single mothers were slightly more warm with their children and less likely to use physical punishment).
- **Mother's Employment Status** - full-time working mothers were not worse off than those who worked part-time, or those who were not in the workforce.

If anything, the part-time working mothers fared the worst. They were least likely to display appropriate parenting behaviour; more inclined to use physical punishment; reported the lowest family functioning; were most dissatisfied with their husband's contribution to parenting; were most likely to experience pressure from others about how to parent and more likely to feel stressed.

- **Experience in the parenting role** does not seem to yield more accurate knowledge about child development, nor confidence in their knowledge. In fact, parents' parenting interactions with their children, rather than improving with age, were actually found to become worse as their children grew older and as the number of children in the home increased. They were also less likely to say that "Being a parent is the most important thing I can do," and were less likely to actively seek out information about childrearing, compared to inexperienced parents.
- **Age of First Time Parents** - older first time parents were as a group, much more likely to display positive/warm behaviours with their children, and were more effective in managing their children's misbehaviour, yet they were much more likely to report low levels of confidence in their knowledge about child development and in the parenting role in general.

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## CONCLUSIONS

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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; yet so many 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 and parents.

# I. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

*Invest in Kids* is a national organization whose purpose is to promote the healthy social, emotional and intellectual development of children aged 0-5. These are the miracle years - the time of greatest human development. And this is the period when a child's future can be most profoundly shaped and influenced by the environment. Considerable research points to the importance of the first five years as pivotal in a child's ability to learn, to think and create, to love, to trust and to develop a strong sense of themselves. As Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) put it, "early childhood is both the most critical and the most vulnerable time in a child's development".

Unfortunately, too many children are not getting off to a good start, and we're seeing the consequences. In 1994, approximately 26% - 32% of Canadian infants, toddlers and preschoolers showed one or more serious motor, social, language, temperament or behavioural difficulties (from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth – NLSCY, Willms, 2002). Over one in four! Offord and Lipman (1996) found that about 10% of 4 to 11 year olds exhibited behaviours consistent with conduct disorder, and we know that children who show high rates of serious conduct problems and aggression have an increased risk of becoming anti-social adults (Farrington, 1991, as cited in Offord & Bennett, 1996). Research also shows that in families where parents have poor parenting skills, 41% of children have intellectual or behavioural problems (Chao & Willms, 2000). Clearly, efforts are needed to examine how children are being raised during the early years.

Studies have consistently shown that how parents behave toward and care for their children in their earliest years is a chief determinant of healthy child outcome. Specifically, parenting behaviour with young children has an impact on how productive, resilient, compassionate and confident they will be as they mature (e.g., Sroufe, 2002). Given that Willms (2001) found that only 1/3 of Canadian parents

displayed optimal parenting behaviour, it is hardly surprising that so many children are not getting off to the best start in life.

What then are the factors that influence parenting behaviour? The present survey was designed to explore a variety of these factors with the goal to identify areas to target for intervention.

Parents' knowledge about children and parenting is believed to play a key role in influencing how parents behave toward their children. Research shows that parents use their beliefs and understanding of child development in everyday life to guide their interactions with their children (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992). Yet, very little is known about Canadian parents' knowledge of relevant and key areas of parenting and child development, and their feelings of competence in the parenting role. As such, the present survey explored the knowledge and confidence of Canadian parents to understand more about the awareness and experiences of parents of young children that may affect their behaviour with children.

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' depressive symptoms and perceived stress have on parenting behaviour, with more negative emotions being associated with more negative parenting practices and family functioning (e.g., Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996; Fagan, 2000; Field, 2000; Oyserman et al., 2000; Pound, 1996). 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 to parenting behaviour.

To summarize, the present survey was conducted to better understand the context in which young children are being raised, by discovering how Canadian parents

behave towards their children in the early years, and by exploring a variety of parental factors that may contribute to their behaviour.

Specifically, *Invest in Kids* designed and commissioned a national survey of 1,643 Canadian parents of children aged 0-5:

- To describe the behavioural interactions between parents and their young children,
- To examine parents' attitudes about and investment in the parenting role,
- To assess the level of knowledge of Canadian parents about early child development,
- To document how parents obtain knowledge and information about children and parenting,
- To explore parents' confidence in their knowledge, and in the parenting role more generally,
- To examine the relations between parents' knowledge, confidence, and parenting behaviour,
- To determine the emotional well-being of parents, and the emotional climate of the homes in which young children are raised,
- To document parents' perceived stress and support in the parenting role,

And finally,

- To explore differences across key subgroups of parents within the population.

The subgroups of parents which were selected for analysis are as follows:

**Mothers and fathers:** While it was once the case that the mother was considered to be the primary socializer for young children (Kohn & Carroll, 1960), experts are now concluding that “the father is extremely important for the child’s intellectual, emotional, and social development” (Biller, 1993, as cited in Popenoe, 1996, p. 147). Despite this recognition, there is very little known about the knowledge, confidence and behaviour of Canadian fathers of young children. The present survey included an equal number of married mothers and fathers who are not related to each other in order to address differences and similarities between these groups. In this survey parents are categorized as “married,” if they answered positively to the question, “Are you married?”

**Married Mothers and Single Mothers:** It is commonly held that mothers and children from single-mother households are at a disadvantage. Popenoe (1996) went so far as to state that because childrearing is such a demanding job, “children with two adults to take care of them have an enormous advantage over children with only one parent”. Indeed, higher rates of poverty are associated with single parenthood, and the combination of raising a child on one’s own with limited resources has been linked to poor child outcome (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000, p. 197). Given that so many children in today’s society are raised by single mothers (from 1971 to 1996, the number of Canadian single parents increased by close to 250%; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000, p. 70), we were interested in understanding more about any differences and/or similarities between single and married mothers of children aged 0-5 on important parenting variables.

**Parents of children aged 0-3 and those with children aged 3-5:** The 0-5 age range covers a considerable amount of development. Are there differences in the beliefs and behaviours of parents whose children are very young as compared to those whose children are older? It is reasonable to think that parents with older children will feel more relaxed and confident in the parenting role, will have picked up more appropriate parenting techniques and strategies along the way, and will have had more opportunities to put support systems in place. On the flip side, as children get older, parents are presented with a different set of challenges - e.g., increased discipline situations, increased peer influence - that may undermine appropriate parenting and confidence in the parenting role. We compared parents of children aged newborn to 3, and those of children aged 3 to 5 to discover possible differences between groups.

**Parents with one child and those with more:** There has been much speculation about how parents raise their first child compared to how they raise future children. Compared to more experienced parents (i.e., those who have more than one child), new parents (i.e., those with only one child) have been depicted as more anxious, less knowledgeable about children and childrearing, and more responsive and attentive to their children (see Falbo & Polit, 1986). We were interested in exploring whether increased experience in the parenting role actually translated into increased knowledge and confidence in the parenting role as measured in the present survey.

**Young first-time parents and older first-time parents:** More and more, parents are waiting until they are older to have children. In 1997, 31% of women had their first child after the age of 30, compared with 19% in 1987 (Canadian Institute of Child Health, 2000, p. 29). Among first-time parents, are there age-related differences in parenting beliefs, feelings, and behaviours? For example, are older first-time

parents, who presumably have more life experience, any more confident about parenting and knowledgeable about child development? Does waiting until you are older to have children influence commitment to parenting? Do young first-timers receive more pressure from others about how to parent? To answer these, and other, questions, the present survey compared three groups of first-time parents: those under 25 years of age, those aged 25-35, and those older than 35 years.

**Income and Education:** Socioeconomic indices such as income and education have long been associated with variations in child outcome, and as such represent important demographics to consider when exploring the conditions surrounding childrearing. Yet, while Willms (1999) found a higher proportion of what he calls “vulnerable children” in the lowest income families, he also found a substantial number of Canadian children who were not faring well in high income families. According to Lipman, Offord and Boyle (1995), “the effect of low income is responsible for only 10% of the behavioural and academic difficulties” experienced by children. Other findings have supported the claim that problem parenting, which clearly compromises child outcome, is not exclusive to low income families, and must be targeted across all socio-economic groups (Chao & Wilms, 2000). Parents’ education level is an especially important consideration when examining knowledge about child development, with the assumption being that more highly educated parents will be more inclined to seek information about parenting and children, and to acquire more relevant parenting knowledge. To learn more about the effects of income and education on parents’ knowledge, confidence, and behaviour in the parenting role, the present survey compared low and high SES groups; a) those whose yearly household income was less than \$30,000 and those who earn \$60,000 or more, and b) those parents with a high school or less education and those with a college or university degree.

**Mother's Employment Status:** Given that so many mothers are currently in the workforce (in 1996, 70% of mothers with young children aged 0-5 were working; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2000, p. 87), we wanted to understand more about mothers who work, and to compare them to mothers who stay at home. The heavy demands on time and energy for working mothers is commonly assumed to result in more stress, and less optimal interactions with children. On the other hand, many stay-at-home mothers have lamented the lack of diversity, intellectual stimulation, personal growth, and adult contact (conditions more typically associated with participation in the workforce). Not only were we interested in comparing the behaviours, attitudes, and emotions of mothers who work and those who stay at home, but also to determine if the type of working arrangement (part-time or full-time) influences the parenting dimensions of interest. Does a part-time working arrangement somehow incorporate the best of both worlds...or perhaps, the worst? To explore these possibilities, we compared three groups of mothers: those working full-time, those working part-time, and those not working outside of the home.

### **Demographic Information of Subgroups**

On the following page is a table featuring demographic information of the parent subgroups that were examined in the present survey. The table is arranged with the subgroups along the top, and the demographic characteristics along the left side. An example of how to interpret the table is as follows: Within the subgroup of Married Fathers (see first column), 47% had a child between the ages of 0-35 months, whereas 53% had a child aged 36-71 months.

The table reveals a few noteworthy demographic breakdowns, all of which are in line with national statistics. For example:

- Low income parents were more likely to have a low education, and conversely, those with high income were most likely to also have high education
- Single mothers and young first-time parents aged 25 or less were highly represented in the low income, low education, nonworking mother subgroups



**Table I. Demographic Information of Parent Subgroups**

(Within each column, the PERCENT of each row subgroup is noted in the cell. E.g., for the column "Married fathers," 47% had a child between the ages of 0-35 months, whereas 53% had a child aged 36-71 months.)

SUBGROUP DEMOGRAPHIC	Married Fathers	Married Mothers	Single Mothers	Child: 0-35 mos	Child: 36-71 mos	1 Child	2 + Children	First Timer: < 25 years	FI: 25- 34 years	FI: 35+ years	Income: Under 30K	Income: 60K +	Education: High School	Education: College Degree	Mother: Stay-at- home	Mother: Full-time	Mother: Part-time
Married Fathers	--	--	--	40	45	37	46	8	45	45	22	53	39	46	--	--	--
Married Mothers	--	--	--	47	38	44	42	61	42	31	43	44	39	47	67	81	80
Single Mothers	--	--	--	13	17	19	12	31	13	24	35	3	22	7	33	19	20
Age of child: 0-35 mos	47	55	43	--	--	62	43	86	60	44	50	51	45	53	53	51	49
Age of child: 36-71 mos	53	45	57	--	--	38	57	14	40	56	50	49	55	47	48	49	51
1 Child	30	37	46	44	27	--	--	--	--	--	38	38	33	37	31	52	42
2 + Child	70	63	54	56	73	--	--	--	--	--	62	62	67	63	69	48	58
First Timer: < 25 yrs	1	11	16	13	2	22	--	--	--	--	16	1	10	3	17	5	18
First Timer: 25-34 yrs	22	21	19	25	17	58	--	--	--	--	19	26	17	26	11	37	14
First Timer: 35+ yrs	7	5	11	6	8	20	--	--	--	--	3	11	6	8	3	10	10
Income: Under 30 K	17	32	76	32	32	35	31	64	30	16	--	--	51	13	60	20	37
Income: 60K +	40	33	6	33	31	34	31	2	41	49	--	--	13	53	11	49	24
Educate: High School	32	32	51	32	38	32	36	46	28	29	55	14	--	--	55	18	27
Educate: College Deg.	40	41	17	39	35	38	36	15	47	39	15	61	--	--	21	52	40
Mother: Stay-at-home	--	40	56	30	27	24	25	57	15	13	54	10	44	16	--	--	--
Mother: Full-time	--	35	23	21	20	29	13	12	35	29	13	31	11	28	--	--	--
Mother: Part-time	--	17	12	10	10	12	8	23	7	14	12	8	8	11	--	--	--

## II. METHODOLOGY

*Invest in Kids* commissioned Market Facts of Canada and Commins Wingrove, to survey the attitudes and behaviours of Canadian parents. The survey questions were developed by child development experts at Invest in Kids, with the assistance of a panel of expert advisors. Some items were derived from pre-existing measures and surveys such as the NLSCY, while others were developed specifically for this survey<sup>1</sup>. A brief summary of survey method, sample, sampling error, and data collection procedures are presented here.

### Survey Method

- Data were collected via a Consumer Mail Panel (CMP). Potential participants were determined based on the selection criterion of child's date of birth. Only households with children under the age of six were selected.
- Parents completed self-report questionnaires of approximately one hour duration that were received and returned by mail.
- Participation in the survey was on a voluntary basis. Households that completed and returned their questionnaires were entered into a prize draw.

### Sample

- 1,643 Canadian parents of children aged 0-5 participated in the survey.
- A two-stage sampling procedure was conducted to acquire a representative sample.
  - First, a sample of parents was selected via random computer selection based on the criterion of one child in the household under the age of 6.

- Next, a sample was designed so that it was statistically representative of the Canadian population according to demographic variables including parent's sex, age, and marital status, province, population density, language, and household income.

- The data received appropriate weighting to achieve national representation and all analyses were conducted on weighted data.
- Invest in Kids identified key demographic variables to represent parent subgroups of interest. The relative percentages and composition for key parent subgroups are available in the Table II: Sample Characteristics.

### Sampling Error

The sample represents only a small proportion of the entire population of Canadian parents with children aged 0-5. Because we can never survey every parent with a young child in Canada, it is necessary to create a range of values within which the total population will likely fall. In our sample of 1,643 parents, the sampling error is  $\pm 2.42\%$ . That means, we can say with 95% confidence that the results of this survey would be the same, plus or minus 2.4 percentage points, if we had conducted a similar survey of all Canadian parents with a child between 0-5.

Sampling error varies when examining subgroups due to the fluctuation in size of their samples (from  $\pm 2.42\%$  to  $\pm 9.14\%$ ). As the sample size increases, the margin of error decreases since more individuals are included in the estimation of the population. For further information, see the Table II: Sample Characteristics.

<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive description of measurement tools and procedures is available upon request.

Table II. Sample Characteristics

	Percentage of sample	Sample Size	Sampling Error
Total (all parents with children aged newborn to five)	100%	1, 643	±2.42%
<b>Household Type</b>			
Married mothers	43%	698	±3.71%
Married fathers	43%	698	±3.71%
Single mothers	15%	247	±6.23%
Mothers (married and single)	57%	945	±3.19%
<b>Age of Youngest Child</b>			
0 to 35 months	50%	817	±3.42%
36 to 71 months	50%	826	±3.41%
<b>Number of Children</b>			
One	35%	582	±4.06%
Two or more	65%	1,061	±2.95%
<b>First Time Parents</b>			
Under 25 years	8%	128	±8.66%
25 to 34 years	21%	339	±5.32%
35+ years	7%	115	±9.14%
<b>Income</b>			
Under \$30, 000	32%	530	±4.27%
\$60, 000 +	32%	524	±4.29%
<b>Education</b>			
High school or less	35%	569	±4.11%
College degree	37%	601	±3.99%
<b>Mother's Employment Status</b>			
Part-Time	9%	147	±8.08%
Full-Time	18%	295	±5.71%
Stay-at-home	25%	414	±4.82%
<b>Province</b>			
Atlantic	8%	138	±8.34%
Quebec	25%	418	±4.79%
Ontario	36%	582	±4.06%
Manitoba/Saskatchewan	9%	142	±8.22%
Alberta	10%	160	±7.75%
British Columbia	12%	203	±6.88%

## Data Collection

- Questionnaires were mailed to selected households and independently completed by parents.
- Questionnaires were available in Canada's two official languages, English and French.
- Questionnaires were returned by mail and were carefully screened to ensure integrity of the data.
- 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.

## Interpretation of Results

With a sample size of 1,643, even a very small portion of the variance (1%) would reach statistical significance. Statisticians have suggested that, with such a large sample, statistical significance is less important than the magnitude of the effect (Cohen, 1990). Therefore, in the present study, we have chosen

not to report statistical significance, and to focus instead on group differences that we deem sufficiently large to be meaningful specifically, we chose to report on subgroup differences of 5% or greater.

