

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE JUSTICE MINISTER



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BT4 3SG



Kathy O'Hanlon
Clerk to the Justice Committee
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

Our ref: JCP\25\169
18 July 2025

Dear Kathy,

Justice Bill: Reasonable Chastisement/Equal Protection

Thank you for your letter 24 June 2025, in which you highlighted that concerns had been raised with the Committee that the removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement has the potential to criminalise parents who may just require additional support. There is no evidence that this has been the outcome in other jurisdictions where the defence of reasonable chastisement has been repealed; however, outcomes have been best where strong parenting and family support is available.

The Minister is fully committed to changing the law to provide equal protection to children in Northern Ireland, but appreciates that some people have concerns about the removal of the defence; however, this is **not** about creating a new criminal offence that would criminalise parents. The Minister fully agrees that there must be a focus on supporting parents and guardians and improving parenting. A public awareness campaign would be an integral part of the implementation of the repeal of the defence of reasonable

chastisement, to allow parents/guardians and the wider public the opportunity to engage and become aware and ready for any change in the law.

In the absence of Executive agreement to progress with the repeal of the defence, there has been no active engagement with the Department of Health beyond the Minister's meeting with the Health Minister in July 2024, and in securing information to provide replies to the Committee's correspondence. Obviously, engagement would substantially increase if there was a prospect that the defence of reasonable chastisement would be repealed.

The Minister is aware that the Department of Health continues to play an important role in supporting parents and carers of children and young people, in particular to promote positive parenting behaviours.

The Department of Health recognises the importance of positive parenting and continues to promote and circulate an information pack called "Top Tips for Parents – Your Guide to Positive Parenting". The pack has been widely disseminated to primary and nursery schools; community settings; GP surgeries; voluntary and community sector organisations working with families; and Sure Starts to inform parents of the current law on physical punishment and provide information and advice, including in connection with behavioural issues. The Department regularly provides additional copies of the Top Tips booklet on request and a PDF version of the booklet is available to download from the Departmental website.

The Department's messaging is supported by a range of family and parenting support services across Northern Ireland, including Family Support Hubs, the Early Intervention Support Service (EISS), Parentline NI and Childline (which is delivered by NSPCC).

Family Support Hubs

There are 29 Family Support Hubs - multi-agency networks of statutory, community and voluntary organisations which work with families in need of support by using their

knowledge of local service providers to signpost referred families to an appropriate service.

In 2024/25 there were 3465 referrals seeking parenting support across all HSC Trust areas. Parenting programmes/parenting support, whether requested in isolation or in addition to another form of support, account for a significant proportion of referrals to Hubs.

10 of the 29 Hubs report unmet need in relation to parenting programmes/ parenting support and whilst the demand has outstripped capacity in these areas it should be noted that they have been able to link all families to some element of support/services.

Early Intervention Support Service (EISS)

The EISS provides provides person-centred, evidence based early intervention and support to families with children 0-18 years old, when difficulties arise and before they need involvement with statutory services.

Parentline NI

Parentline NI is funded to offer free impartial advice, general support and guidance to anyone caring for or concerned about a child or young person. The service is available through a range of different channels including telephone, face to face and online. CiNI have delivered the Parentline NI helpline since 1 April 2019 and will be partnering with NSPCC to lead a positive parenting campaign in the coming months.

They aim to model the caring, compassionate connections which have proved to be most beneficial for parenting by encouraging stress-management and wellness in order that parents can consistently maintain their capacity to cope. Their aim is to be flexible and responsive to parent need, delivering targeted workshops such as School Readiness/ADHD/ASD/Weaning & Toilet Training in the Early Years as well as parent discussion groups/ workshops that reflect their Parent Well theme.

Parentline are contacted regarding such difficulties as family breakdown; co-parenting; waiting lists & diagnosis of ADHD/ASD/special needs; children's anxiety & behaviours; emotionally based school avoidance; bullying and social media; isolation/loneliness & lack of parenting confidence.

During each of these contacts, Parentline aim not only to provide an understanding and nurturing response, but also to encourage and explain the ethos and benefits of a gentle, authoritative parenting style. This style has Positive Parenting at its core. A section of their Go To resource on Parenting Styles reflects this.

Whilst promoting Positive Parenting, they are also constantly encouraging parents and carers to recognise the importance of looking after themselves and sharing wellness strategies, both mental and physical, with their children.

