

Research Brief
Parenting Today in Victoria:

Parents' information seeking



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Key insights

- Use of online parenting information is near universal, regardless of gender, level of education and socio-economic status
- Almost all parents seek out information about parenting from multiple sources, and more than half consult at least five sources
- Fathers are active consumers of parenting information, however, mothers tend to use more and a greater variety of sources than fathers do.

Where do parents go to get information about parenting?

This Research Brief reports findings 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

Effectively supporting families in their parenting is vital for positive child wellbeing and development. An important part of this effort is ensuring that parents can access accurate and useful information about raising children.

The Parenting Today in Victoria study provides an opportunity to examine patterns of parental information seeking and how parenting information use is affected by factors such as gender, socio-economic status and the parents' own wellbeing. We have data from parents collected in 2016 and 2019, and while that is not enough to confidently make conclusions about trends, we note differences over time where they seem relevant.



Findings

Sources of parenting information

Aside from their own families, the most frequently used source of information about parenting for Victorian parents is informal in nature – other parents, friends and neighbours (86%) (see Table 1). The next most frequently used source of parenting information, sitting at almost the same frequency as talking with other parents and friends, is online information (83%, up from 79% in 2016). Trusted professionals, however, continue to be important sources of advice and information about parenting. The finding that three in four parents seek parenting information from their children’s educators (up from 68% in 2016) is particularly noteworthy.

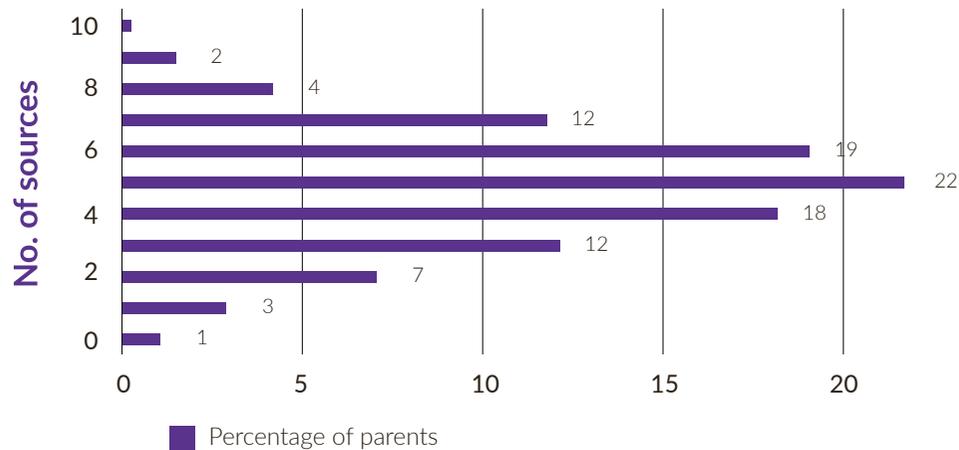


Figure 1. Number of different sources of information used by parents (2019 data)

Table 1. Where parents go for parenting information (2019 data)

Source of information	% of parents who use this source
Other parents/friends/neighbours	86%
Accessing information online	83%
Educators (childcare staff or teacher/principal)	72%
Books	64%
GP	57%
Other health professional (e.g. speech pathologist, psychologist)	56%
Parenting group	30%
Telephone helpline	15%
Community leader, such as an Elder or religious leader	14%
Other	4%

While most parents are consumers of online information about parenting, this is not their sole source of information. Virtually all parents (96%) draw on more than one source of information, and more than half had used at least five different sources (59%) (see Figure 1).

Who uses which information source?

Parent gender

Both mothers and fathers are consumers of parenting information (see Figure 2). Fathers report reading books on parenting as frequently as mothers (64%) and accessing online information about parenting (80%, compared to 86% of mothers). However, mothers were more likely to report using most of the information sources we asked about. Mothers also tended to consult a greater number of information sources than fathers did. For example, 58% of

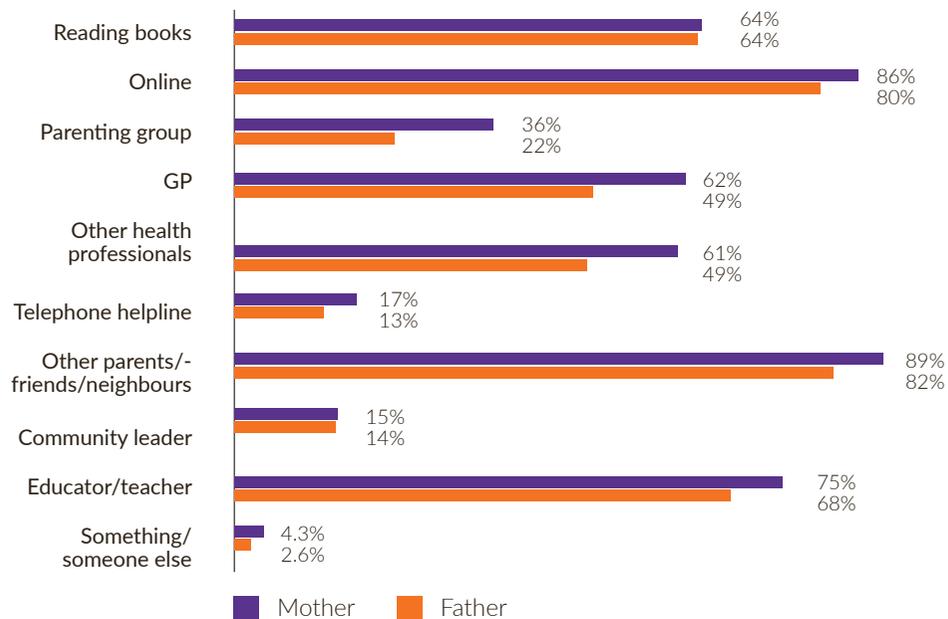


Figure 2. Where parents go for parenting information (2019 data)

¹ Low level of education = Year 9 & below to Diploma; High level of education = Bachelor's degree/Post graduate.

mothers had used five or more sources, compared to 46% of fathers. While very few (less than 3%) mothers said they used no or only one source of parenting information, just over 6% of fathers said they used no or only one source of parenting information.