The majority of questions in the survey used a Likert-type scale ranging from "completely disagree" (0) to "completely agree" (10). For present purposes, we have defined "strongly agree" as a score of 8 to 10 on the scale for any given question.

The above described Likert-scale was not used for all questions in the survey. In those instances in which a different scale was used, we clearly indicate the scale and cut-off criterion used to arrive at percentages. For example, some questions were designed to elicit a "yes" or "no" response from parents. Others were part of standardized scales (e.g., to assess depressive symptoms, time stress, family functioning), resulting in a total numerical value. The use of these items and their meaning will be specified throughout the report to aid the reader's interpretation of the results.

# III. RESULTS

## 1. PARENTS' INVESTMENT IN THE PARENTING ROLE

Canadian parents of young children are strongly committed to, and invested in, the parenting role.

92% of parents surveyed strongly agreed with the statement: **“Being a parent is the most important thing I can do”**

Similarly, 94% agreed with the statement: **“I enjoy being a parent most of the time”**

If a parent's level of commitment was all that was involved in appropriate parenting and in healthy child outcome, the story would end here. However, we know that it does not, because while strong commitment to being a good parent is an important ingredient, there are many other factors - including parenting knowledge, confidence, stress, and support - that, in combination, influence the parenting environment in which young children are raised.

### Parents' Investment in The Parenting Role - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- The high degree of investment in parenting was evident across all parent subgroups. The percentage of parents who strongly agreed that being a parent was the most important thing they could do ranged from 89% to as high as 97%. Similarly, the percentage of parents claiming to enjoy being a parent ranged from 92% to 97%.
- The only subgroup differences that were obtained reflected parents' level of experience in the parenting role. Those parents with older children, and those with more than one child (i.e., more experienced parents), were slightly less inclined to say that being a parent was the most important thing they could do.

**Parents' Investment in The Parenting Role - Subgroup Findings\***

**Sex of Parent and Marital Status:**

<i>"Being a parent..."</i>	<b>Marital Status and Sex of Parent</b>			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Most important thing I can do	92	90	93	89
Enjoy most of the time	94	94	96	92

**Age of Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:**

<i>"Being a parent..."</i>	<b>Age of Child</b>		<b>Number of Children</b>		<b>Age of First-time Parent</b>		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Most important thing I can do	94	89	95	90	95	94	97
Enjoy most of the time	95	93	96	93	97	96	97

**Household Income and Parent's Education:**

<i>"Being a parent..."</i>	<b>Income</b>		<b>Parent's Education</b>	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Most important thing I can do	94	92	91	92
Enjoy most of the time	94	96	94	95

**Mother's Employment Status:**

<i>"Being a parent..."</i>	<b>Mother's Employment Status</b>			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Most important thing I can do	93	92	94	92
Enjoy most of the time	95	93	95	95

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## 2. PARENTS' INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR CHILDREN

### a. PARENTING BEHAVIOUR

Given the evidence in the literature directly linking parenting behaviour to child outcome (e.g., see Chamberlain & Patterson, 1995 for a review; Lamb, 1997), we begin by documenting the behavioural interactions between Canadian parents and their young children.

We 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<sup>2</sup>, three robust parenting dimensions were derived:

- **Positive/warm interactions:**

- How often do you praise your child by saying something like “Good for you!” or “What a nice thing you did!” or “That’s good going!”?
- How often do you and your child talk or play with each other, focusing attention on each other for five minutes of more, just for fun?
- How often do you and your child laugh together?
- How often do you do something special with your child that he or she enjoys?

- **Angry & punitive parenting:**

- How often do you get annoyed with your child for saying or doing something he or she is not supposed to?
- How often do you tell your child he or she is bad or not as good as others?
- How often do you raise your voice, scold or yell at your child when he or she breaks the

rules or does things that he or she is not supposed to?

- How often do you use physical punishment when your child breaks the rules or does things that he or she is not supposed to?
- How often do you get angry when you punish your child?

- **Ineffective child management:**

- How often does your child get away with things that you feel should have been punished?
- How often is your child able to get out of a punishment when they really set their mind to it?
- How often, when you discipline your child, does he or she ignore the punishment?
- When your child breaks the rules or does things that he or she is not supposed to, how often do you ignore it, do nothing?

#### Methodological Note:

The scales used to assess parenting behaviour were frequency-based (e.g., never, rarely, sometimes, often, or always). Each respondent received a factor score for each behavioural dimension, based on the sum of their responses for each item comprising that factor. The percentages reported here represent those parents whose factor scores fell in the top quartile of possible responses for that dimension (i.e., those parents high on the positive/warmth dimension, low on the ineffective dimension, and low on the punitive/angry dimension).

<sup>2</sup> Details about the factor analysis are available upon request.

### Parenting Behaviour Findings:

- While the majority (64%) of parents reported frequent positive/warm interactions with their young children, 36% did not.
- Similarly, 66% of parents were found to be effective in their child management techniques; 34% were not.
- Finally, only 38% of parents reported infrequent use of angry and punitive parenting behaviour, with a full 62% reporting regular usage of punitive behaviour when their children misbehave.

As can be seen, there is considerable room for improvement in how Canadian parents behave with their young children:

- 36% could increase positive/warm behaviour with their children
- 34% could become more effective at child management
- 62% could reduce punitive/angry behaviour with children

Again, because the literature supports linkages between positive child outcomes and positive parenting behaviour (specifically, high levels of warmth and positive regard, low levels of punitive/angry behaviour, and more effective child management techniques), our findings underscore the conviction that efforts to improve the parenting behaviour of Canadian parents 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. Indeed, as mentioned, it is likely that other factors besides level of commitment (e.g. parenting knowledge, confidence, emotional well-being of parent) influence how appropriately parents will behave with their children.

## Parenting Behaviour - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Mothers and fathers were similar in their parenting practices in the areas of effectiveness and punitiveness. The groups did differ, however, in their displays of positive/warm parenting behaviours, with far fewer fathers than mothers reporting positive/warm parenting, and an especially high percentage of single mothers displaying positive/warm behaviour with their young children.
- As children grow, and as more children arrive on the scene, appropriate parenting in all three behavioural domains decreases.
- While a relatively large number of first-time parents reported high levels of positive/warm behaviour, the older first-timers (age 35+) were those most likely to display high levels of such positive and warm parenting behaviour. More of these older first-time parents were also deemed highly effective with their children than younger new parents. The youngest group of first-time parents (< 25) were notable in their low use of punitive and angry behaviour.
- Income and education levels did not affect punitive/angry parenting. There were, however, differences in warmth and effectiveness, with more low income parents reporting high levels of warmth, and high income and highly educated parents more likely to be effective in managing their children's misbehaviour.
- Mothers' working status did not affect positive/warm parenting. However, in the other areas (punitiveness and effective child management), full-time working mothers were the most appropriate group, followed by stay-at-home mothers, and finally part-time working mothers.

## Parenting Behaviour - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

Parenting Dimension (top quartile)	ALL Parents %	Marital Status and Sex of Parent		
		Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
High positive/warm	64	56	68	73
High effectiveness	66	66	66	64
Low punitive/angry	38	36	39	41

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

Parenting Dimension (top quartile)	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
More positive/warm	72	55	76	57	73	76	79
More effective	69	63	70	63	70	68	77
Less punitive/angry	45	31	43	35	52	42	39

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

Parenting Dimension (top quartile)	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
More positive/warm	71	65	64	62
More effective	62	69	58	73
Less punitive/angry	40	40	37	38

### Mother's Employment Status:

Parenting Dimension (top quartile)	ALL Mothers %	Mother's Employment Status		
		Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
More positive/warm	69	69	68	67
More effective	66	64	71	59
Less punitive/angry	39	37	43	31

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## USE OF PHYSICAL PUNISHMENT

We examined separately the responses to one of the questions within the Angry/Punitive factor, specifically the “use of physical punishment when young children break rules or do things they are not supposed to do”.

The use of physical punishment as a form of discipline is among one of the most contentious childrearing topics in our society today. Not only are there differences of opinion among parents as to whether physical punishment should be used with children, but also among child development experts. While there is clear agreement in the field that physical abuse of children is harmful and traumatic, no such consensus exists around the effects of what has been called “normative nonabusive physical punishment” (e.g., moderate levels of spanking used to modify children’s behaviour). In a recent address at the Convention of the American Psychological Association (August, 2001), renowned psychologist, Diana Baumrind, concluded that occasional spanking does not damage a child’s social or emotional development. Other equally prominent experts in the field (e.g., Murray Strauss) strongly oppose this view, and argue that any level of physical punishment is harmful to children, and that the consequences of “normative” and “abusive” physical punishment differ only in degree, not kind.

In the present survey, we were interested in examining the practices of Canadian parents with respect to physical punishment, and exploring behavioural correlates of such practices.

### Methodological Note:

The item used to assess parents’ use of physical punishment was frequency-based. The percentages reported below represent those parents who indicated

that they use physical punishment at least once in a while (e.g., “rarely”, “sometimes”, “often”, or “always”), and those who claimed to “never” use physical punishment when disciplining their youngest child.

### Findings:

In keeping with the debate around the use of physical punishment, the findings from the present survey revealed an even split between the number of parents who use physical punishment occasionally, or more often (51%) versus those who never use it at all (49%).

Our findings showed that the majority of parents who reported using physical punishment used it either “rarely” (39%) or “sometimes” (11%). Less than 1% of parents in the present survey reported frequent use of physical punishment. In other words, the behaviour of almost all those parents who used physical punishment was more in line with what Baumrind would call “normative physical punishment”, not what she would label as “abuse”.

It is intriguing to be faced with two groups of parents who are so evenly represented among the general population, and who differ in their use of physical punishment. Do these groups also differ on other parenting behaviours? We conducted group comparisons to see if **any** use of physical punishment would differentiate parents with respect to (a) their positive behaviour with children, (b) their effectiveness in child management, (c) their use of other negative parenting behaviours aside from physical punishment, and (d) general family functioning.

The findings clearly differentiated the two groups of parents on their parenting behaviour. Compared to those who never used physical punishment with their young children, those parents who did use it on occasion:

- Displayed less warmth with their children
- Were more ineffective in managing their children's misbehaviour
- Engaged in more punitive strategies aside from physical punishment (e.g., expressing annoyance, telling child s/he is bad, yelling at child, getting angry with child)
- Reported more family dysfunction in the home<sup>3</sup>

These findings are compelling in suggesting that, even though the frequency and severity of physical punishment by the “users” in the present study was low, the mere fact that they used it at all set them apart in more negative ways on other key parenting behaviours from those parents who never used physical punishment with their children.

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<sup>3</sup> The measure of family functioning is described in the next section of the report.

### **Use of Physical Punishment - Summary of Subgroup Findings:**

- Mothers and fathers did not differ in their reported used of physical punishment, although single mothers were less likely to use physical punishment than were married parents.
- The older the child, and the more children there were in the home, the more likely parents were to use physical punishment when their children misbehave.
- When we took a more refined look at child's age, we found that there were no differences in the use of physical punishment among parents of children aged 1-5. The only age difference was found for parents of infants, who were the least likely to engage in physical punishment with their infants. However, it is disturbing to note, that a full 40% of these parents of infants under the age of one did report using physical punishment, at least occasionally, with their babies.
- Among first-time parents, the older parents (aged 35+) were the least likely group to engage in physical punishment.
- While income level did not affect parents' use of physical punishment, education level did make a difference; parents with low education were more likely to report using physical punishment than highly educated parents.
- More part-time working mothers reported using physical punishment with their children than both full-time and stay-at-home mothers.

## Use of Physical Punishment - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Use Physical Punishment	51	52	53	45

### Age of Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Use Physical Punishment	48	55	45	55	47	46	41

	Further Breakdown of Age of Youngest Child				
	0-12 months	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4-5 years
Use Physical Punishment	40	56	57	53	56

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Use Physical Punishment	52	48	56	46

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Use Physical Punishment	51	52	49	60

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## b. FAMILY FUNCTIONING

In examining the behavioural context in which young children are being raised, we also explored behaviour at the family level. “Family functioning” refers to how families get along, how they resolve problems, communicate their feelings, and relate to one another. The more positive and healthy these patterns of behaviour within the home, the more positive the outcomes for children in the areas of social, emotional, and intellectual development (Greenwald, 1990). Research indicates many positive correlates of high family functioning. For example, families who function well report fewer negative states when they are together, spend more time doing positive activities, and experience fewer daily hassles (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990, as cited in Crnic & Acevedo, 1995; Larson & Richards, 1994). On the flip side, compromised family functioning is associated with child psychological and behavioural problems (Culligan, 1998; Hetherington, 1999; Jaycox & Repetti, 1993; Kinsman, Wildman, & Smucker, 1999; Larson & Richards, 1994; Lindahl & Malik, 1999; Mash, 1984).

General family functioning was assessed using the General Functioning Subscale of the Family Assessment Device (FAD; Epstein, N. B., Baldwin, L. M., & Bishop, D. S., 1983). The FAD is a 60-item self-report measure based on the McMaster Model of Family Functioning and is designed to assess healthy family functioning. The General Functioning Subscale used in the present survey is a 10-item subscale of the FAD that represents an overall measure of family health/pathology.

### Methodological Note:

In the present survey, an 11-point scale (0 to 10) was used rather than the original FAD 4-point scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree). As such, it is not possible to compare our scores to standardized means, and established cut-offs. Instead, we chose to classify families as “high functioning” if their mean score was 8 or above; middle functioning if the mean was 6.0-7.9, and low functioning, 5.9 or less.

### Findings:

61% of families were classified as high functioning,  
27% were classified as middle functioning,  
12% were classified as low functioning.

Given the documented advantages of growing up in family environments deemed “high functioning”, it is concerning that close to 40% of the families surveyed did not fit this description.

### Family Functioning - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Far fewer single mothers (49%) reported high family functioning compared to married parents (63%). While this finding might, on the surface, seem to reflect problems between single mothers and their ex-spouses, this interpretation is unlikely given that respondents were specifically asked to rate relationships and interactions between family members currently living in the home. As such, issues with ex-spouses would not be expected to be reflected in the family functioning score.
- More parents of younger children reported high family functioning than parents of older children.
- The number of children in the home did not affect the percentages of families reporting high family functioning.
- Among first-time parents, the youngest and oldest subgroups were least likely to report high family functioning.
- Low income and education were related to lower family functioning.
- Fewer part-time mothers reported high family functioning than either stay-at-home or full-time mothers.

## Family Functioning - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Fathers %	Married Mother %	Single Mothers %
High family functioning	61	62	63	49

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
High family functioning	63	58	58	61	53	63	50

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
High family functioning	57	65	55	66

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
High family functioning	59	60	63	52

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



### 3. PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT CHILDREN AND DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned, parenting knowledge plays an important role in building the foundation for parenting behaviours. Research indicates that parents use their beliefs and understanding of child development in everyday life to guide their interactions with their children (Grusec & Kuczynski, 1997; Sigel, McGillicuddy-DeLisi, & Goodnow, 1992). To the extent that parents are knowledgeable about how babies and very young children develop, and are aware of the important connections between a child's experiences and their developmental outcomes, they will be in a better position to respond to their children, right from birth, in ways that foster healthy social, emotional and intellectual development. Yet, very little is known about Canadian parents' knowledge of healthy child development. How much do Canadian parents know about important areas of parenting and child development that have been well researched and documented?

#### a. WHAT PARENTS KNOW

##### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST FIVE YEARS

We provided parents with a series of statements about the early years and their role as parents during these years. Parents indicated their agreement by providing a value ranging from “completely disagree” (0) to “completely agree” (100). Those parents scoring 80-100 were considered to “strongly agree” with the statement.

On a very general level, parents were found to be knowledgeable about the importance of the early years, and about their own influence as parents.

79% of parents strongly agreed with the statement: “The years from birth through age five are absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult”.

84% strongly agreed with the statement: “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”.

Parents were also asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following two statements about the influence of both mothers and fathers: “The influence of a mother during a child's early years (birth through age five) is absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult”. and “The influence of a father during a child's early years (birth through age five) is absolutely critical to the way a child turns out as an adult”.

While 82% of parents felt that the **mother's** influence during the child's early years was critical for future development, fewer parents (73%) felt that the **father's** influence was equally critical. In other words, there was significantly greater agreement among all parents that mothers, as compared to fathers, were critically important to the development of children.

In sum, the vast majority of parents recognized the importance of the early years to a child's future development, and the vital role of parents (especially mothers) during a child's first five years. This again speaks to the investment and commitment made by Canadian parents of young children to their role and responsibility.

