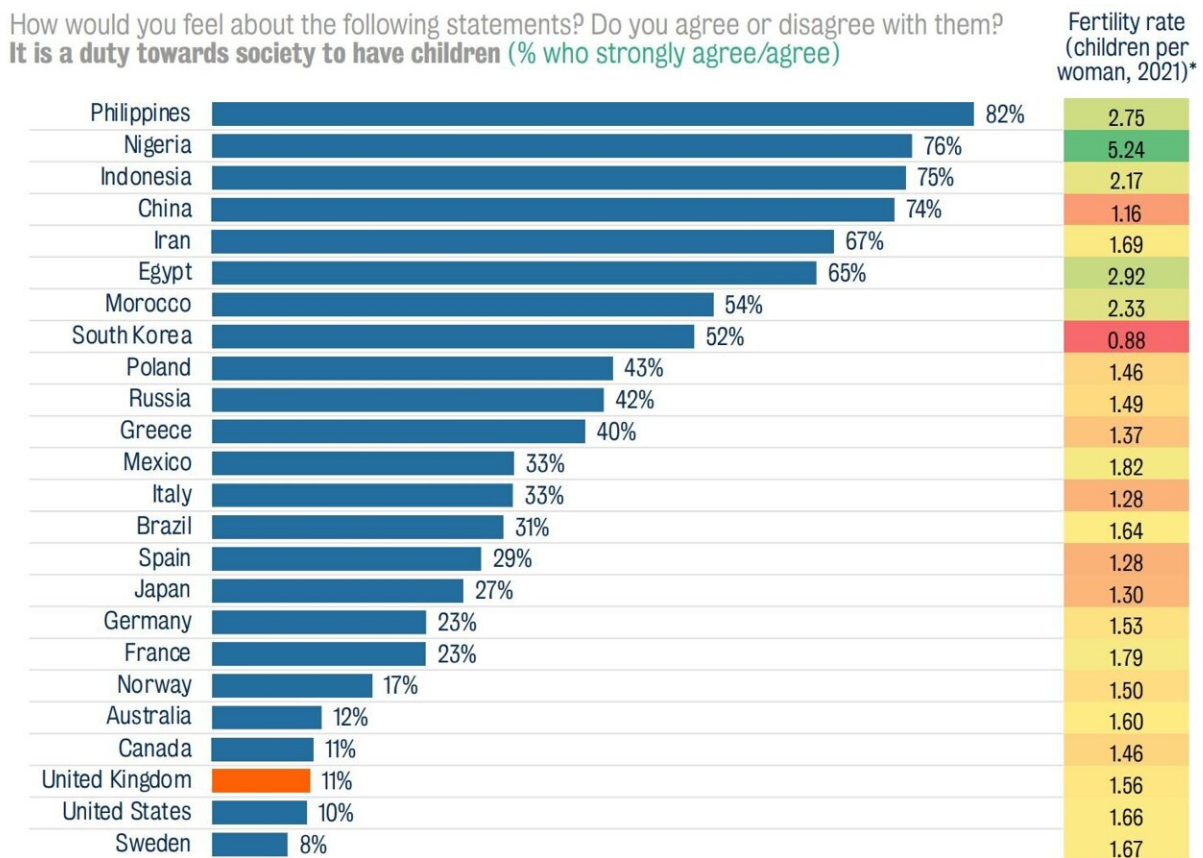


Good manners, obedience and unselfishness: Data reveal how UK parenting priorities compare with other nations

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Credit: *Parenting priorities: international attitudes towards raising children* (2023).

Changing attitudes to parenting mean the UK public now rank among the

lowest internationally for the importance they place on obedience or responsibility in children, and among the highest for how much they value unselfishness, good manners and imagination, a [new study](#) shows.

The research, by the Policy Institute at King's College London, finds the share of Britons who think obedience is an especially important quality for children to learn at home has decreased dramatically since the late 1990s.

But at the same time, there has been a large increase in the proportion who say hard work is particularly important for children, with this now ranking as the UK's fourth most important quality out of the 11 asked about in the research.

And while the vast majority of Britons have consistently said it is especially important for children to have good manners, this has declined in importance elsewhere, particularly in the US, where good manners are now valued the least out of 24 countries included in the research.

On several traits, Britons' views vary little by generation—with the exception of Gen Z, who stand out as least likely to say tolerance for other people and good manners are essential qualities in children.

And more broadly, of the countries included in the study, only two are less likely than the UK to believe there is a duty to have children, or that [adult children](#) have a duty to care for their parents, while the UK is among the most likely to say it is unjustifiable for parents to beat children.

The analysis was carried out as part of the World Values Survey (WVS), one of the largest and most widely used academic social surveys in the world, with some questions dating as far back as 1981.

The latest UK data was collected in 2022, with data for other nations collected at various points throughout the latest wave of the WVS, which spanned 2017 to 2022.

How the UK compares with other nations

Among 24 countries in the study, the UK public stand out for the importance they place on several qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home.

Unselfishness

43% of the UK public select unselfishness as an especially important quality for children to learn—second only to France (45%), which comes top on this measure, though on a par with Australia (43%) and Iran (41%).

At the other end of the table, in Germany and Spain, just 6% and 5% respectively prize unselfishness to this extent.

Good manners

85% of people in the UK say good manners are particularly important for children to learn, with the country ranking sixth out of 24 for the degree to which they prioritize this trait. However, this is virtually the same as in several other nations, including Australia (84%) and Mexico (86%).

The US is the country where good manners are valued the least, with 52% saying they are crucial for children in the latest data—down significantly from the 76% who felt this way in 1990.