They have expanded their ability to do this by developing their new collection of *Parent Well* workshops and discussion groups which have been running since November 2024. (These are in addition to very popular and well received targeted workshops on topics such as Weaning & Toilet Training in the Early Years/Anxiety/School Readiness/ADHD and ASD.)

Parent Well sessions provide parents and carers with a supportive space to explore and understand Positive Parenting. Topics such as 'Supporting Emotions and Learning to Thrive' build the essential foundations of parenting. These were created to adequately cater for parents of either primary school children or parents of teenagers. Each *Parent Well* session includes an explanation of simple neuroscience and also emphasises the importance of parental well-being & stress management.

All Parent Well discussion groups/workshops offer guided inspiration, information, resources, and encouragement on specific parenting themes and challenges. An important factor is the additional opportunity for parents to contribute and share their own

experiences and learning. These sessions are delivered via zoom and also in person to school/community groups.

- Confidentiality: All groups have clear confidential guidelines in place to foster trust.
- Resources: Parent Support Officers facilitating these sessions provide in-session information but also suggest other trusted sources including books, apps and podcasts.
- Sharing Experiences: Parents feel empowered by sharing their experiences and solutions to encourage others.

Parent Well Workshops include targeted sessions on topics such as:

- Supporting Emotions & Learning to Thrive - Parent & Child (online sessions in November & December 2024 and community session held in January 2025).
- Worry to Wonder - Managing anxiety & worry in primary school aged children (online sessions in September & October 2024 and February, April and May 2025).
- Tweens & Teens - Communicating and understanding Behaviour (online sessions in January 2025).
- Play - The Power of Play and Joyful connection (online sessions in March and June 2025).

32 workshops were delivered between February 24 and June 25. Attendance generally ranges between 50-80%. 23 of 32 workshops (71%) had more than 50% attendance. 21 of 32 workshops (65%) had 60% or more attendance. 13/32 workshops (40%) had 70% or more attendance.

Hear Me, See Me, Know Me session to support parents communicate and understand their autistic child had over 100 parents register and 73 parents attend. Feedback provided by 29 of the 31 evaluations returned by parents rated the session as “excellent”.

Parentline Pathways - A Go To Guide for Parents was launched by Parentline in October 2024. This is a Positive Parenting manual which spans parenting in the early years through to teens. All resources carry a positive parenting ethos with some being more specific/targeted. The most used Go To resources emphasising positive parenting include:

- Keep Calm Parent On
- Creating a Calmer Home
- Peaceful Connections at Home
- Beyond The behaviour
- 5 Steps to Supporting Behaviour
- Nurturing Inner Strength
- Parenting Styles
- Play- series for all ages and stages
- Understanding & Living with Teenagers
- Understanding & living with ADHD
- Supporting children with Autism
- Coping with Anxiety 1 and 2

NSPCC

The NSPCC has a positive parenting guide, available on their website: [Positive parenting | NSPCC Learning](#). This guide shares practical advice and tips for positive parenting techniques that work well for children - from babies to teenagers. These techniques encourage better behaviour and help parents find out what works for them and their child.

The guide is also a valuable resource for services and professionals offering parenting advice to new parents and those caring for young children or teenagers.

In 2022, NSPCC NI published the results of a survey of public attitudes on equal protection in Northern Ireland. The results revealed:

- almost two thirds (65%) of adults in Northern Ireland support a change in the law to protect children from being physically punished by their parents and carers. Among parents, carers and guardians this rose to 71%.
- 70% of survey respondents, and 74% of parent/carer respondents, confirmed they would be more likely or much more likely to support legal reform in Northern Ireland if they were provided with [more] information and support on how to manage children's behaviour effectively.
- 72% of adult and 75% of parent respondents said they would be more likely to support a change in the law if they were assured that parents could still physically intervene to protect a child from immediate danger (e.g. running across a road).
- Only 25% of adults and 23% of parents stated that they think physical punishment is an effective form of discipline.
- Only 14% of adults surveyed and 8% of parents think that physical punishment is an acceptable form of discipline. Physical punishment was the least acceptable form of discipline or punishment (14%).
- 60% of adult and 62% of parent respondents said they would be more likely to support a change in the law if the proposed legal change was well publicised.
- 60% of adults surveyed did not know the law currently allowed for 'reasonable chastisement' of children.
- Only 33% of parents who responded to the 2022 survey reported that they had received information on positive parenting.
- The most common sources for information on positive parenting were a parent or children's group (42%), followed by schools (27%) and health visitors (26%). 12% of parent-respondents said the information came from either a GP or social worker respectively, while 19% couldn't remember the source.