### **The Importance of the First Five Years - Summary of Subgroup Findings**

- Married mothers and fathers did not differ in their beliefs about the early years. It is noteworthy that the perceived discrepancy between the importance of mothers and that of fathers was as pronounced for married fathers as it was for married mothers. In other words, even fathers did not feel that their role was as important or influential as the mothers' role.
- Single mothers were, not surprisingly, the least likely group to believe that the father's influence was critical to children's development. They were also more likely than married parents to believe in the critical importance of mothers.
- Experience in the parenting role (i.e., the age of one's youngest child, and the number of children in the home), did not influence parents' beliefs about the early years.
- Within the first-time parent group, older parents had greater conviction about the importance of the early years, and had a slightly more positive view of the father's influence compared to young first-timers.
- Household income and parent's education did not influence parenting beliefs about the early years.
- Fewer stay-at-home mothers believed in the importance of the early years, and in the importance of parents during these years compared to mothers who work. Of the working mothers, those working part-time were most certain that the early years were important, and that parents (both mothers and fathers) played a critical role in children's development.

## The Importance of the First Five Years - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Importance of early years	79	80	78	78
Parents' influence is critical	84	83	84	86
Mother's influence is critical	82	82	81	89
Father's influence is critical	73	73	74	46*

\* Given the very low percentage of single mothers who believed in the critical importance of fathers, it was decided to reduce any confound effects by removing this group of mothers from further analyses in which the "father influence" question was examined.

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

<i>Strongly agree</i>	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Importance of early years	81	77	81	78	77	81	84
Parents' influence is critical	85	83	85	83	82	85	82
Mother's influence is critical	82	83	82	83	81	81	85
Father's influence is critical*	74	72	71	74	70	71	75

\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

<i>Strongly agree</i>	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Importance of early years	79	81	80	80
Parents' influence is critical	84	85	87	84
Mother's influence is critical	83	80	84	84
Father's influence is critical*	70	73	76	75

\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses

### Mother's Employment Status:

<i>Strongly agree</i>	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Importance of early years	78	71	80	86
Parents' influence is critical	85	81	86	89
Mother's influence is critical	83	83	81	86
Father's influence is critical*	74	73	71	76

\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



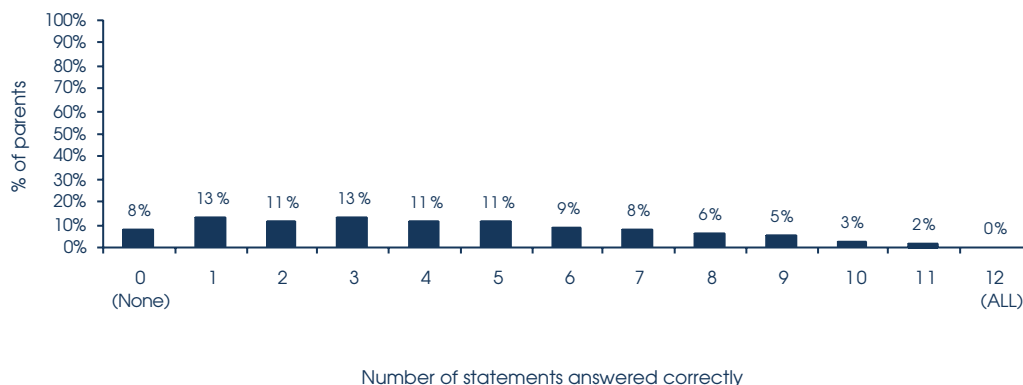
## b. WHAT PARENTS DON'T KNOW

We gave parents a series of factual statements about children's social, emotional, and intellectual development, and asked them to tell us, in each case, whether they agreed completely with the statement, disagreed completely with the statement, or were somewhere in between.

The 12 statements focused mostly on the very early years, because research has shown that these years build the foundation for later development. We included only those statements that could be fully supported by the research literature. As such, our primary interest was in determining the percentage of Canadian parents of young children who were completely certain that any given statement was true or false, depending on the statement. For each statement, parents responded on a Likert-scale ranging from 0 (completely disagree) to 10 (completely agree). We are reporting on those parents who scored either "10" or "0" (again, depending on the statement).

While we would like to have seen the majority of Canadian parents falling into such an "informed" group, this was not what we found. In fact, a relatively small percentage of Canadian parents were completely sure of the accuracy of many of the facts we presented to them. Some statements were better understood than others, with the percentage of parents who were completely knowledgeable ranging from as high as 84% to as low as 8%, with an average of 36% across the 12 statements. Another way of describing the results is to consider the percentage of parents who were completely sure about the accuracy of 1 of the 12 statements, 2 of the 12, 3 of the 12, and so on. As can be seen in the figure below, no parents answered all 12 statements correctly. Only 10% answered at least 75% of the statements correctly. If we consider those parents who answered at least 50% of the statements correctly, the percentage is still very low - only 33%!

Percentage of parents who were completely certain about the accuracy of 1 statement, 2 statements, and so on



### **Factual Statements - Summary of Subgroup Findings**

- There were no differences found in correct responses for any of the parent subgroups examined: marital status, sex of parent, age of youngest child, number

of children in the family, age of first-time parent, income level, education level, or mother's employment status. In other words, when assessing relatively specific factual knowledge about child development, all parents received similarly low scores.

## Factual Knowledge - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
<i>Average % correct responses across items</i>	ALLParents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Overall knowledge – 12 items	36	34	36	37

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
<i>Average % correct responses across items</i>	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Overall knowledge – 12 items	37	34	36	36	35	37	33

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
<i>Average % correct responses across items</i>	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Overall knowledge – 12 items	36	35	34	37

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mothers' Employment Status			
<i>Average % correct responses across items</i>	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Overall knowledge – 12 items	36	36	35	34

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Research strongly supports the important influence of the environment on young children's development. Environmental influences include a range of stimuli that children encounter from the moment of birth, ranging from sights and sounds to parents' interactions with them. Parents' awareness of the important connections between the child's environment and the child's development is critical to their understanding and knowledge in the parenting role. Six of the 12 knowledge statements specifically addressed the effects of environmental influences on children's development.

### Environmental Influence Knowledge Statements

(the correct answer is indicated in the brackets following each statement)

1. Babies are learning from the moment they are born. (TRUE)
2. Parents' emotional closeness with their baby can strongly influence that child's intellectual development. (TRUE)
3. The things a child experiences before the age of three will greatly influence his/her ability to do well in school. (TRUE)
4. If a baby does not receive appropriate stimulation – like being read to, played with, or touched and held – his/her brain will not develop as well as the brain of a baby who does receive these types of stimulation. (TRUE)
5. Every baby is born with a certain level of intelligence, which cannot be either increased or decreased by how parents interact with him/her. (FALSE)
6. The more stimulation a baby receives by holding and talking to them, the more you spoil them. (FALSE)

### Findings:

Across the six statements, correct responses averaged only 48%.

In other words, when asked about the influence of the environment on children's development, parents were only correct about half the time.

The information that follows shows the statements we presented to parents, what is at issue in each statement, the research that supports or disputes each statement, why it is important for parents to have this knowledge, and the proportion of parents who were completely certain about the correct response for each statement. Accompanying each finding is a graph showing the percentage of parents who responded within each of the response choices.

1) *“Babies are learning from the moment they are born.”*

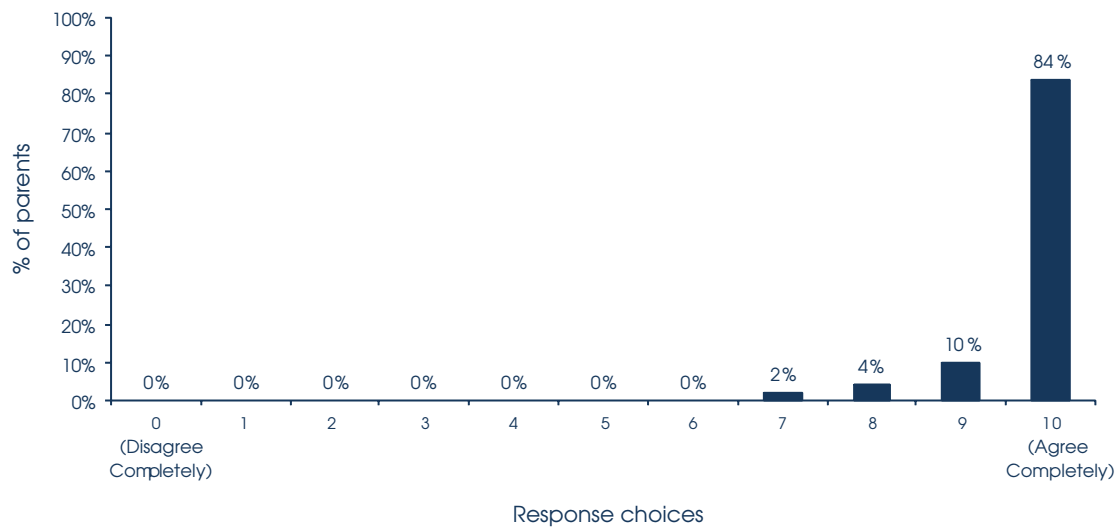
This statement speaks to parents’ beliefs about whether newborns are basically unaware of what’s going on around them, or are able to take in, respond to, and learn from their environment right from birth.

Research clearly indicates that babies are actively learning about the world around them, through each of their five senses, from the moment of birth (sources: Moon & Fifer, 1990; Porter & Winberg, 1999; Schaal, Marlier, & Soussignan, 2000; Walton, Armstrong, & Bower, 1998). To the extent that parents are aware of

this important fact, they will be more likely to assume an active role in providing stimulation to their infants from the very beginning.

Indeed, this is one aspect of child development that parents know best. The majority of parents surveyed-84%-were completely sure that this statement was true, indicating that Canadian parents are well informed that babies are capable of learning right from birth. The figure below shows that most parents chose the response associated with the highest level of knowledge, and that the remainder, while somewhat less sure, were leaning in the right direction.

Statement: Babies are learning from the moment they are born (TRUE)



2) *“Parents’ emotional closeness with their baby can strongly influence that child’s intellectual development.”*

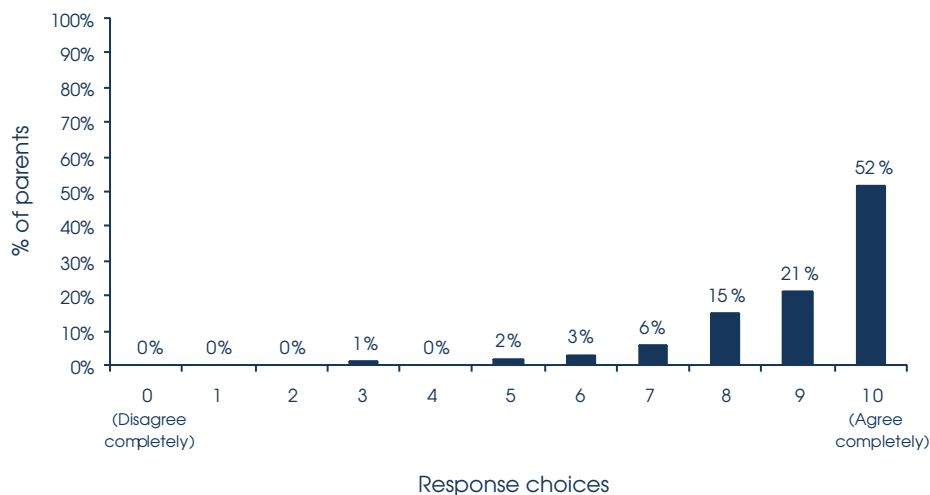
This statement assesses parents’ ideas about whether the quality of the parent-infant emotional relationship has an impact on children’s intellectual development, or whether these two domains of development are not strongly related.

In child development studies, emotional closeness with parents has been shown to make a major, positive contribution to intellectual development (sources: Liang & Sugawara, 1996; Murray, Fiori-Cowley, Hooper, & Cooper, 1996). For example, children whose parents were affectionate, accepting, and “tuned in” to the

child’s emotional state at one point in time eventually developed better cognitive skills than those whose parents were less affectionate, less accepting, and less tuned in to their children’s inner states. If parents are aware that their emotional closeness with their baby can not only make their child feel secure, but can also enrich their child’s intellectual development, they will be more likely to engage in behaviours that will promote these positive outcomes.

The figure below indicates that about half (52%) of the parents we surveyed agreed completely with this statement. The remaining parents were less sure about the connection between parent-child emotional closeness and children’s intellectual development.

Statement: *Parents’ emotional closeness with their baby can strongly influence that child’s intellectual development (TRUE)*



3) *“If a baby does not receive appropriate stimulation—like being read to, played with, or touched and held—his or her brain will not develop as well as the brain of a baby who does receive these kinds of stimulation.”*

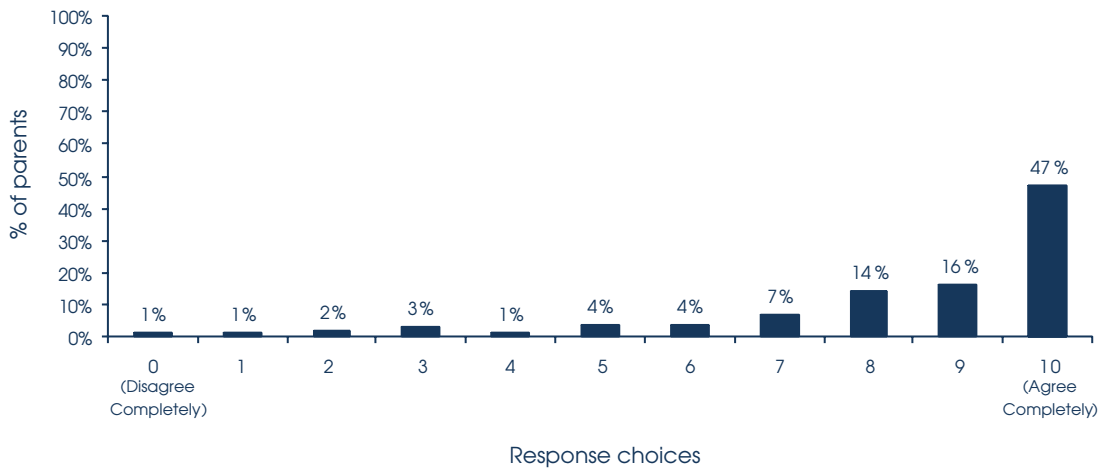
This statement addresses parents’ opinions about whether a baby’s brain requires certain caregiving experiences in order to develop properly, or whether the brain develops according to a predetermined plan regardless of what a baby experiences.

Evidence from science continues to accumulate showing that this statement is true. The most direct evidence comes from animal studies: if young animals are deprived of appropriate experiences, their brains will be compromised in terms of size, weight, amount of certain brain chemicals, and number of connections

between neurons, all of which can contribute to compromises in behavioural development (source: Diamond, 1988). Researchers who study humans have been able to infer parallels with respect to effects of lack of appropriate stimulation on brain development and behaviour in human children. The things a child sees, touches, feels, and thinks, translate into electrical activity in the synapses of the brain, and if certain synapses are rarely activated they will stop functioning and die; in turn, it becomes harder for the child to develop certain skills (sources: Caulfield, 2000; Eliot, 1999; Hamblin & Hamblin, 1984).

As shown in the figure below, just short of half (47%) of the parents we surveyed were completely sure that appropriate stimulation is essential for normal brain development.

Statement: If a baby does not receive appropriate stimulation, his/her brain will not develop as well as the brain of a baby who does receive these kinds of stimulation (TRUE)



4) *“The more stimulation a baby receives by holding and talking to them, the more you spoil them.”*

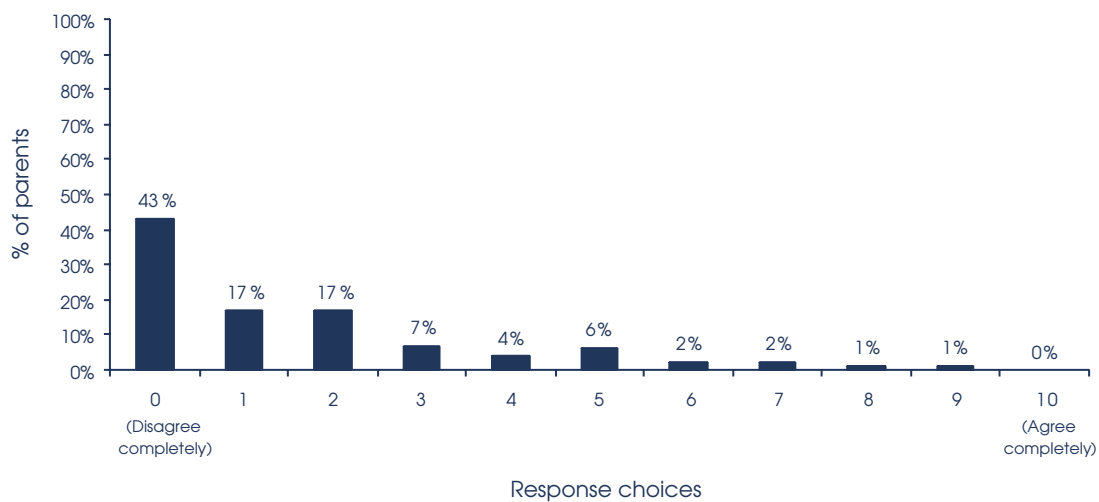
This statement speaks to parents’ beliefs about the effects of frequently picking up a baby and talking to them—does this spoil the baby, or does it encourage healthy development?

