

Research Brief
Parenting Today in Victoria:

Parental anxiety

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Key insights

- Parents who reported anxiety since having children were more likely to have other vulnerabilities such as low income, parenting a child with complex needs and current psychological distress.
- Parents who found parenting less enjoyable, who were more critical of their parenting, and who had less confidence in their ability to parent were also more likely to report having had symptoms of anxiety.
- Parents who said their child had anxiety were more likely to report symptoms of anxiety themselves.
- Programs and information addressing parenting challenges to improve child wellbeing and development have the potential to alleviate some parental anxiety.
- Implications of these findings for policy and practice are explored in the Conclusions and Implications section.

How does anxiety relate to parenting experiences?

This Research Brief derives from the 2016 and 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria Studies, conducted and analysed by the Parenting Research Centre and funded by the Victorian Government.



Context

Anxiety is a universal human experience. The sense of apprehension and unease typical of anxiety is part of the natural response to stress and can play an adaptive role in so far as it alerts us to potential threats, stimulates action to avoid harm to ourselves or loved ones, as well as motivating us to seek positive solutions to life problems. But a high and persistent level of anxiety is counterproductive and distressing. We think of anxiety as being problematic when it is having a significant impact on our daily lives, negatively affecting our ability to make decisions, maintain relationships and care for ourselves and others.^{1,2}

Problematic levels of anxiety are relatively common and according to population level data may be increasing in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that in 2017–2018, 3.2 million Australians, or 13%, had an anxiety-related condition – up from 11% in 2014–15.³ Given the well-established links between parental anxiety and child mental health and wellbeing,^{4,5} we wanted to explore the experience of anxiety among a representative sample of parents, the factors that are associated with higher levels of parental anxiety, and ways parent anxiety and parenting might interact.



Findings

Prevalence of parent-reported anxiety

We asked if parents had symptoms of anxiety since becoming a parent. This did not need to refer to a diagnosed condition. Forty nine percent of parents we surveyed reported they had experienced anxiety. This was higher than the 2016 survey when 28% of parents said they had experienced anxiety symptoms.

Mothers were more likely than fathers to report symptoms of anxiety. For mothers, the prevalence was 55%, for fathers it was 38% (see Figure 1). This is consistent with population data showing females had an anxiety-related condition at one and a half times the rate of males.⁶

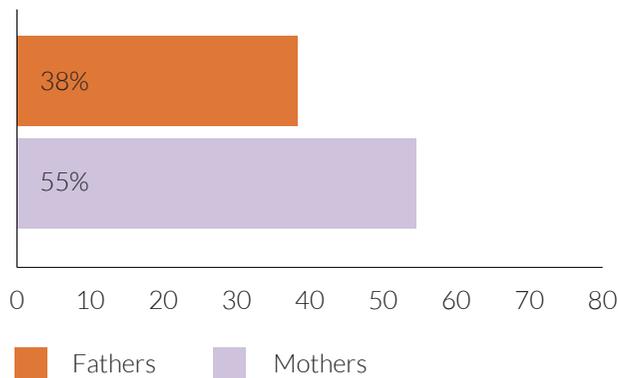


Figure 1. Proportion of mothers and fathers who report symptoms of anxiety since becoming a parent.

Parental anxiety and wellbeing

There also appears to be a link between reported anxiety and quality of life: the parents who reported symptoms of anxiety since becoming a parent had lower scores on the Personal Wellbeing Index.⁷ This index captures parents' satisfaction with a range of aspects of their lives including health, standard of living, personal relationships, life achievements and community connections.

Over half of the parents who reported symptoms of anxiety said they had experienced symptoms of depression and stress since having a child. They were also more likely to have specific worries – for example, parents who reported anxiety were more likely to worry about what others thought of their parenting and to worry about their child's future.

To obtain a measure of current psychological distress, we asked parents about their emotions and mental states in the previous 30 days.⁸ Parents reporting symptoms of anxiety since becoming a parent had greater current psychological distress. Anxiety was overwhelmingly reported (over 80%) by those parents whose current mental health was at the serious (or clinical) level of distress.

Parent anxiety and child anxiety

Our survey gathered responses from parents about one of their children – the focus child – including whether this child had anxiety.⁹ As expected, we found a strong relationship between anxiety in children and in parents.

Almost three quarters of parents who reported their child had anxiety had experienced anxiety themselves. And of the parents who reported experiencing symptoms of anxiety (49% of the total sample of parents surveyed) over one in ten of them said they had a focus child with anxiety, compared to only one in twenty parents without anxiety.