NSPCC is taking forward a campaign from May 2025 with Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) titled Take 5 seconds. The overall content of the campaign is supported by the NSPCC Early Years thematic lead to ensure accuracy and quality assurance.

Take 5 Seconds is a public-facing behavioural change campaign designed to support parents and carers helping them respond calmly and confidently. At its core, the campaign promotes positive parenting strategies and aims to shift wider public understanding of positive alternatives to and the impact of physical chastisement. The key objectives are to:

- Encourage parents/carers to reflect on parenting strategies;
- Increase knowledge of positive parenting strategies;
- Increase awareness of impact of negative parenting strategies can have on children; and
- Raise awareness of the support around parenting approaches for parents/carers across NI.

The target audience is parents/carers of children aged 2-4, professionals who directly support parents/carers with young children and wider community networks who support families.

Conclusion

It is clear that, while parents are seeking and receiving parenting support, there is more work to be done and the Department of Health is committed to providing that support.

Through the Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme, the Department is also taking forward work to develop a new model of family support for Northern Ireland that is preventative, collaborative, operates at different levels of need and is connected at all levels. The aim is to reduce the number of families who require

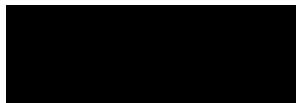
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statutory intervention and or to enable statutory intervention to cease, including returning children safely home from care.

Specifically in relation to physical punishment and the defence of reasonable chastisement, there is a clear need for those leading on any change to the law to ensure that a widespread and effective information campaign is delivered to parents in advance of any change.

Officials in DOJ and DOH are available to give a joint evidence session to the Committee. I would be grateful if you could please let me have available dates so this can be arranged.

Yours sincerely,



**DAVID GRAHAM
DALO**

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 19 August 2025 11:47
To: O'Hanlon, Kathy [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: Query: JC request for meeting with DOJ/DOH re Equal Protection - further info requested on topics for discussion

JCP\25\169

Kathy - please see request below, on behalf of DOH colleagues.

Grateful if this request could be out to Committee members on their return and DOJ colleagues will liaise further with their DOH counterparts to progress this joint evidence session.

Many thanks,

DG

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Working together for fairness, justice and safety.

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 19 August 2025 11:40
To: [REDACTED]
Cc: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] <>
Subject: JC request for meeting with DOJ/DOH re Equal Protection - further info requested on topics for discussion

Hi David

Further to the JC's request for an evidence session with the department and the Department of Health colleagues to discuss the issue of Equal Protection, DoH colleagues have asked for details of what the Justice Committee will want to discuss at the session.

This will help to ensure that DoH have the right people attending the session who will be able to answer the JC's questions and will also enable dates to be confirmed for the session.

Grateful if you could liaise with the JC (on its return after recess) and the Clerk and we can then revert to DoH and firm up a date for the evidence session.

Regards

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Working in partnership to create a fair, just and safe community where we respect the law and each other



**Northern Ireland Assembly
Committee for Justice**

David Graham
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Department of Justice
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24 June 2025

Justice Bill — Reasonable Chastisement/Equal Protection

Dear David

At its meeting on 12 June 2025, the Committee for Justice considered the Department's response (DoJ reference JCP\25\120) to the Committee's request for details of any engagement that the Department had with colleagues in the Department of Health regarding the defence of reasonable chastisement and equal protection.

Concerns have been raised with the Committee that the removal of the defence of reasonable chastisement has the potential to criminalise parents who may just require additional support. In its response, the Department referred to the range of family and support services that is already available. It is unclear to the Committee, however, whether enough support is currently available or how effective that support is.

The Department has also advised that the Minister will continue to work with Executive colleagues to seek their support to repeal the defence of reasonable chastisement in Northern Ireland. The Committee wants to ensure that the availability of sufficient and effective support mechanisms for parents is being fully considered in parallel with any proposals to remove the defence of reasonable

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chastisement and therefore agreed to ask the Department for details of any discussions it is having with the Department of Health to ensure that this is the case.

I should appreciate a response by 10 July 2025.

The Committee also requested a joint evidence session with officials from the Department of Justice and the Department of Health to discuss reasonable chastisement/equal protection. I would be grateful if you could contact me to make the necessary arrangements.

Yours sincerely

Kathy O'Hanlon

Kathy O'Hanlon
Clerk to the Committee for Justice