Child development research indicates that responding to infants by holding and talking to them are excellent ways to promote healthy development. And, the more

quickly and more often caregivers pick up a crying baby, the less the baby cries over time (sources: Bell & Ainsworth, 1972; Solomon, Martin, & Cotto, 1993). Because being held and talked to have such beneficial effects on infant development, it is very important for parents to know that these types of responses do not spoil their baby.

As indicated in the figure below, only 43% of respondents were certain that this statement was false.

Statement: The more stimulation a baby receives by holding and talking to them, the more you spoil them (FALSE)



5) *“The things a child experiences before the age of three will greatly influence his or her ability to do well in school.”*

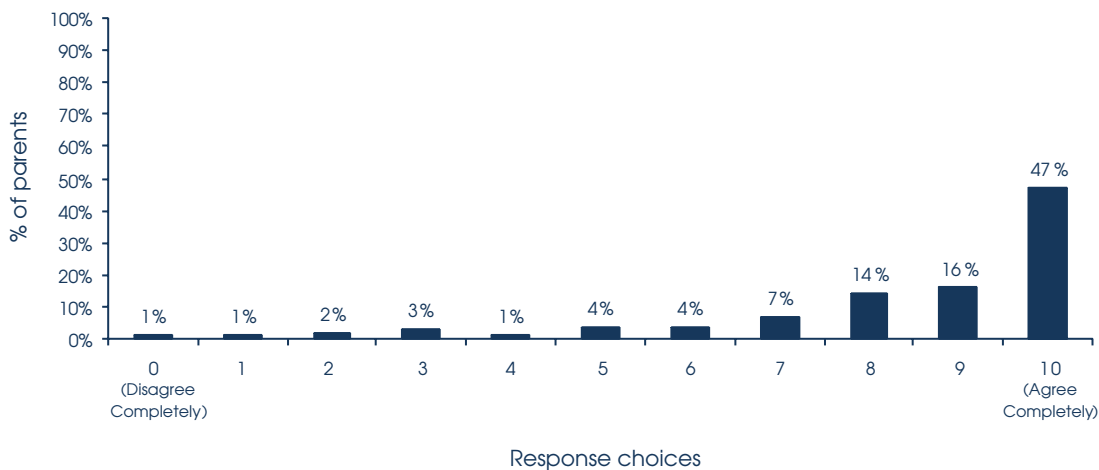
This statement addresses parents’ opinions about whether early experiences with people, places, and things strongly affect a child’s ability to perform well in school in the future, or whether these experiences have only moderate or little bearing on school performance.

Research on child development indicates that this statement is true: early experiences have a significant impact on children’s later school performance (sources: Bradley, Caldwell, & Rock, 1988; Cary, 1987; Coates & Lewis, 1984; Eliot, 1999). For example, positive early experiences-such as a healthy prenatal environment; adequate nutrition; plenty of opportunities to explore a

variety of playthings within a variety of social settings; exposure to a range of experiences; and, most important, interactions with caregivers who are nurturing, involved, responsive, and clear in their expectations for appropriate behaviour-are related to advantages such as increased spatial-temporal and language skills, higher IQ, and fewer behavioural problems. A parent’s opinion about this issue influences the kind of interactions they will have with their infant or toddler, and can play a role in many of the decisions parents make regarding their young children.

However, as observed in the figure below, only 34% of the parents assessed knew this for sure. Others were not completely sure or were misinformed about this fact.

Statement: If a baby does not receive appropriate stimulation, his/her brain will not develop as well as the brain of a baby who does receive these kinds of stimulation (TRUE)



6) *“Every baby is born with a certain level of intelligence, which cannot be either increased or decreased by how parents interact with him or her.”*

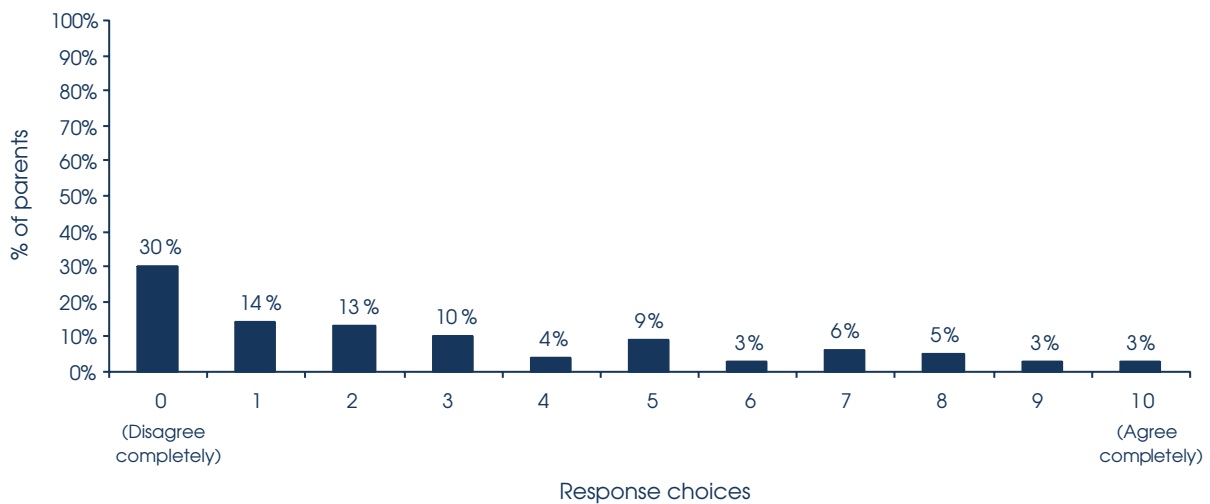
This statement focuses on parents’ beliefs about how much, if any, impact their behaviours with their child have on the child’s intelligence. For example, some people believe that a child’s intelligence is set at birth, whereas others believe that intelligence can be influenced by the interactions parents have with children.

Studies on parents and children have shown that the statement is false; in other words, the way parents

interact with their infants has a significant impact on infants’ subsequent intellectual abilities and IQ (sources: de Roiste & Bushnell, 1996; Diamond, 1988; Eliot, 1999; Hamblin & Hamblin, 1984; Hart & Risley, 1992; Wijnroks, 1998). For example, infants whose parents were more nurturing, involved, and responsive subsequently showed enhanced intellectual development, including higher IQ scores. If parents understand this connection, they will be more likely to interact in ways that foster their child’s intelligence.

As shown in the figure below, we found that less than one-third (30%) of the parents surveyed were completely sure that the statement is false.

Statement: Every baby is born with a certain level of intelligence, which cannot be either increased or decreased by how parents interact with him or her (FALSE)



## KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HOW CHILDREN DEVELOP

Six of the 12 statements were included to tap parents' knowledge about developmental competencies of young children. To the extent that parents are unaware or misinformed about children's capabilities at various ages, they will have inaccurate expectations for their children, and will not be in a position to respond appropriately and sensitively to their children's cues. In order to assess parents' knowledge of child development during the early years, the following six statements were presented (the correct response is indicated in brackets following each statement):

### Child Development Knowledge Statements

(the correct answer is indicated in brackets following each statement)

1. A baby can't communicate much until he/she is able to speak at least a few words. (FALSE)
2. Infants as young as six months consciously know how to manipulate parents. (FALSE)
3. The average one-year old can say one or two words, but understands many more words and phrases. (TRUE)
4. One-year olds often cooperate and share when they play together. (FALSE)
5. Intellectual development is the most important part of a child's being ready for school. (FALSE)
6. By age one, a baby's brain is fully developed. (FALSE)

## Findings:

Parents' knowledge was even more limited with respect to child development than it was for statements about environmental influence.

Across the six Child Development statements, correct responses averaged only 23%!

A more detailed look at the individual statements pertaining to Child Development follows:

1) "A baby can't communicate much until he or she is able to speak at least a few words."

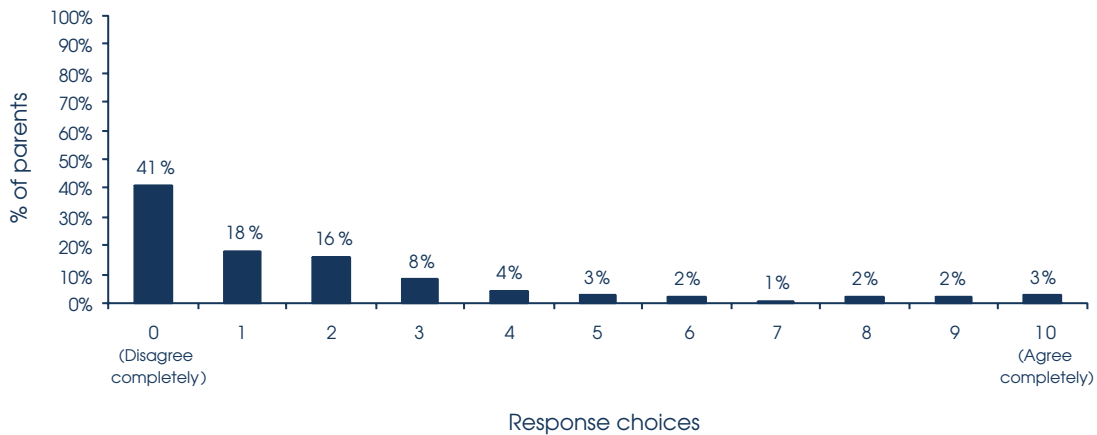
This statement assesses parents' understanding about preverbal infants' ability to communicate-whether these infants are essentially unable to communicate with the people around them, or have some way of making themselves understood.

Research shows that long before their first words appear, infants are capable of telling others a great deal about what they're thinking, feeling, and needing, using facial expressions, sounds and cries, as well as

gestures and body language (sources: Bretherton, 1991; Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001). Caregivers who understand this will be better positioned to recognize and respond sensitively to their child's cues and to ultimately promote healthy development. Caregivers with this understanding also find that caring for an infant is more rewarding, because they can more easily help the infant to feel content.

As shown in the figure below, only 41% of parents were certain that this statement was false.

Statement: A baby can't communicate much until he or she is able to speak at least a few words (FALSE)



2) *“The average one-year-old can say one or two words, but understands many more words and phrases.”*

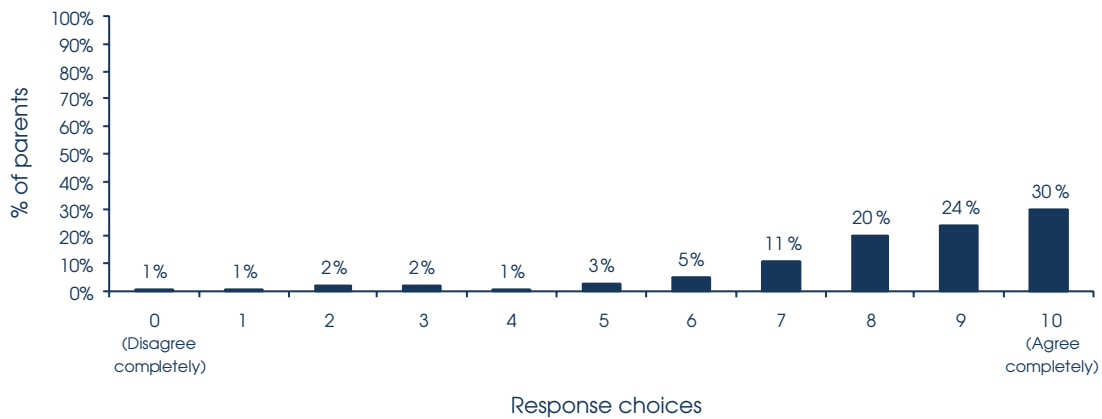
This statement speaks to parents’ ideas about one-year-olds’ language production and comprehension, and whether one outpaces the other.

Child development studies show that sometime after their first birthday, children are able to understand a

large number of words and phrases-many more than they can actually say (source: Weitzman, 1992). Parents who understand this fact will be more likely to talk to their toddlers using a wide variety of words and sentences, thereby helping to expand their child’s vocabulary and foster language development.

Just under one-third (30%) of our respondents were certain that this statement is true.

Statement: The average one-year-old can say one or two words, but understands many more words and phrases (TRUE)



3) "By age one, a baby's brain is fully developed."

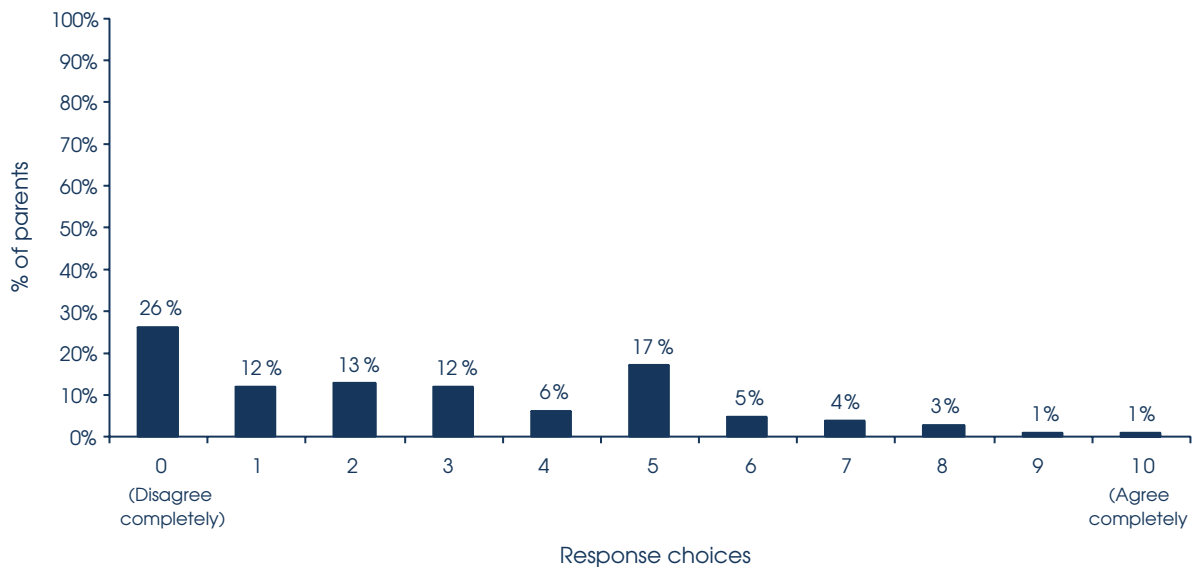
This statement assesses parents' awareness of brain development-whether they think that a one-year-old's brain is fully developed, or that the brain is not fully developed until some time after the infancy period.

Scientific research shows that the human brain continues to mature and develop throughout the lifespan. More specifically, in addition to the formation of

important connections and pathways, significant structural developments continue to be established in the human brain until the adolescent years (source: Eliot, 1999).

Only one-quarter (26%) of the respondents were sure that this statement is false. The figure indicates that among the remaining parents, there was a great deal of variation in opinion about this issue.