Factors associated with higher parental anxiety

In addition to higher rates of anxiety among mothers compared to fathers (see Figure 1 above), people with lower household income were more likely to report having symptoms of anxiety, and parents reporting anxiety were less likely to agree that their employment situation was flexible.

Another group of parents statistically more likely to report symptoms of anxiety were parents of children with complex needs – for example, a medical condition or learning or behavioural difficulties. Of the individual conditions we asked parents about, child behavioural and/or emotional difficulties including autism were most strongly and significantly related to parent anxiety. The association between child intellectual disability and parent symptoms of anxiety approached significance.



Associations between anxiety and parenting

Importantly for our survey sample, there are links between symptoms of anxiety and the experience of parenting – whether it was enjoyable, how parents felt they were managing it, and even whether they felt up to the job of a parent.

Parents reporting symptoms of anxiety were more likely to:

- find parenting more frustrating and demanding, and less enjoyable (see Figure 2)
- wish they were less impatient with their child and more consistent in their parenting behaviours
- have a lower sense of self-efficacy as a parent – for example, they didn't feel confident in their parenting, felt they lacked parenting skills or felt they weren't doing a good job as a parent
- be less likely to agree they were satisfied with the amount of time they can give their child.

Unfortunately, these parents who struggled with parenting and were harder on themselves were also less likely to do things to relax and re-energise even though they were more likely to report that tiredness gets in the way of parenting. They also thought that most parents were happier than them.

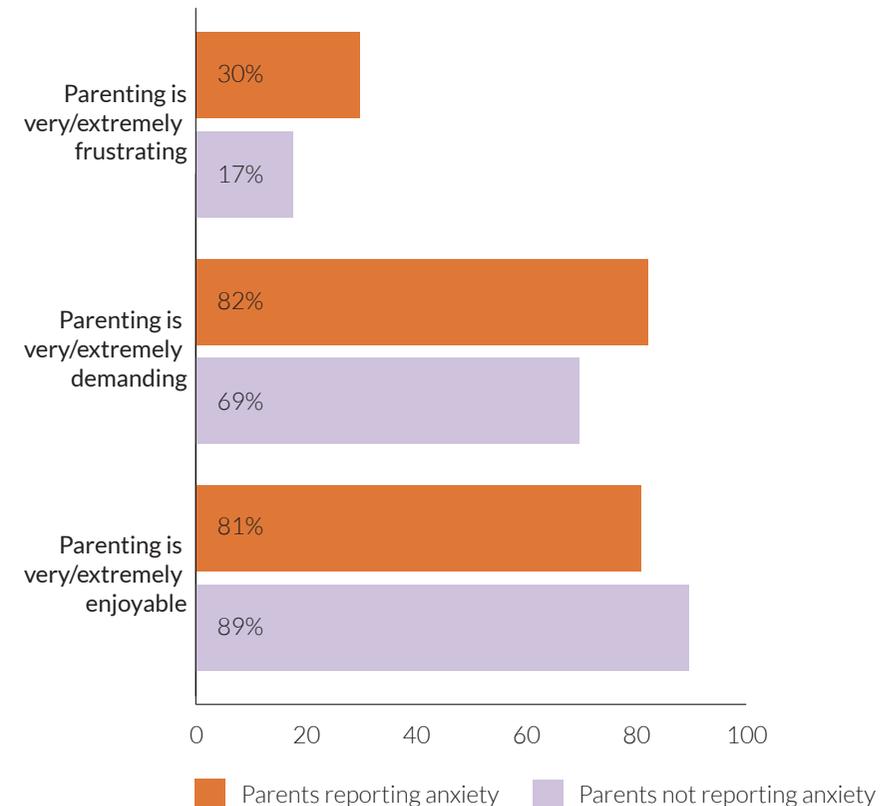


Figure 2. Differences in reports of parenting experiences for parents reporting anxiety since becoming a parent, and those not reporting anxiety since becoming a parent.

Parental anxiety and help-seeking

Anxious parents may find it harder to get the support they need for their parenting. They were less likely to have a trusted person they could turn to for advice and less likely to turn to family first for help and support with child raising. Perceived support from partners or co-parents was also lower for this group. They were less likely to say that they often agreed with the other parent on how to parent or that they felt understood and supported by this person (see Figure 3).