Obedience

Only four countries are less likely than the UK (12%) to say it's especially important for children to be obedient, with Japan (3%) the least likely to and Nigeria (58%), Mexico (57%) and Egypt (56%) the most.

A feeling of responsibility

Only Nigeria (40%) is less likely than the UK (46%) to consider it crucial for children to have a feeling of responsibility. And the UK is the only western country in the study where less than half the population hold this view.

Independence

Yet while responsibility is valued comparatively less in the UK, 53% of the country say a similar trait—independence—is especially important, with the UK ranking in the top half of nations on this measure.

The qualities the UK values most now

Of the 11 qualities asked about in the study, good manners and tolerance and respect for other people are seen as first and second most important respectively to the UK public—a ranking which is unchanged since 1990.

Meanwhile, over the same period, hard work has risen to be fourth most important in the eyes of the public, up from eighth, and independence has climbed to third from sixth.

Moving in the other direction, obedience has plummeted from fifth to

tenth position, and unselfishness has fallen from third to sixth place.

How attitudes have changed over time

In 1998, a high point of half (50%) the British population said it was especially important for children to be obedient—a figure which had fallen to just 11% in 2022 (note latter figure varies from above by 1pt due to GB vs. UK differences).

Similarly, in 1999, a peak of 60% of Britons thought unselfishness was a key trait for children to develop—a figure which has since declined to 43% in the latest data.

But over the last three decades, other qualities have assumed more importance. Below is the share of the public who thought these traits were especially important in 2022 and how it has increased since 1990:

- Independence: 53%, up from 43%
- Hard work: 48%, up from 29%
- Determination, perseverance: 41%, up from 31%
- Imagination: 37%, up from 18%

Meanwhile, during this time, the perceived importance of good manners and tolerance has changed little, with around eight in 10 or more Britons saying these are especially important qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home.

Gen Z are least likely to say tolerance and good manners are essential in children, while all generations value obedience much less than they once did

In 2022, 61% of Gen Z said tolerance and respect for other people are important child qualities—considerably lower than the three-quarters or more of all other generations who said the same.

Gen Z are also notably less likely to think good manners are essential: 75% felt this way in 2022, compared with at least 85% among older cohorts.

But Gen Z (64%) are among the most likely to say independence is an especially important quality for children to learn at home—the highest proportion of any generation, although Gen X (61%) come close.

And all generations, including older cohorts, have become much less likely to prize obedience: between 1999 and 2022, the share of the Pre-War generation who said this is an essential quality for children to learn at home has more than halved, from 56% to 24%.

The UK ranks low internationally for the belief that there is a duty to have children...

11% of people in the UK agree it is a duty towards society to have children, putting the country joint 22nd out of 24 nations for agreement with this view. In Sweden, which ranks bottom, only 8% agree, in stark contrast to a number of other countries—for example, the Philippines, where 82% see having children as a duty.

...and for the belief that adult children have a duty to care for their parents...

31% of people in the UK agree adult children have the duty to provide [long-term care](#) for their parents, with only those in Sweden (30%) and Japan (26%) less likely to agree with this view.

...but mid-table when it comes to the desire to make parents proud

The UK (79%) is mid-table internationally for the share of the public who agree one of their main goals in life has been to make their parents proud, ranking 12th of 24 nations for this view.

A comparable level of agreement is seen in several other western countries, such as the US (81%), while those in Norway (53%) are least likely to be motivated by making their parents proud and those in Egypt (99%) and Indonesia (99%) the most.

Attitudes to beating children

Among a smaller number of 18 countries with comparable data, the UK (91%) is fourth most likely to say it is not justifiable for parents to beat children, though 7% indicate they believe it may be justifiable, and another 1% think it is justifiable.

In most countries included in the research, fewer than one in 10 say such behavior is justifiable, but in Nigeria four in 10 (38%) think this is acceptable, while around two in 10 say the same in Morocco (22%), Brazil (18%) and the Philippines (18%).

Professor Bobby Duffy, director of the Policy Institute at King's College London, said, "The qualities we'd like to see instilled in our children are important signals of what we value as a society—and the very clear message from these long-term trends is the increased importance of imagination and decline in how much we prize straightforward obedience.

"But this doesn't mean we want a society of self-centered

children—good manners are still the quality we want to see most, there has been an increasing emphasis on the importance of hard work, and we're also among the very most likely to value unselfishness. Instead, this is likely to reflect a more general shift towards valuing self-expression, while still wanting our [children](#) to be positive and productive contributors to society."

Technical details

2022 UK data comes from a random probability sample of 3,056 adults aged 18+ interviewed by Ipsos through a mix on face-to-face and online survey methods. Data has been weighted by region, education and age interlocked with gender to be nationally representative.

For analysis of trends over time, data is nationally representative for Great Britain due to a lack of available trend data from Northern Ireland, and is based on surveys of 1,000 or more people aged 18+.

Samples for other countries are all nationally representative and made up of at least 1,000 people. Information on the sampling methodology these nations is available via the [World Values Survey Association website](#).

Data produced for this research is used in wave 7 of the World Values Survey, which included around 90 countries and ran from 2017 to 2022. See the full report for the precise year each country was surveyed. The report focuses on a cross-section of 24 countries selected based on the availability of reliable and weighted data and then narrowed down, focusing on global coverage (based on the [UN's standardized country coding system](#)), regional coverage and population size. This selection gives coverage of 12 of the 17 UN M49 geographic regions across 24 countries, representing almost 50% of the world's population (source: [World Bank](#)). Not all questions are asked in each country in every wave of the study, and so the number of [countries](#) compared on each question

can vary.

More information: Full report: [www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute ...
nting-priorities.pdf](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute...nting-priorities.pdf)

Provided by King's College London

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