Statement: By age one, a baby's brain is fully developed (FALSE)



4) *“Infants as young as six months consciously know how to manipulate parents.”*

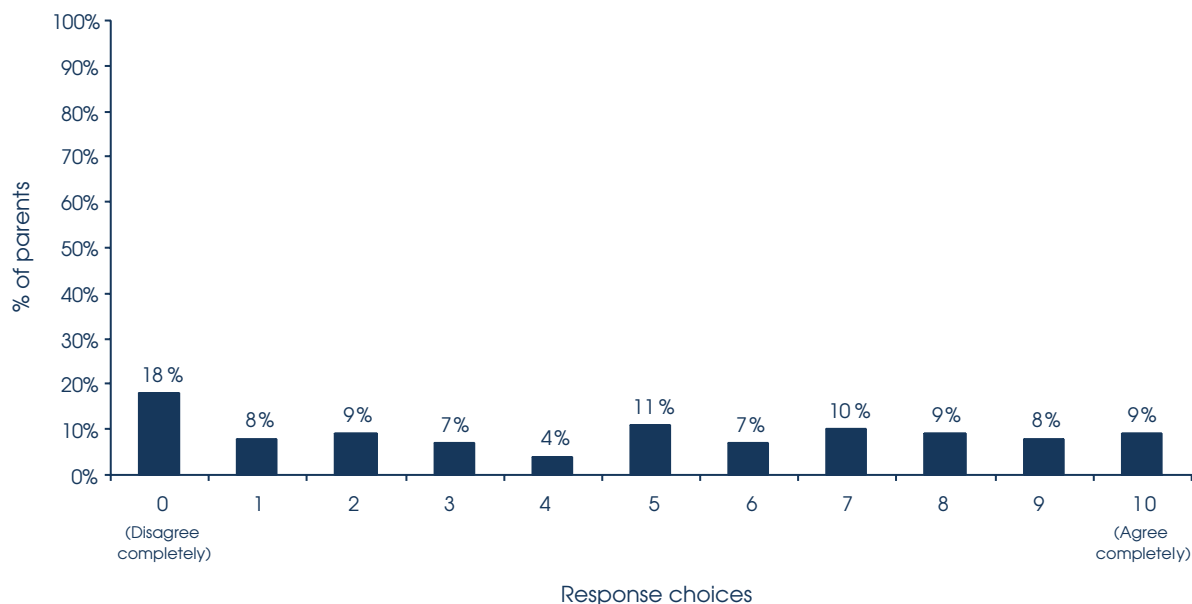
This statement focuses on parents’ opinions about how early infants are capable of intentionally manipulating others’ behaviour. Some parents believe that infants as young as six months know how to plan their actions so as to “control” their parents’ behaviour, whereas others believe that infants this young do not know how to do this.

Studies show that this statement is false. Six-month-old infants are not capable of planning a series of events so that they can control another person’s actions-an ability that does not emerge until closer to 18 months (sources: Bretherton, 1991; Lewis &

Ramsay, 1999). In our society it’s a pervasive myth that very young infants intentionally try to manipulate parents. It’s important for parents to understand that infants’ signals indicate a genuine need for parental attention and are not driven by a deliberate plan to control the parent. Parents who do not understand this often misinterpret their infant’s actions, which can lead to inappropriate responses and compromised infant development.

Only 18% of parents in our survey were certain that the above statement is false. The relatively even distribution of responses in the figure shows that there was a wide assortment of parental beliefs about the development of children’s ability to manipulate parents - with many parents probably guessing.

Statement: Infants as young as six months consciously know how to manipulate parents (FALSE)



5) *“One-year-olds often cooperate and share when they play together.”*

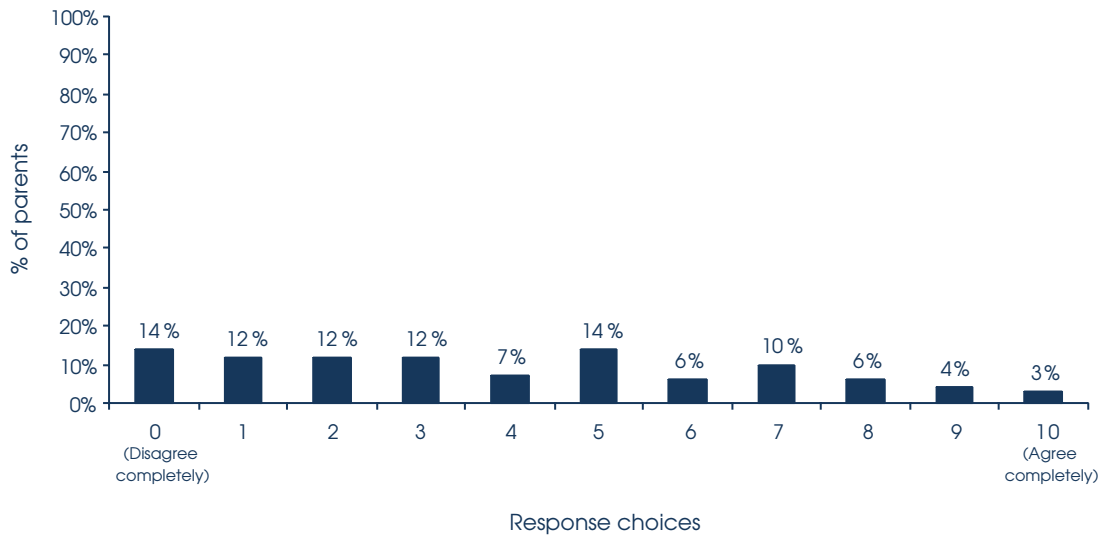
This statement addresses parents’ expectations about the age at which children are able to routinely cooperate and share toys with other children-whether one-year-olds should be able to do this, or are too young to have developed this ability.

Research indicates that this statement is false. One-year-olds are too young to cooperate and share toys-a skill that is not well developed until three or even four years of age (sources: Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Eisenberg, Losoya & Guthrie, 1997; Gonzalez-Mena &

Eyer, 1997). A parent’s opinion on this issue affects whether their expectations are in line with what children are capable of doing at a given developmental stage. If expectations are too high for the age of the child, parents may misinterpret their child’s actions as a sign of willful misbehaviour or selfishness.

Only a very small minority of parents we assessed-14% -chose the response indicating knowledge about this issue. Looking at the pattern of responses in the figure, it appears that most parents were feeling unsure of how to respond, resulting in a random distribution of responses.

Statement: One-year-olds often cooperate and share when they play together (FALSE)



6) *“Intellectual development is the most important part of a child’s being ready for school.”*

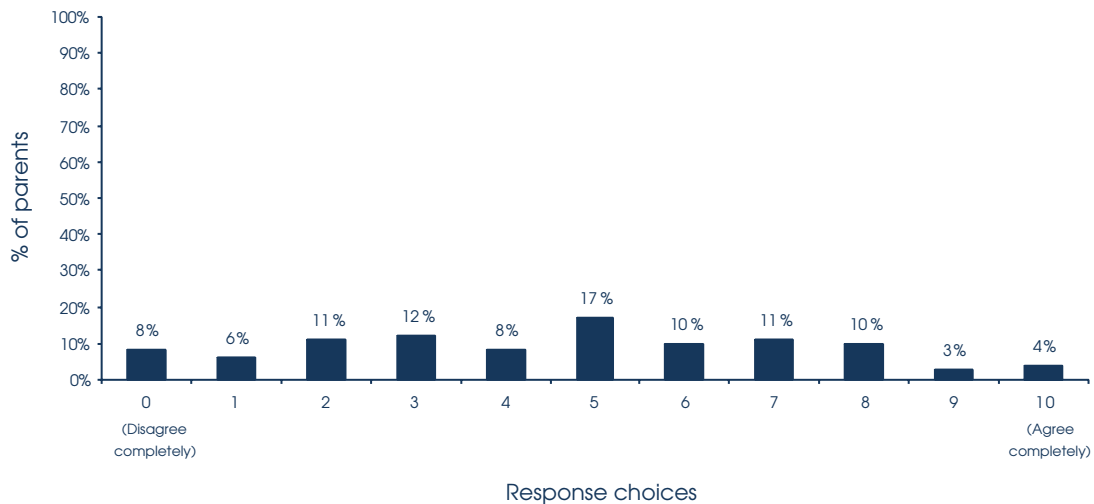
This statement assesses parents’ position with respect to the commonly-held belief that knowledge of letters, numbers, shapes, and so forth—in other words, intellectual development—is the most important aspect of development in determining if a child is ready to enter school.

Although researchers have not always agreed about what factors are the most important, the most recent research is clear that readiness to enter kindergarten is not best facilitated by skills related to intellectual competence alone. In fact, this research shows that

social and emotional skills are as important for academic success as intellectual skills (sources: Cavanaugh, Lippitt, & Moyo, 2000; Huffman, Mehlinger, & Kerivan, 2000). It is necessary for parents to be aware of this fact, as this knowledge will affect how they prepare their children during the preschool years.

It turns out that a very small number of parents (only 8%) were certain that intellectual development is not the most important part of school readiness. The distribution of responses in the figure below suggests that this statement, above all others, caused the most uncertainty among parents.

Statement: Intellectual development is the most important part of a child’s being ready for school (FALSE)



## 4. PARENTS' CONFIDENCE IN THEIR KNOWLEDGE

The previous section showed that parents lack important knowledge about how children grow and develop. But, do they know they lack this information?

In support of the results from the knowledge questions, pointing to parents' lack of knowledge about child development, are results from a different set of questions that directly asked parents to indicate:

“How sure do you feel that you know what signs to watch for that would indicate that a baby or young child’s [Physical/Emotional/Social/Intellectual] Development is healthy and about right for his/her age?”

Parents indicated their degree of certainty for each developmental domain. As seen below, while about

60% of parents reported some degree of certainty (“Pretty sure”) across all domains, the percentages of those who felt very confident in their knowledge (“Totally sure”) were low, and the percentages of parents who reported little confidence in their knowledge (“Not sure at all ” or “Only somewhat sure”) was substantial. Indeed, with the exception of physical development, there were significantly more parents who 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%). As mentioned, 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 confidence in their knowledge in this area.

**Table III. Parents' Reports of Confidence in their Knowledge about Child Development**

Developmental Domain	High confidence in their knowledge “Totally sure”	Some confidence in their knowledge “Pretty sure”	Low confidence in their knowledge “Only somewhat sure” “Not sure at all”
Physical	29%	64%	7%
Social	13%	62%	25%
Emotional	13%	59%	28%
Intellectual	17%	60%	23%

## Parents Confidence in their Knowledge - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- In general, all parents felt at least reasonably confident that they would know what signs to look for to indicate healthy physical development in their children.
- More fathers expressed low confidence in their knowledge of emotional development compared to mothers. Across the social, emotional, and intellectual domains, married mothers were more inclined to feel they lacked confidence in their knowledge about child development compared to single mothers, whose reported confidence in their knowledge was consistently higher than that of married parents.
- Neither the age of one's youngest child, nor the number of children in the home, influenced parents' confidence in their knowledge across domains of development. This runs contrary to the popular belief that experience as a parent increases knowledge about children and what to expect. In fact, this finding supports other results presented later in the report indicating that confidence in the parenting role in general does not increase as a result of experience in the parenting role.
- Older first-time parents, most notably those over 35 years of age, were more likely than younger first-timers to report low confidence in their knowledge of child development. This finding also supports other findings in the report in which older first-time parents were less likely to feel confident in the parenting role in general.
- Higher income parents, compared to low income parents, were more likely to say that they did not have adequate confidence in their knowledge of healthy child development. Differences were not generally found with parents' education level, although there was one exception: Highly educated parents were more likely to claim low confidence in their knowledge in the emotional domain than parents with low education.
- Very few differences were found in parents' confidence in their knowledge when working status of the mother was considered.

## Parents Confidence in their Knowledge - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
<i>Unsure of signs that indicate healthy development</i>				
Physical Development	7	10	6	5
Social Development	25	28	25	19
Emotional Development	28	35	24	18
Intellectual Development	23	24	25	16

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
<i>Unsure of signs that indicate healthy development</i>							
Physical Development	7	8	9	7	12	7	11
Social Development	25	25	27	25	12	30	33
Emotional Development	27	29	28	28	18	27	39
Intellectual Development	24	23	26	22	23	22	38

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
<i>Unsure of signs that indicate healthy development</i>				
Physical Development	6	6	9	6
Social Development	21	28	26	26
Emotional Development	21	33	25	32
Intellectual Development	19	26	25	23

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
<i>Unsure of signs that indicate healthy development</i>				
Physical Development	5	6	2	9
Social Development	23	21	25	27
Emotional Development	23	23	26	25
Intellectual Development	23	23	24	26

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## 5. PARENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND INFLUENCE DILEMMA

We asked parents to tell us the one area of development (social, emotional, intellectual or physical) in which they felt they had the **most knowledge**, as well as the one area they felt they had the **most influence**.

The pattern of findings indicates that parents are in a genuine dilemma, feeling they have the most influence in areas in which they are not especially knowledgeable (most notably social and emotional development), and conversely, reporting the most knowledge of the one area they feel they have little influence (physical development).

**Table IV. Parents' Reports of Having "Most Knowledge" and "Most Influence" by Area of Child Development**

Areas of Child Development	Area of Most Knowledge	Area of Greatest Influence
Physical	55%	6%
Emotional	18%	44%
Social	12%	32%
Intellectual	15%	18%

Specifically, the majority (55%) of parents chose physical development as the area in which they had the most knowledge, yet only 6% felt they had the most influence in the area of physical development.

In the area of emotional development, the pattern was reversed, with a full 44% of parents saying that this was the area in which they had the greatest influence, yet only 18% of parents reported having the most knowledge in the area of emotional development.

Similarly, 32% of parents reported the greatest influence in the area of social development, while only 12% reported the most knowledge in that area.

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 struggling.

## Knowledge / Influence Dilemma – Summary of Subgroup Findings

- While there were differences in the absolute numbers of parents selecting each of the four domains of knowledge and influence, there were many similarities across parents in the rank ordering of domains. Across all subgroups, physical development was consistently chosen as the area of development in which parents had the most knowledge. With respect to influence, emotional development was, with only one exception (first-timers, aged 35+), most often chosen as the area in which parents had the most influence, followed by social development, then intellectual, and lastly, physical development.
- The emotional domain presented the most clear differences across subgroups: Mothers, and especially single mothers, first-time parents, and especially young first-timers, low income and low education parents, and stay-at-home mothers were all more likely than their comparison groups (i.e., fathers, married mothers, parents with more than one child, older first-timers, high income and high education parents, and working mothers) to rate emotional development as the area of development in which they had the most knowledge and the most influence.
- Highly educated parents, and those first-time parents over the age of 35, were more likely to feel that intellectual development was the area in which they had the greatest influence as a parent. On the flip side, single mothers were less likely to feel that they were highly influential in affecting their child's intellectual development, compared to married parents.
- In the area of social development, more of the older first-time parents reported high knowledge and high influence, compared to younger new parents. As well, parents with a higher family income felt more influential in their child's social development than those with lower incomes.
- Highly educated parents, and those with higher incomes, were more inclined than their counterparts to identify physical development as the area they had the most knowledge and information. On the other hand, single mothers, and older first-time parents, were less likely than their counterparts to believe they had the most knowledge about physical development.

## Knowledge / Influence Dilemma – Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

Area of most knowledge and information	ALL Parents %	Marital Status and Sex of Parent		
		Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Physical Development	55	58	55	45
Social Development	12	13	11	13
Emotional Development	18	13	21	27
Intellectual Development	15	16	13	15
<i>Area of greatest influence as a parent</i>				
Physical Development	6	9	4	3
Social Development	32	34	31	29
Emotional Development	44	38	46	57
Intellectual Development	18	20	19	10

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parents:

Area of most knowledge and information	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Physical Development	57	53	53	56	55	54	47
Social Development	9	15	11	12	4	11	21
Emotional Development	19	18	21	17	30	19	18
Intellectual Development	15	14	15	15	11	16	14
<i>Area of greatest influence as a parent</i>							
Physical Development	7	5	6	6	7	7	2
Social Development	34	31	28	34	23	27	36
Emotional Development	43	45	48	42	58	49	35
Intellectual Development	17	19	18	18	12	17	27

## Knowledge / Influence Dilemma – Subgroup Findings - Cont'd

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
<i>Area of most knowledge and information</i>				
Physical Development	51	60	51	63
Social Development	11	11	13	8
Emotional Development	26	13	23	14
Intellectual Development	12	16	13	15
<i>Area of greatest influence as a parent</i>				
Physical Development	6	6	8	5
Social Development	26	36	33	34
Emotional Development	52	39	46	39
Intellectual Development	16	19	13	22

### Mother's Employment Status:

	ALL Mothers %	Mother's Employment Status		
		Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
<i>Area of most knowledge and information</i>				
Physical Development	53	52	53	60
Social Development	11	11	12	11
Emotional Development	23	22	24	14
Intellectual Development	13	15	11	15
<i>Area of greatest influence as a parent</i>				
Physical Development	4	3	4	6
Social Development	31	29	30	31
Emotional Development	49	52	49	44
Intellectual Development	16	16	17	19

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## a. TOPICS OF INTEREST TO PARENTS

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In support of the previous findings in which parents felt they had the most influence, and yet low knowledge about, social and emotional development, are findings from a separate set of questions asking parents to indicate the areas in which they most wanted information and advice. Parents could select up to 10 topics (among 75 choices covering a range of issues and situations). The following five topics were most frequently identified by parents:

- Building children's self-esteem (41%)
- Setting limits with children (38%)
- Raising a kind, caring child (33%)
- Managing my own anger (30%)
- Helping children manage their emotions (29%)

As can be seen, each of the top five topics involves emotional and/or social development - the areas in which parents reported feeling most influential and least knowledgeable.