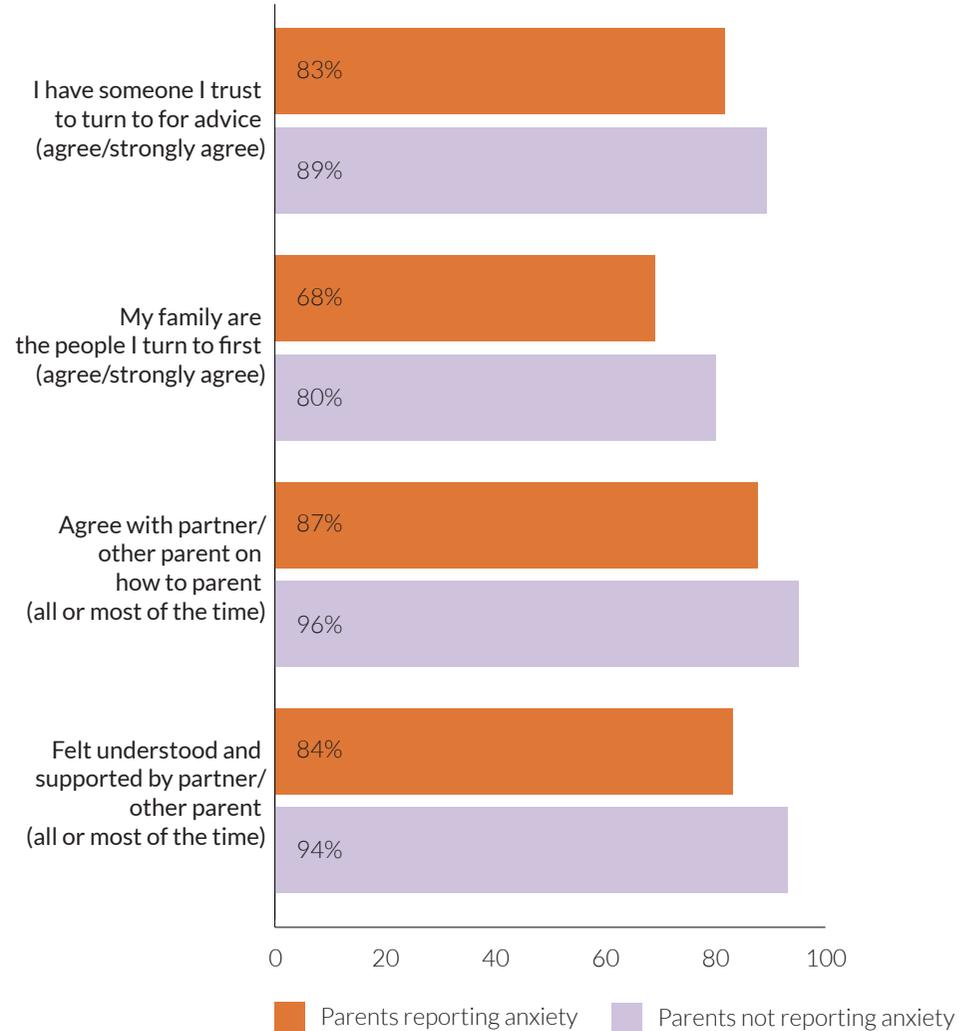


Figure 3. Differences in perceived support for parents reporting anxiety since becoming a parent, and those not reporting anxiety since becoming a parent.

When parents who reported anxiety since becoming a parent sought help from professionals for their parenting, they were less likely to be satisfied with the help offered. They were also more likely to have felt judged, blamed or criticised in their interactions with these professionals, who included nurses, GPs, teachers and psychologists (see Figure 4).