## 6. PARENTS' CONFIDENCE IN THEIR ROLE

How does all this relate to parents' confidence in the parenting role? Presumably, low levels of knowledge, especially in areas in which parents feel they should be knowledgeable in order to effectively raise their children, will go hand-in-hand with relatively low levels of confidence in the parenting role.

We obtained aggregate scores of parenting confidence at three points in time<sup>4</sup>: a) before the birth of one's first child; b) immediately following the birth of one's first child; and c) currently, based on the following survey items:

### Prebirth Confidence Measure:

- “Before our first baby was born, I felt very prepared for parenthood”

### Postnatal Confidence Composite Measure:

- “After our first baby was born, I felt afraid of doing something wrong”
- “After our first baby was born, I felt afraid of not being a good parent”
- “After our first baby was born, I felt unsure about what to do a lot of the time”

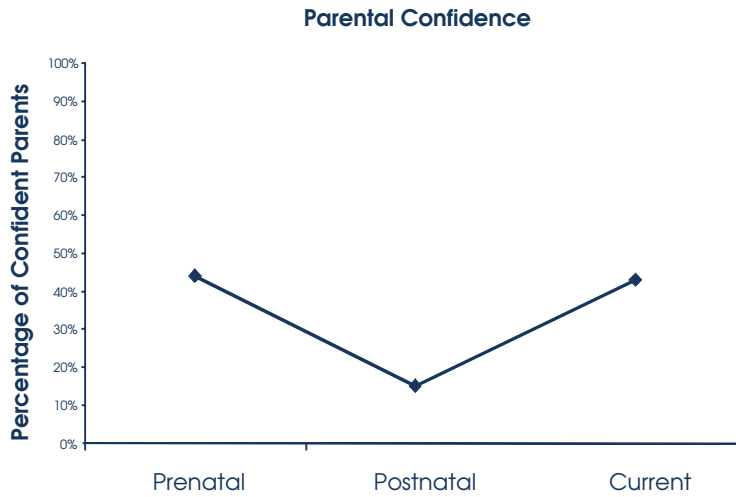
### Current Confidence Composite Measure:

- “I lack confidence in my parenting skills”
- “I don't know how to handle difficult situations with my child”
- “I find it hard to understand my child's feelings and needs”

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<sup>4</sup> Details about statistical procedures taken to determine the validity of these constructs are available upon request.

**Findings:**



Only 44% of parents reported feeling confident in their parenting ability before their first child was born. Parenting confidence plummets dramatically immediately following the birth of one's first child (only 15% of parents reported feeling confident at this time). While the percentage of confident parents is shown to return to the prebirth level, the number of confident parents overall remains low (43%).

## Parents' Confidence in their Role - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- In discussing differences between subgroups, it is noteworthy that no one parent subgroup stood out as being highly confident in their parenting abilities. The numbers of parents reporting high levels of current confidence ranged from as low as 36% (first-timers, aged 35+) to a high of only 50% (first-timers, aged 25-35). In other words, even for the most confident parent subgroup, only 1/2 of its members felt confident in the parenting role.
- While there were differences in confidence for mothers and fathers before the birth of their first child (with more mothers feeling confident than fathers), and immediately following the birth of their first child (with more single mothers reporting confidence than married parents), current levels of confidence were found to be equally low for mothers and fathers, and for single mothers and married parents.
- Experience as a parent (based on age of child and number of children) was surprisingly unrelated to one's level of confidence at any point in time. This finding parallels that reported elsewhere in this report, in which experience in the parenting role did not influence parents' confidence in their knowledge of child development.
- Within the first-time parent group, older parents, compared to younger ones, were consistently less likely to feel confident in the parenting role at all three points in time. Again, this finding is consistent with the "confidence in knowledge" finding reported elsewhere in this report. While more parents under the age of 25 reported high confidence pre-birth compared to older parents, it is noteworthy that these young parents showed the most prominent decline in confidence (a drop of 12% from pre-birth to current confidence).
- Stay-at-home mothers showed the same pattern as young first-timers, that of a marked decline from pre-birth to current confidence. Full-time working mothers were more likely to report high current confidence compared to either stay-at-home mothers or those working part-time.
- Parents' income and education did not affect parenting confidence.

## Parents' Confidence in their Role - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Pre-birth confidence	44	40	48	44
Post-natal confidence	15	14	14	20
Current confidence	43	43	44	42

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parents:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Pre-birth confidence	45	43	45	44	54	44	37
Post-natal confidence	14	16	14	16	13	15	9
Current confidence	45	41	45	42	42	50	36

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Pre-birth confidence	47	42	45	44
Post-natal confidence	17	14	17	15
Current confidence	43	43	41	44

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Pre-birth confidence	47	50	45	44
Post-natal confidence	15	15	16	11
Current confidence	43	40	48	38

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## 7. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONFIDENCE, KNOWLEDGE AND BEHAVIOUR

We were interested in examining the relationships among parenting confidence, knowledge and behaviour. Theoretically, these parenting constructs feed into one another as follows. Parents who lack knowledge about child development will in turn lack confidence in the parenting role, and will not behave as appropriately with their young children as those parents who feel confident and knowledgeable. Ultimately, the behaviour displayed by parents with children will affect child outcome. To the extent that parents' knowledge and confidence impact their parenting behaviour, these same areas (knowledge and confidence) become important targets for intervention.

### Findings:

Correlations were calculated between parents' i) knowledge about child development, based on scores

from the 12 Knowledge Items; ii) current level of confidence; iii) behaviour with their children, including positive/warmth, punitive/angry, and ineffective child management, and iv) behaviour at the family level.

As seen in the correlation table below: Parents' confidence, knowledge and behaviour are significantly related. The lower a parents' knowledge about child development, the lower their confidence in the parenting role. In turn, low confidence and low levels of knowledge were found to be significantly related to poorer parenting practices, and poorer family functioning in general.

**Table V. Correlations Between Parents' Confidence, Knowledge, Parenting Behaviour and Family Functioning**

Parents' -	Current Confidence	Knowledge Items
Knowledge	.27***	--
Behaviour:		
Positive/Warmth	.26***	.22***
Punitive/Angry	-.31***	-.18***
Ineffective Mgmt.	-.23***	-.17***
Family Functioning	.40***	.25***

\*\*\*p ≤ .001



## 8. PARENTS' EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING

To this point, we have been examining parents' behaviour, knowledge, and confidence, and have discussed relationships among these parenting variables. We now turn to the emotional context in which parents are raising children as an important set of factors that likely influence one's ability to parent well, and ultimately affect how children develop.

Considerable research points to the negative impact on parenting and child outcome of such factors as parents' depressive symptoms (Field, 2000; Lovejoy et al., 2000, Oyserman et al., 2000; Pound, 1996; Reis, 1988), time stress (Fagan, 2000; Rodgers-Farmer, 1999), and conflict between spouses over childrearing (see meta-analysis by Reid & Crisafulli, 1990; and more recently Dadds & Powell, 1991; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992; Harrist & Ainslie, 1998; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Lindahl & Malik, 1999; Purcell & Kaslow, 1994). We aimed to determine the extent to which Canadian parents were experiencing these

negative conditions, and to establish within our sample, relationships between these negative states and inappropriate parenting behaviour.

The following table includes correlations between each of the emotional factors that we explored<sup>5</sup>, and parenting behaviour with children, and within the home more generally. As seen, most of the expected relationships between the emotional well-being of parents and their parenting behaviour were significant in the present sample. Generally, relationships were not particularly strong for positive/warm parenting behaviours, but were substantial for negative parenting behaviours, and were especially strong for general family functioning. In other words, the negative emotional state of parents was linked most clearly to their negative patterns of behaviour with their children, and to the overall behavioural and emotional climate of the home in which their children are being raised.

**Table VI. Correlations between Parents' Emotional Well-being, Behaviour and Family Functioning**

Emotional and Well-Being	Parenting Behaviour			Family Functioning
	Positive/Warmth	Punitive/Angry	Ineffective	
Depressive Symptoms	-.08**	.22***	.23***	-.47***
Conflict Between Spouses	-.09***	.23***	.24***	-.52***
Time Stress	-.09***	.14***	.14***	-.26***
External Pressure on how to parent	-.00	.14***	.13***	-.18***

\*\*p ≤ .01

\*\*\*p ≤ .001

The relationships found within our sample support those found in the literature linking the emotional well-being of parents to their behaviour with children. As such, these emotional constructs represent important factors to consider in understanding the manner in which young children are raised during the early years.

<sup>5</sup> The measures of emotional well-being included here will be described subsequently in the report.

## a. DEPRESSIVE SYMPTOMS

The well-documented role of depressive symptoms in parents and child outcome underscores the need to understand the degree of depressive symptomology among Canadian parents. Parents' depressive symptoms were assessed using a shortened version of the standardized Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). This shortened 12-item scale is identical to that used in another large Canadian survey (NLSCY, 1996), and measures such depressive symptoms as appetite loss, sleep disturbances, lack of focused attention, and depressive mood, in the general population. While the CES-D does not measure clinical depression per se, it has been successfully used to identify those respondents experiencing elevated levels of depressive symptoms in large-scale epidemiological surveys.

Participants were asked to rate how often they experienced various symptoms of depression on a 4-point scale with the following response choices: (0) 'rarely, none of time', (1) 'just occasionally', (2) 'some or a little of time', and (3) 'most or all of time'. Responses were summed to create a total score ranging from 0 to 36. A previously established cut-off score of 10 (NLSCY, 1996) was used to identify those parents with elevated depressive symptoms. To put it in context, parents who responded that they "occasionally" experienced 10 or more of the 12 symptoms, for example, would receive a score falling at or above the cut-off, as would parents who experienced four or more of the symptoms "most or all of the time". Thus, the group identified as reporting elevated depressive symptoms included parents whose symptoms ranged from mild to severe.

## Findings:

A sizable number of Canadian parents of young children (27%) were experiencing elevated depressive symptoms at the time of the survey.

It is of interest to note that this percentage is considerably higher than that obtained by the NLSCY study (15%) for mothers of similarly aged children. One difference between our approach and that of NLSCY was purely methodological. They administered the CES-D in a person-to-person interview format, with interviewers reading each question, and having parents respond to them. In our survey, parents completed the CES-D on their own in the privacy of their own home, in complete anonymity. It is possible that parents would be more willing to reveal private internal states of depression more readily in the latter approach. As such, the numbers from this survey, while considerably higher than those obtained in the NLSCY study, maybe more representative of the true state of affairs with respect to depressive symptomology among Canadian parents of young children. Indeed, this survey's numbers are more in line with those obtained by other researchers who have administered the CES-D or equivalent instruments by means of an anonymous self-report format to parents of young children. Results from these studies have found elevated depressive symptoms in about 1/3 to nearly 1/2 of mothers of young children (Heneghan, Silver, Bauman, Westbrook, & Stein, 1998; Kahn et al., 1999; Pound, 1996; Wolf, De Andraca, & Lozoff, under review).

In conjunction with the strong evidence linking depressive symptoms to parenting behaviour, this survey's findings reveal that for over 1/4 of the Canadian families, the depressive symptomology of parents of young children likely plays a role in how their children are being raised.

### Depressive Symptoms - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- More mothers than fathers reported elevated depressive symptoms, and the proportion of single mothers with depressive symptoms was especially high at 48%.
- While depressive symptoms were not influenced by a parent's experience (i.e., age of their youngest child, and number of children in the home), the age of the first-time parent did make a difference, with the youngest first-time parents more likely to experience depressive symptoms than older first-timers.
- Low income and low education were clearly linked to a higher incidence of depressive symptoms among parents. Given that single mothers and young first-timers are overly represented in the low education and low income groups as reported elsewhere in the report, it is likely that their high levels of depressive symptoms are intricately linked to their SES status.
- Of the three working status subgroups, stay-at-home mothers (41%) were most likely, and full-time working mothers (24%), least likely, to experience depressive symptoms.

## Depressive Symptoms - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Martial Status:

		Marital Status and Sex of Parent		
<i>Overall score for ...</i>	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Depressive symptoms (CESD)	27	19	28	48

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
<i>Overall score for ...</i>	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Depressive symptoms (CESD)	26	28	26	28	34	24	22

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
<i>Overall score for ...</i>	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Depressive symptoms (CESD)	38	17	35	19

### Mother's Employment Status:

		Mother's Employment Status		
<i>Overall score for ...</i>	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Depressive symptoms (CESD)	33	41	24	34

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## b. CONFLICT BETWEEN SPOUSES

The connections between marital discord and both parenting behaviour and child outcome have been well-documented; the more discord, the more problems for children (see Dadds & Powell, 1991), and the poorer the parenting behaviour (Lindahl & Malik, 1999). Research also indicates that the less satisfied parents are in their marital relationship, the less satisfied they are in the parenting role (Rogers & White, 1998), and that conflict between spouses over childrearing is a major source of marital discord (Snyder, 1981). Indeed, conflict between spouses about childrearing has been linked to behaviour problems in children (Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992), even after accounting for general marital adjustment (Mahoney, Jouriles, & Scavone, 1997).

We examined parents' satisfaction with their marriage in general, as well as more specific questions pertaining to conflict between spouses over childrearing - including disagreement about parenting approaches, pressure from spouse to change how one parents, and unfair sharing of childrearing responsibilities. (Note: The three measures of childrearing conflict were combined into a composite score for purposes of the correlations presented on p. 64).<sup>6</sup>

### Findings:

This analysis is limited to parents who answered positively to the question, "Are you married?"

Overall, the majority of married parents reported being satisfied with their marital relationship. In response to the item, "All things considered, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your marriage or relationship with your partner?" a full 82% scored 8 or above on a scale ranging from 0 (completely dissatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied).

However, when more specific questions were asked about childrearing conflicts between parents, fairly high levels of dissatisfaction were expressed by parents.

### Disagreement About Parenting

**63% agreed, 37% did not agree with the statement: "My spouse and I almost always agree on how to parent"**

**60% did not feel pressure; 40% did feel pressure: "I often feel pressure from my spouse/partner to change how I parent our child or children"**

### Unfair Sharing of Childrearing Responsibilities

**44% disagreed, 56% agreed with the statement: "I wish my partner would help more with the parenting"**

In sum, about 40% of parents reported disagreements with their spouse about parenting, and over 50% felt that their spouse did not share evenly in childrearing responsibilities.

<sup>6</sup> Specific information about the data reduction techniques used to create this composite is available upon request.

## Conflict Between Spouses - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Generally speaking, married mothers were less likely to be satisfied with their husbands/partners than vice versa. That more fathers than mothers claimed to receive pressure from their spouse likely reflects efforts/pressure on the part of mothers to increase their husbands' help and involvement in the parenting role.
- As children get older, there is less agreement and more perceived pressure between spouses around parenting.
- Among first-time parents, the youngest group, which is predominantly made up of mothers (see Table II), was much less likely to be satisfied with their spouse's contribution than the older groups.

A striking difference was found in the number of parents wanting more help from their spouse: A full 76% of the youngest first-timers expressed such a desire, compared to 56% of the middle group, and only 45% of the oldest first-timer group.

- Low income and low education parents were more likely to report dissatisfaction with their spouses' contribution to parenting.
- Among mothers, those working part-time were more likely to wish their partner helped out more in the parenting role than either the full-time working group or stay-at-home mothers. Part-timers were also less likely to report overall marital satisfaction compared to the other groups.

## Conflict Between Spouses - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Married Parent:

	Sex of Married Parent		
	ALL Married Parents %	Mothers %	Fathers %
Overall marital satisfaction	82	79	85
Agree how to parent	63	59	66
Need help from my spouse	56	67	44
Receive pressure about parenting	40	36	43

*\* single mothers excluded from analyses*

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Overall marital satisfaction*	83	81	82	82	68	87	79
Agree how to parent*	67	58	65	61	61	65	67
Need help from my spouse*	55	56	57	55	76	56	45
Receive pressure about parenting*	36	44	36	42	46	35	28

*\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses*

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Overall marital satisfaction*	78	84	83	81
Agree how to parent*	59	64	59	65
Need help from my spouse*	67	50	60	54
Receive pressure about parenting*	44	39	43	39

*\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses*

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Married Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Overall marital satisfaction*	79	78	84	73
Agree how to parent*	59	58	55	60
Need help from my spouse*	67	65	60	77
Receive pressure about parenting*	36	38	35	34

*\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses*

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## C. TIME STRESS

If parents are experiencing high levels of time stress and/or pressure from others about how to raise their children, then it is likely their experience in the parenting role, and ultimately their behaviour with their children, will be negatively affected. For example, the higher the rate of daily hassles and stress experienced by parents, the more likely they are to use an angry and punitive approach to discipline (Rodgers-Farmer, 1999), and the less likely they are to engage in positive interactions with their children (Fagan, 2000).

A standardized measure, the Time Crunch Instrument (TCI; Statistics Canada, 1992), was included in the survey to assess time use by parents of young children. The TCI consists of 10 items that emphasize time related stress such as cutting back on sleep, feeling constantly under stress, and lack of time for oneself, family and friends. Participants were asked to rate how often they experienced these various indices of time stress on a 5-point scale from (1) 'disagree completely' to (5) 'agree completely'. According to Statistics Canada (1992), participants are defined as highly time stressed if they agree (choose either a "4" or "5" on the scale) with seven or more of the 10 time stress items.

### GENERAL TIME STRESS

#### Findings:

Close to 1/4 of the parent sample (23%) were classified as highly time-stressed. An examination of some of the individual items on the Time Crunch Instrument revealed even higher percentages of stressed parents.

**48% of parents agreed with the statement: "I feel that I'm constantly under stress trying to accomplish more than I can handle"**

**63% of parents agreed with the statement: "I don't have enough time for me anymore"**

### TIME STRESS RELATED TO CHILDREN

#### Findings:

We were also interested in "time stress" specifically as it relates to the time parents have available to spend with their children - a construct directly linked to parenting and the parent-child relationship.

**When asked, "On most days, how do you end your day feeling about the time you spent with your child or children?", 58% reported that they spent less time than they wanted to, 39% felt the amount of time they spent with their children was about right, and only 3% felt they spent too much time with their children.**

**In response to another question on the survey, a full 68% strongly agreed with the statement: "I do not spend as much quality time with my child as I'd like to".**

Therefore, parents are telling us that they do not have time for themselves, and of more concern, they do not have enough time for their children.

### Time Stress - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- With slight variation, about 25% of parents across most subgroups were classified as highly time stressed overall.
- Single mothers, young first-timers, and mothers working part-time were all more likely than their counterparts to report being constantly under stress to accomplish more than they can handle.
- Unexpectedly, mothers working full-time were less likely than other mothers to report stress about having too much to do, and too little time. On the flip side, and as one would expect, the more time mothers spent working outside the home, the more likely they were to feel stressed about not spending enough time, and quality time, with their young children.
- As children get older, and as more children arrive on the scene, the amount of time and quality time spent with children declines.
- Mothers, compared to fathers, were more likely to report that they did not have enough time for themselves, while fathers were more inclined to feel that they did not spend enough time with their children.
- Within the first-time parent group, the older the parent, the less likely they were to feel they spent enough time with their children, although the oldest group did not differ from the youngest group in the amount of “quality” time they felt they spent with their children.

## Time Stress - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Overall time stress (composite)	23	21	24	28
Under stress to do more than I can handle	48	46	48	57
Don't have time for me	63	60	66	65
Spend less time than I would like with my children	58	64	56	51
Not enough quality time with my children	68	70	67	63

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Overall time stress -composite	24	23	23	23	24	21	27
Under stress to do more than I can handle	48	49	47	50	53	44	47
Don't have time for me	65	61	59	66	69	53	64
Spend less time than I would like with my children	52	64	57	60	45	57	64
Not enough quality time with my children	64	72	61	71	55	65	58

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>				
Overall time stress (composite)	23	23	24	25
Under stress to do more than I can handle	51	47	48	49
Don't have time for me	62	64	59	67
Spend less time than I would like with my children	51	43	52	63
Not enough quality time with my children	65	68	65	69

**Time Stress - Subgroup Findings Cont'd**

**Mother's Employment Status:**

	ALL Mothers %	Mother's Employment Status		
		Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
<i>Strongly agree</i> (scored 8-10)				
Overall time stress (composite)	25	27	26	17
Under stress to do more than I can handle	51	51	46	56
Don't have time for me	66	69	63	71
Spend less time than I would like with my children	55	44	72	55
Not enough quality time with my children	66	59	76	68

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

#### d. PRESSURE ABOUT HOW TO PARENT

Parents were asked about the pressure they currently experience in the parenting role.

Specifically, they were presented with the following statement: “I often feel pressure from my \_\_\_\_\_ to change how I parent our child or children.”

Eleven separate sources of pressure outside of the home were tapped (see Table below):

#### Findings:

Parents reported the most pressure from their own mothers (34%) and their in-laws (32%). In general, pressure from other sources was not high (averaging only 10%).

**Table VII. Parents' Reports of Pressure about How to Parent by Source of Pressure**

Source of Pressure	% Reporting Pressure
Own Mother	34
Own Father	17
In-laws	32
Own Grandparents	8
Brothers or Sisters	15
Friends	13
Neighbours	7
Child's Babysitter/ Child Care Provider	8
Child's Doctor/Pediatrician	11
Ethnic Group	3
Religious Group	6

### Pressure from Own Mother and In-Laws - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Mothers experienced more pressure about how to parent from their own mother and their in-laws than did fathers.
- While there were no differences in the pressure experienced by first-time parents compared to those with two or more children, the age of the first-time parent was a key determinant of perceived pressure: Specifically, young first-timers reported the most pressure from their own mother and in-laws, while those over the age of 35 received the least pressure.
- More low income parents reported pressure from their mothers and in-laws than parents in a higher income bracket.
- Among mothers, those working part-time were more likely to report pressure from their own mother and in-laws than either full-time working mothers or stay-at-home mothers.

## Pressure from Own Mother and In-Laws - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

% of parents experiencing...	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Pressure from own mother	34	31	37	37
Pressure from in-laws	32	29	34	36

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

% of parent experiencing...	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Pressure from own mother	35	34	35	34	49	34	24
Pressure from in-laws	33	32	33	32	43	33	23

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

% of parents experiencing...	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Pressure from own mother	40	30	37	34
Pressure from in-laws	39	28	33	32

### Mother's Employment Status:

% of parents experiencing...	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Pressure from own mother	37	37	33	49
Pressure from in-laws	35	35	32	43

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## 9. SUPPORT IN THE PARENTING ROLE

Research indicates many beneficial effects of increased social support for parents, including reduced depression (Reis, 1988), reduced parenting stress (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996), and a lower tendency to use punitive approaches to discipline children (Reis, 1988).

### a. SUPPORT FROM CHILD'S GRANDPARENTS

Given that about 1/3 of parents reported pressure from their own mothers and their in-laws in the parenting role, we were interested in exploring the extent to which parents also reported *support* from these same sources (i.e., their child's grandparents).

who took care of their youngest child on a regular basis. The 55% of parents who answered "yes" to this question were then asked to indicate who that other caregiver was, and to rate their level of satisfaction with the care provided on a scale of 0-10.

As can be seen, a sizable percentage of parents reported that they rely on the child's grandparents to regularly care for their young children. While the actual hours/week spent with children were lower for grandparents than the other childcare arrangements noted, the number of parents who reported a high level of satisfaction with the care provided by grandparents (95%) was consistently greater than the other sources, which averaged 84%.

**Table VIII. Parents' Reports of Child Care Use, Hours per Week, and Satisfaction by Type of Child Care Arrangements**

Child Care Arrangement	% of parents using it	# of hrs/wk	% of parents "Very satisfied"
Home Care (nonrelative's home)	46	26	89
Child's Grandparents	45	10	95
Licensed Daycare Centre	35	29	89
JK/SK	28	16	87
Nonrelative comes to home	19	17	77
Other family members	15	13	79

Indeed, we found that the child's grandparents were rated (on a separate question) as being a primary source of childcare support for parents.

Specifically, parents were asked to indicate if there was someone else - besides themselves or their partner -

In sum, while parents experienced more pressure from their parents and parents-in-law than other outside sources, they also derived more value from the support these relatives provided than from other childcare sources.

## Support from Child's Grandparents - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- While there was considerable variability across parent subgroups in the extent to which grandparents were relied on to care for children (ranging from a low of 28% for older first-time parents to a high of 87% for young first-timers), the percentage of parents who were highly satisfied with the care provided by grandparents was less variable, being consistently quite high (range of 87% to 100%).
- More single mothers than married parents relied on the support of grandparents to care for their children.
- Fathers were least likely to report using grandparents as a childcare arrangement.
- Parents with less experience in the parenting role (i.e., those with younger children, and those with only one child) were more inclined than experienced parents to regularly use grandparents for childcare support.
- Low income and education were related to more grandparent involvement in the child's care.
- Among mothers, those working full-time were least inclined to rely on grandparents for support in looking after their children than those working either part-time, or those that stayed-at-home.

## Support from Child's Grandparents - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

Of those who regularly use alternate childcare	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Rely on grandparents	45	36	46	57
Very Satisfied with care provided by grandparents	95	95	99	89

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

Of those who regularly use alternate childcare	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child%	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Rely on grandparents	58	36	55	38	87	56	28
Very Satisfied with care Provided by grandparents	96	92	97	92	100	95	100

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

Of those who regularly use alternate childcare	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Rely on grandparents	55	36	48	41
Very Satisfied with care provided by grandparents	96	96	90	99

### Mother's Employment Status:

Of those who regularly use alternate childcare	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Rely on grandparents	50	57	43	61
Very Satisfied with care provided by grandparents	95	87	98	98

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## **b. SUPPORT FOLLOWING THE BIRTH OF THE FIRST CHILD**

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Following the birth of their first child, the vast majority of parents reported that they “fell in love with their baby” (87%), and “felt happier than ever before” (80%). As heartening as these numbers are, a full 73% of Canadian parents also reported feeling stressed and worn out following the birth of their first child.

The period of time immediately following the birth of one’s first child is clearly very stressful for many parents, and as presented elsewhere in this report, it is also a time when parenting confidence is at an all-time low. How supported do parents feel during this stressful time?

Parents were asked to indicate their level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements: “When I first became a parent, I felt I received enough emotional support” and “When I first became a parent, I felt I received enough practical support”

### **Results:**

Only 55% of parents felt they received enough emotional support following the birth of their first child.

An equal percentage of parents (55%) felt they received enough practical support following the birth of their first child.

In other words, a full 45% of parents did not feel sufficiently supported, either emotionally or practically, following the birth of their first child.

### Support following the Birth of First Child - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Those parents who had their first child earlier (i.e., parents currently with more than one child) were less likely than first-timers to report having received enough practical support. Given that both sets of parents were reporting on the support they received following the birth of their first child, differences between groups do not likely reflect differences in the number of children parents have, but perhaps a slight shift (in a positive direction) in the amount of practical support provided to first-time parents in more recent years than in the past.
- Mothers working full-time were more likely than either stay-at-home or part-time working mothers to report having received enough practical and emotional support following the birth of their first child.
- Other factors, including family income, educational level of parent, sex of parent, and the marital status of mothers did not influence the perceived support received following the birth of their first child.

## Support following the Birth of First Child - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Received enough emotional support after birth of first child	55	53	56	55
Received enough practical support after birth of first child	55	53	57	56

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Received enough emotional support after birth of first child	53	56	57	53	56	57	58
Received enough practical support after birth of first child	54	57	60	53	60	62	57

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Received enough emotional support after birth of first child	54	53	57	54
Received enough practical support after birth of first child	57	55	54	55

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Received enough emotional support after birth of first child	56	52	63	51
Received enough practical support after birth of first child	57	55	63	50

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## c. NATIONAL SUPPORT

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Prior to this point, we have been exploring the extent to which parents feel supported in the parenting role by those close to them (e.g., own parents, spouses, etc.).

Support can be felt, however, on a number of levels. We were also interested in knowing how much parents of young children felt that Canada, as a nation, valued and supported their role as parents. To the extent that parents feel that what they do, and what they believe

in (i.e., promoting the healthy development of their young children) is shared by their country as a whole, they will feel more supported in the parenting role.

Parents were presented the following statement:

*“I think Canada values its young children.”*

Disturbingly, only 42% of Canadian parents believed that Canada values its young children. The remaining 58% do not believe that Canada either values its young children or, by extension, their role as parents.

### **National Support - Summary of Subgroup Findings**

- Across parent subgroups, the perception of national support was never expressed by even 1/2 of the parents (the highest percentage was 49% for first-time parents aged 35 and older). In other words, regardless of parent type, over 50% of the parents felt that neither their children nor, by extension, their role as parents, were valued by their country.
- Parents with more than one child were less likely than first-time parents to feel that Canada values its young children.
- Fewer of the highly educated parents, compared to those with low education, believed that Canada values its young children.
- The youngest first-time parents were less inclined to believe in Canada's support than the two older first-time groups.

## National Support - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

		Marital Status and Sex of Parent		
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Canada values its young children	42	42	42	43

### Age of Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Canada values its young children	44	40	47	39	43	48	49

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Canada values its young children	43	43	45	39

### Mother's Employment Status:

		Mother's Employment Status		
<i>Strongly agree (score 8-10)</i>	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Canada values its young children	42	41	45	41

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.



## 10. PARENTS' INFORMATION-SEEKING

The bottom line of the findings from this survey is straightforward: Parents need help. They lack knowledge and confidence in the parenting role, they are emotionally worn out and stressed, and they are not receiving sufficient support. Why?

A first step in answering this question is to explore how parents currently attempt to acquire knowledge and seek support in the parenting role. To the extent that we understand their motivation and efforts to obtain knowledge and support, we will be better positioned to understand why they have not been especially successful, and to develop and implement more effective strategies to educate and support parents.

### a. MOTIVATION TO LEARN

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”.

These responses suggest that Canadian parents are open to learning more about parenting and child development. It is not that parents do not want to learn, or have not sought advice and support in the parenting role - they have.

Perhaps the more telling question is: “Where have parents turned for information and support?”

### b. TOP SOURCES FOR INFORMATION AND ADVICE

When parents were asked to indicate where they usually turn for information and advice about children and parenting, six sources (out of a possible 23 listed on the survey) were sought out by 45% of parents or higher.<sup>7</sup>

**Table IX. Parents' Reports of Top Sources Providing Information/Advice on Parenting**

Top Sources of Information/Advice	
Child's doctor/pediatrician	61%
Spouse/partner	58%
Friends	58%
Own mother	57%
Books	56%
Magazines	45%

<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that access to the internet was not found to be a common source of advice and information for parents at the time the survey was initially conducted (January, 1999). At that time, only 9% of parents turned to the internet for parenting information. However, given the proliferation of internet use in recent years, this method of reaching parents may represent an especially fruitful future approach. Further research into parents' reception to information provided through the internet is needed.

## Top Sources for Information and Advice - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Mothers were more likely than fathers to seek information and advice about children and parenting from various sources. Fathers were more inclined to rely on their spouses, than on sources outside the home, to provide them with childrearing information.
- Parents with less experience (i.e., those with younger children, and those with only one child) were more likely to seek information from their doctor, mother, books and magazines than were parents with more childrearing experience.
- Within the first-time group, the younger the parent, the more likely they were to turn to their own mothers for guidance and information. Many more of the young first-timers (83%), compared to the oldest ones (51%), have turned to their own mothers. The youngest first-time group was less inclined to rely on their spouses for information and advice than were the two older groups.
- In contrast, the oldest group was more likely to obtain information from magazines and their child's doctor.
- More high-income and highly educated parents sought parenting information from outside sources compared to parents with low income and education. The one exception to this pattern was with one's own mother, where the findings were reversed.
- When there were differences across working status mother groups, it was typically the case that full-time working mothers sought parenting advice more than did either stay-at-home or part-time working mothers. Again, the exception was for one's own mother, in which part-time working mothers were more likely to rely on their mothers for information and advice than were full-time working mothers.

## Top Sources for Information and Advice - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

<i>Usually turn to for advice about parenting</i>	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
Child's Doctor	61	55	67	64
Spouse/Partner	58	64	54	6*
Friends	58	49	65	60
Own Mother	57	50	62	58
Books	56	49	63	60
Magazines	45	38	50	50

\* Given the extremely low, and hardly surprising, percentage of single mothers who turned to their ex-spouse/partner for parenting advice, it was decided to reduce any confound effects by removing this group of mothers from further analyses including the "spouse/partner" option.

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parents:

<i>Usually turn to for advice about parenting</i>	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
Child's Doctor	65	58	66	59	64	64	74
Spouse/Partner*	59	58	58	59	39	64	60
Friends	58	57	56	58	50	58	56
Own Mother	63	50	67	51	83	67	51
Books	64	49	63	53	69	65	53
Magazines	50	40	49	42	48	48	54

\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses

### Household Income and Parent Education:

<i>Usually turn to for advice about parenting</i>	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
Child's Doctor	65	62	59	64
Spouse/Partner*	55	63	56	60
Friends	54	62	55	59
Own Mother	63	52	59	53
Books	55	62	46	64
Magazines	43	50	38	48

\*Single mothers are excluded from analyses

Top Sources for Information and Advice - Subgroup Findings Cont'd

**Mother's Employment Status:**

<i>Usually turn to for advice about parenting</i>	<b>Mother's Employment Status</b>			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
Child's Doctor	66	64	68	68
Spouse/Partner*	54	51	56	52
Friends	64	62	67	67
Own Mother	61	62	59	66
Books	62	59	68	55
Magazines	50	45	56	49
<i>*Single mothers are excluded from analyses</i>				

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## c. BOOKS AND MAGAZINES

Books and magazines, typically authored by child development and parenting experts, are generally regarded as a source of sound and practical information for parents. While it is promising that, on average, 1/2 of Canadian parents claimed to turn to these sources for information and advice about children and parenting, the numbers are less impressive when we look at the actual frequency with which parents said they consulted books and magazines.