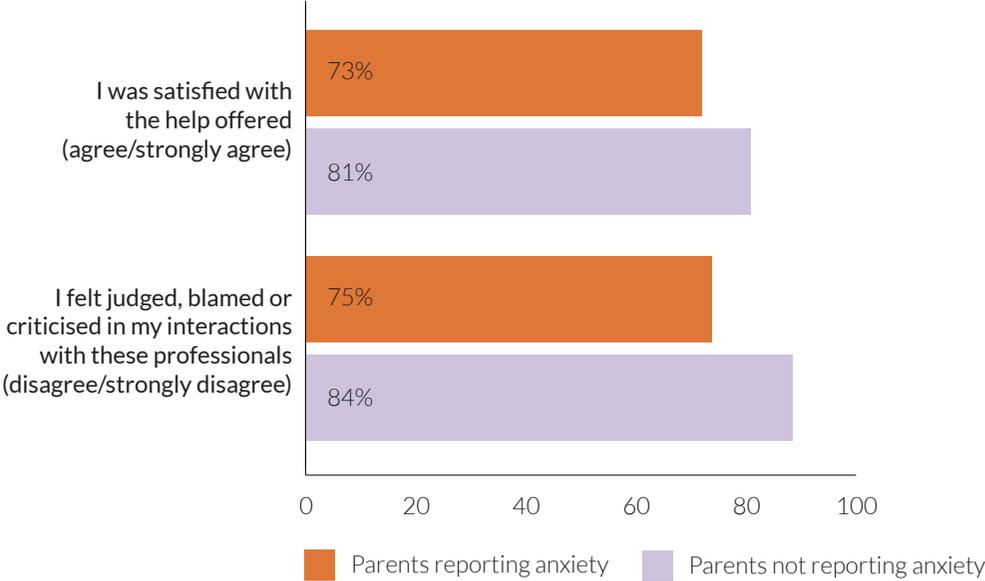


Figure 4. Differences in perceptions of professional support for parents reporting anxiety since becoming a parent, and those not reporting anxiety since becoming a parent.

Conclusions and implications

Nearly half of all parents have experienced anxiety since becoming a parent. Whilst mothers were more likely to report anxiety than fathers, it's worth noting that 40% of fathers reported they had experienced anxiety as a parent.

Anxiety is likely to be impacting on parental wellbeing. Our data reveal links between reports of parental anxiety and high current psychological distress and lower quality of life.

As expected, we also found links between parent and child anxiety. In addition to genetic mechanisms that could explain this link, it is highly probable parents and children mutually influence each other's anxiety.¹⁰ Research has shown that parents, particularly anxious parents, can inadvertently exacerbate anxiety in their children by facilitating avoidance and other maladaptive responses to a stressor.^{11 12} In some circumstances, both parent and child may have a common cause of anxiety, such as shared past trauma or current adverse circumstances. If we support parents to understand how anxiety might be influencing their own behaviour, such as their reactions to their child or to life stressors, and if we help parents to manage their own anxious reactions or responses, there also is likely to be a positive effect on child anxiety. This is supported by research that shows enhanced child outcomes when

parents are involved in treatments for child anxiety.¹³ Parents could be supported through evidence-based parenting programs that have demonstrated positive effects on parent and child anxiety.

We found that anxiety was related to some adverse personal or family circumstances – for example, low income, poor health, poor standard of living, and parenting a child with complex needs – however, the prevalence of anxiety shows that it spans different levels of socio-economic status. Whilst addressing anxiety needs to go hand-in-hand with providing practical solutions to real-world problems for some families, anxiety is so widespread that population level strategies that better equip parents to manage anxiety related to raising children are required. However, our findings also suggest that anxiety is likely to be higher in some groups (e.g., parents of children with complex needs and those with children with anxiety) and these parents may need more support.

There is also evidence that when parents' mental health is supported, child outcomes are enhanced.¹⁴ This points to a need for child-focused services to be attuned to how parents are faring. However, our data show that anxious parents are less satisfied with professional support,



suggesting that the service system is not responding effectively to their needs.

It is possible that the persistence of terms like 'worried well' reflect a professional and perhaps a societal tendency towards being dismissive of anxiety¹⁵ and may be partly due to not knowing how to help. It's important for professionals not to dismiss parental anxieties, and over-reliance on strategies such as reassurance and normalisation may not ultimately be effective in helping parents better manage the uncertainty and anxieties that are an inevitable part of parenting. This suggests a need to build capability across the service system in identifying and working effectively with anxious parents. The need for sensitive and responsive services may be even more important for anxious parents because they do not appear to enjoy the same level of informal supports as other parents.

Supporting parents through their parenting challenges is part of addressing anxiety and psychological distress. Our study focused on support needs for parenting, and there

is evidence from other research that supporting parenting through evidence-based parenting programs can alleviate parental anxiety.^{16 17 18} This has particular importance for the parents responding to our survey because parents who reported anxiety had lower parenting confidence and were more critical of themselves as parents. Evidence-based parenting programs have the potential to improve child wellbeing and developmental outcomes via parenting skills, and may also simultaneously improve the psychological wellbeing of parents. Informing parents where they can get reliable, evidence-based advice may also alleviate some anxiety associated with parenting.



Footnotes

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Study details

The 2016 and 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria surveys used computer-assisted telephone interviewing to randomly survey 2600 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0–18 years in each year. In each family, one parent was interviewed in their preferred language and asked questions about one child (the focus child). Each sample was weighted to match Victorian parents in the Australian Census (using the 2011 Census for the 2016 survey, and the 2016 Census for the 2019 survey), with key characteristics of our samples adjusted in 2016 and 2019 for education level (sample education was lowered) and residential location (sample was adjusted towards more metro/city dwellers), and also for parent age in 2016 (sample age was adjusted upwards).

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