Using a 4-point scale, from “hardly ever” to “very regularly”, parents were asked the following questions: “How often do you look for information about babies, young children, and parenting in books?” and “How often do you look for information about babies, young children, and parenting in magazines?”

As seen below, close to 1/3 of Canadian parents of young children do not read books and/or magazines to find out about children and parenting, 40% refer to them infrequently, and only about 1/4 of parents rely on these sources of information to any significant degree.

**Table X. Parents' Reports of Regularity in Using Books and Magazines for Information on Parenting**

	“Very Regularly”	“Fairly Regularly”	“Once in a While”	“Hardly Ever”
Books	10%	17%	41%	31%
Magazines	9%	18%	42%	30%

## Books and Magazines - Summary of Subgroup Findings

- Fathers were much less likely than mothers to **regularly** read books and magazines to obtain information about children and parenting. This is in keeping with the previously described finding that fewer fathers sought information from outside sources than did mothers. Given that mothers appear to be the more active information-seekers, we were interested in identifying those mothers most strongly committed to seeking out information about children and parenting in books and magazines. As such, fathers were removed from subsequent subgroup comparisons.

## Mothers

- Single mothers were more likely than married mothers to regularly read books about parenting.
- Mothers with younger children were more likely to regularly read books and magazines than those with older children, and more first-time mothers frequently turned to books for advice than did experienced mothers.
- Of the first-timers, the younger the mother, the more inclined she was to read books and magazines to obtain information about parenting and child development.
- More highly educated mothers read books on a regular basis, and those with higher incomes were more inclined to frequently turn to magazines for information about parenting.
- More full-time working mothers regularly read parenting books than did either part-time or stay-at-home mothers.

## Books and Magazines - Subgroup Findings\*

### Sex of Parent and Marital Status:

	Marital Status and Sex of Parent			
	ALL Parents %	Married Fathers %	Married Mothers %	Single Mothers %
"Very regularly" and "Fairly regularly"				
Magazines	27	20*	33	35
Books	27	17*	32	41

\* Given the very low % of fathers who regularly consulted books and/or magazines, it was decided that, in order to explore differences among mother groups in their information-seeking tendencies, we would remove fathers from further analyses examining the use of books and magazines.

### Age of Youngest Child, Number of Children, and Age of First-Time Parent:

	Age of Child		Number of Children		Age of First-time Parent		
	0-35 months %	36-71 months %	1 child %	2 or more children %	< 25 yrs %	25-35 yrs %	35+ yrs %
"Very regularly" and "Fairly regularly"							
Magazines	40	26	36	34	43	35	30
Books	43	25	44	33	48	43	39
<i>Fathers excluded from analyses</i>							

### Household Income and Parent's Education:

	Income		Parent's Education	
	Under 30K %	60K+ %	HS or less %	College Degree %
"Very regularly" and "Fairly regularly"				
Magazines	33	40	33	36
Books	33	37	28	35
<i>Fathers excluded from analyses</i>				

### Mother's Employment Status:

	Mother's Employment Status			
	ALL Mothers %	Stay-at-home %	Full-time %	Part-time %
"Very regularly" and "Fairly regularly"				
Magazines	34	34	32	32
Books	35	31	39	33

\* Note: Subgroup differences of 5% or greater are highlighted with shading.

## 11. SUBGROUP ELABORATIONS

Research, theory and common sense indicate that particular subgroups of parents experience important variations on how they raise infants and young children. Throughout this report we have paid special attention to how these particular subgroups of parents raise infants and young children. Separate reports on each of these groups are being planned, but we will offer a few elaborations of key findings from these subgroups at this point.

### a. THE ROLES OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS

Given the recent work documenting the very real and important role fathers play in their children's development (e.g., Amato, 1998; Lamb, 1997), we were interested in exploring parents' perceptions of the role of fathers, as well as fathers' actual involvement in childrearing. While both mothers and fathers claimed equally high investment in the parenting role, both also believed that the role of the mother was more important to a young child's development than that of the father. This is not to imply that fathers in this survey were uninvolved with their children, but it does, in conjunction with the finding that mothers made a greater effort to seek out information about children and childrearing, address a need to narrow the gap that exists between mothers' and fathers' perception of the importance of fathers' role, and more *active* commitment to become educated about the parenting role.

Since mothers are currently seen in our society as more important in influencing children's development, it is hardly surprising that they also assume the bulk of childrearing responsibilities. This situation likely accounts, at least in part, for a number of findings from

the present survey: a) mothers' dissatisfaction with their husbands' contribution to the parenting role; b) mothers' stress around not having enough time for themselves; c) their higher levels of depressive symptoms; and d) the greater pressure mothers experience from others to change their parenting behaviour. To the extent that all parents, and nonparents alike, come to recognize and equally value the role of mothers and fathers, it is likely the responsibility of childrearing will more naturally and evenly fall on the shoulders of both mothers and fathers.

Behaviourally, fathers and mothers were equally effective in managing children's behaviour, and they did not differ in their use of punitive strategies when children misbehave. However, fathers were less warm and positive with their children than were mothers. Parental warmth, nurturance, and affection represent especially important parenting behaviours, and are directly associated with positive child outcomes (Lamb, 1997).

The obtained difference in warmth expressed by mothers and fathers with their children parallels another set of findings from the present survey: Compared to mothers, fathers a) believed they had less influence over their young child's emotional development; b) were more likely to say that emotional development was the area they were least knowledgeable; and c) felt less confident in their knowledge of children's emotional development. Other research (Fivush, 2000) has shown that, indeed, fathers engage in less emotion-type behaviour with their children than do mothers (e.g., talking about feelings, comforting, expressing their own emotions with their children, etc.). Yet we know that the more likely parents are to comfortably and effectively address

children's emotions, both the positive and the negative, the more emotionally healthy children will grow up to be (Denham, Zoller, & Couchoud, 1994).

Increased involvement on the part of fathers must not only occur in the areas of development where fathers feel especially knowledgeable and confident, but also the ones they are less familiar with. Indeed, despite the high levels of knowledge and confidence in the area of children's physical development, fathers, and mothers alike, recognized that their greatest influence lay more in the arenas of social/emotional development, and to a lesser degree, intellectual development. In other words, while fathers may not feel entirely at ease delving into the area of emotional development, they are telling us, and the literature supports their claim, that to do so is both necessary and beneficial to children's healthy psychological development.

## **b. SOCIO-ECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE**

In the present sample, the single mothers and young first-timers, predominantly mothers, were socio-economically disadvantaged, with the majority falling in the low income and low education subgroups. A selection of findings from the present survey was obtained across all four of the low socio-economic subgroups: 1) low income parents, 2) low education parents, 3) single mothers, and 4) young first-timers.

Specifically, we found that when compared to their higher SES counterparts (high income, high education, married mothers, and older first-timers), parents from these low SES parent subgroups were more likely to:

- rely on their children's grandparents for childrearing support;
- report more conflict with their spouses around childrearing (while single mothers were not included in these analyses, it can be assumed, by

definition, that conflict with spouses was at one point high);

- report low family functioning;
- experience elevated depressive symptoms,
- choose emotional development as the area of development in which they had the most knowledge and the most influence,
- report the most confidence in their knowledge of emotional development,

Given that the findings were consistently found across all four low SES parent subgroups, we assume that they reflect SES influences, rather than marital status or parental age per se.

To test that the effects were primarily due to socio-economic factors, we chose to examine, as an example, depressive symptoms in more detail. We removed single mothers from the low income and low education groups, and found that the income and education differences held; when low socio-economic mothers were removed from the group of single mothers, of those who remained, the percentage with elevated depressive symptoms was not any different than that for married mothers. Similar findings were obtained with the young first-timer group. In other words, elevated depressive symptoms were related more to low income and education than to marital status or age.

While the majority of the findings we obtained are in line with others from the literature examining the conditions surrounding poor parents and parents with low levels of education (e.g., higher parental depression, more family dysfunction and marital discord), the findings related to emotional development were unexpected and new. Perhaps low SES parents focus more on their children's emotional development than other areas by virtue of being in a more emotional

state themselves (recall their higher levels of depressive symptoms). Or perhaps they put more effort into understanding children's emotional development because these parents know their family situation (e.g., divorce, family conflict, etc.) may be negative and difficult for children to cope with on their own.

### c. SINGLE MOTHERS

There were also findings specific to single mothers that were unrelated to their socio-economic status (i.e., were not evident when income and education subgroups were compared).

Compared to married mothers, single mothers were much less inclined to regard fathers as important in the upbringing of children, and were more likely to see mothers as critical to children's development. While it is understandable that single mothers, by necessity, believe so strongly in the primacy of mothers, this belief also places a rather heavy burden on single mothers to live up to the responsibility - an explanation that may in part account for the greater effort on the part of single mothers, compared to married mothers, to read about parenting and child development in books.

Behaviourally, single and married mothers did not differ in their levels of punitiveness and effectiveness with their children. The only differences that did arise actually *favoured* single mothers (i.e., single mothers were slightly more warm with their children, and less likely to use physical punishment). These findings run counter to a popular view which holds that single mothers display less appropriate parenting behaviour with their children.

### d. MOTHER'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS

We did not find evidence to support the claim that full-time working mothers were worse off than those who work part-time, or those who are not in the workforce. In fact, if anything, full-time working mothers fared the best of all three working status groups on a number of parenting dimensions. Although, as expected, there was a direct negative relationship between the amount of time mothers worked and the time they had available to spend with their children, full-time working mothers were the least likely, among the three groups of mothers, to feel stressed trying to accomplish more than they could handle, to feel that they did not have enough time for themselves, or to experience depressive symptoms. These indices of stress and negative emotionality were most experienced by stay-at-home mothers and those working part-time. Mothers working full-time were also more likely to be more positive and effective with their children, and to have high levels of confidence in the parenting role.

While the stay-at-home mothers and the part-time working mothers were similar on some parenting dimensions, in many cases it was the part-time working mothers who fared the worst. Mothers working part-time were least likely to display appropriate parenting behaviour; were more inclined to use physical punishment with their young children; reported the lowest family functioning; were most dissatisfied with their husband's contribution to parenting; and were most likely to experience pressure from others about how to parent. They were also the group most likely to report feeling stressed trying to accomplish more than they can handle.

It would seem that the part-time working arrangement, so often regarded as the ideal by many mothers, has its own disadvantages that are associated with a variety of negative conditions surrounding parenting. Perhaps, rather than representing the best of the working and stay-at-home worlds, the part-time working arrangement seems to present unique challenges for mothers that transform the arrangement into what may, in reality, feel like two full-time jobs.

Interestingly, part-timers were more likely than other mothers to claim that the first five years are critical to a child's healthy development, and to feel that parents play an especially important role in influencing how their children turn out. Such beliefs, which in part may explain why many of these mothers chose to work part-time rather than full-time, also likely places added pressure on part-time working mothers to do it all...in half the time.

## **e. EXPERIENCE IN THE PARENTING ROLE**

Experience in the parenting role is not helping. Parents do not seem to learn more about child development and childrearing as a result of having had more practical extended experience in the parenting role. As noted, experienced parents were not more knowledgeable than first-time parents about child development, nor were they any more confident in their knowledge, or in the parenting role more generally. In fact, parents' behavioural interactions with their children, rather than improving with age, were actually found to become worse as their children grew older and as the number of children in the home increased. We also found that experienced parents were less inclined to say that being a parent was the most important thing they could do, and to be less likely to actively seek out information about childrearing compared to inexperienced parents.

Experienced parents more often lamented that they had less than the desired amount of time, and less quality time, to spend with their children than did first-time parents. As well, conflict and pressure between spouses around childrearing increased as children got older and more children were in the home. It would seem that the demands of having more children and/or older children negatively impacts on parenting behaviour, without any of the added benefits of increased knowledge and confidence that one would expect to come with experience.

## **f. AGE OF FIRST-TIME PARENT**

A number of interesting age differences within the first-time group was found. Parents who waited until they were older to have their first child (those aged 35+ when surveyed) represent an especially interesting group in that their parenting behaviour with their children was found to be relatively good. While notably stricter than young first-timers (as a result of young first-timers reporting especially low levels of punitive behaviour with children), they were also more likely to display positive/warm behaviours with their children, and were more effective in managing child misbehaviour. First-time parents aged 35+ were also found to be the least likely parent subgroup to use physical punishment with their children. These older parents were more inclined than younger first-time parents to hold appropriate beliefs that the early years are critical to a child's future development, and that fathers play an important role in influencing how children develop.

Despite these findings that consistently favour older first-timers, they were, as a group, much more likely to report low levels of confidence in their knowledge about child development, and in the parenting role in general - even though, as found, their actual knowledge

about children and childrearing was not lower than other parent subgroups.

It is possible that, for those parents who wait longer to have children, the significance of being a parent looms larger than for those parents who have children when they are young. Demographic trends have shown that the older parents are when they have their first child, the less likely they will be to have a second child. In other words, for many of these older first-time parents, it may feel as if this is their only chance to “get it right” - a belief that would understandably lead to lower confidence levels.

Given that confidence is so intricately linked to the parenting role, the findings obtained for older first-time parents serve to drive home a key message: It is not enough to simply measure and target the behaviour and/or the knowledge of parents, but also their confidence in their behaviour and knowledge. Unless parents actually believe that what they know and what they are doing is accurate and appropriate, the likelihood that they will consistently translate acquired knowledge into appropriate parenting practices is reduced.

## IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## SUMMARY

### WHY THE CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS?

Despite their strong commitment to the parenting role, and their desire to learn, parents clearly reported that they do not feel confident in their knowledge about child development and parenting. And in truth, they have little reason to feel confident - their knowledge is not high. This state of affairs was found to apply to parents across the board - be they highly educated, affluent, older, or experienced in the parenting role. No one parent group stood out as notably superior in their knowledge of child development and their confidence as parents; no one group could be said to represent the “gold standard” by which other parents should be compared.

Individual differences in 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 positive, less punitive, and more effective were their interactions with their young children. Similarly, higher levels of emotional well-being were associated with better parenting practices - a finding of concern given that so many of the parents we surveyed were emotionally stressed, and worn out. In other words, the pervasive lack of knowledge and confidence among parents, in conjunction with elevated negative emotional states, are implicated in the less than optimal parenting behaviour displayed by many Canadian parents of young children.

And 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-timers, highly

educated parents, and mothers working full-time) did not reveal higher levels of knowledge or confidence.

### High Information-Seeking Not Related to Increased Knowledge or Confidence

To confirm the lack of relationship between information-seeking tendencies and acquired knowledge and confidence, we conducted a set of correlations. We created an information-seeking composite score comprised of responses to the four questions on the survey that reflected parents' information-seeking tendencies. The first question assessed the extent to which parents sought information before their first baby was born; the second and third measured the respective frequencies with which parents turned to books and magazines for parenting information; and the fourth reflected the total number of sources parents turned to for information about parenting (Details regarding how this composite score was calculated are available upon request).

Using this composite score, we found 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 Canadian parents of young children only very 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.

Put simply, those parents who could be described as high information-seekers were not noticeably any more knowledgeable or confident in the parenting role than those parents who were low in their information-seeking efforts. Why?

Well, why not?

Parents have told us that they turn most often to their child's doctor/pediatrician for advice about parenting. One could legitimately question whether this strategy would lead to increased knowledge about social, emotional or intellectual development, confidence as a parent, and/or feelings of support in the parenting role." Given that the amount of time spent consulting the child's doctor/pediatrician is typically limited to short, infrequent appointments, where the bulk of the information discussed revolves around the child's

physical health, it is hardly surprising that this source of information and support does not satisfy the various needs of parents that have been revealed throughout this report. Similarly, there is no reason to expect that one's spouse, friends, or own mother are any more informed about child development and parenting than are parents themselves. Indeed, in a recent American parenting survey, it was 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). We have also seen that while grandparents and spouses are considered a primary support for parents, they are also clearly regarded as a very real source of pressure and conflict in the parenting role. And one source of information that has potential to be credible - books and magazines - are reported to be accessed regularly by only 1/4 of Canadian parents.

## 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.

- 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 knowledge quandary. They 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 parents, to educate 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.

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