Socio-economic factors

Parents with relatively lower levels of education¹ are active consumers of parenting information: 84% of this group talk to other parents and friends and 80% access online information. Parents with lower educational levels are also consulting professionals at around the same rate as more highly educated parents. However, as might be expected, we found small but significant differences in the frequency of use in some information sources (see Table 2).

Table 2. Use of different parenting information sources according to parents' educational attainment (2019 data)

Source	Low level of education ¹	High level of education ¹
Reading books	58%	74%
Online	80%	89%
Parenting group	28%	34%
Telephone help line	14%	18%
Other parents/friends/neighbours	84%	90%

Who uses which information source?

Whilst we did find² that parents from more disadvantaged neighbourhoods were more likely to rely on their GP for information about parenting (see Figure 3), socio-economic status as indicated by location was not related to parents' use of any other parenting information sources.

Parent wellbeing and their mental health

Parent wellbeing appears to influence patterns of information use. Parents with higher self-rated personal wellbeing were more likely to report using informal networks such as family and friends, compared to parents with poorer wellbeing. And, the higher parents' levels of reported psychological distress (measured using the Kessler ⁶³), the more likely they were to seek information from GPs, health professionals and telephone helplines.

Rural and regional

The only difference we found between parents living in metropolitan versus regional areas was that parents living in metropolitan areas were more likely to use online sources than parents living in regional areas (85% and 78% respectively).

Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) quintile (1= more disadvantaged, 5 = less disadvantaged)

	1	2	3	4	5
GP	62%	64%	60%	55%	50%

Figure 3. How neighbourhood disadvantage relates to use of GPs as a source of parenting information (2019 data)



² Using the SEIFA as an indicator of area of relative socio-economic disadvantage, where low scores (1) indicate relatively greater disadvantage and high scores (5) indicate a relative lack of disadvantage. Reference: Pink, B. (2008). *Information Paper: An Introduction to Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2006*. nc

³ Kessler, R., Andrews, G., Colpe, L. J., Hiripi, E., Mroczek, D. K., Normand, S.-L. T., ... Zaslavsky, A. M. (2002). Short screening scales to monitor population prevalences and trends in non-specific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959–976.

Who uses which information source?

Child age

The use of particular information sources varied depending on the age of the child (see Figure 4). Most notably, parents of younger children were more likely than parents of older children to access information online and from telephone helplines.

To a lesser extent⁴ there was some indication that parents of teenage children were less likely to seek parenting information via their children's educators compared to parents of both primary school and preschool age children. And the use of parenting groups dipped for parents of pre-schoolers but increased again for parents of primary school age children and again for parents of teens.

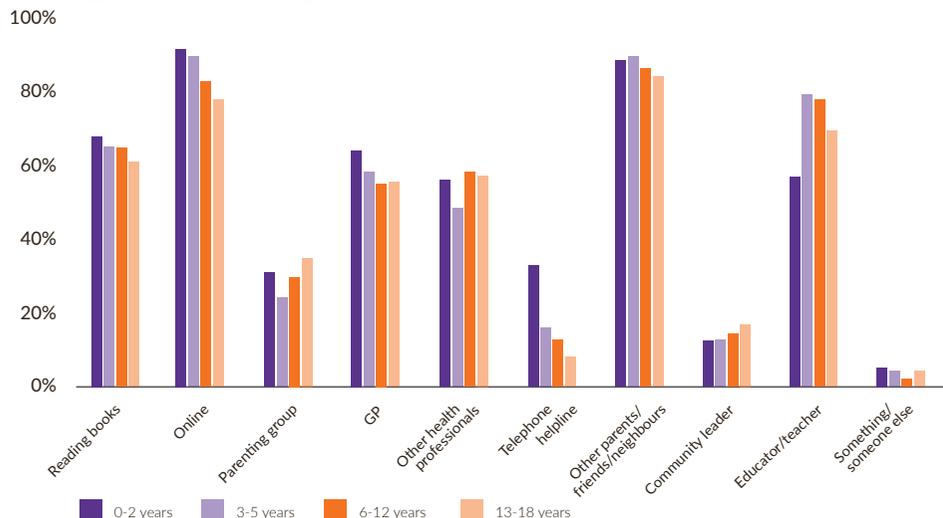


Figure 4. Child age in relation to sources of parenting information (2019 data)

⁴ That is, not statistically significant at $p < .001$, but indicating a trend.

Having a child with complex needs

The parents of children with complex needs such as a learning difficulty or medical condition, reported a similar pattern of information use as other parents. As would be expected, however, the parents of a child with a medical condition or learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties were more likely to have sought parenting information from a health professional and more likely to report having attended a parenting group (see Figure 5).

Source of information	Parents of children with a medical condition or learning difficulty	Parents of children without a medical condition or learning difficulty
Parenting groups	35%	28%

Source of information	Parents of children with an emotional or behavioural difficulty	Parents of children without an emotional or behavioural difficulty
GP	77%	52%
Other health professional	87%	48%

Figure 5. Percentage of parents of children with and without complex needs and their use of professionals for parenting information (2019 data)

Who uses which information source?

The co-parenting relationship

The level of consensus a couple has about their approach to parenting and degree of mutual support also appears to influence parents' information and advice seeking. Whilst being a small proportion of the total sample, parents who were in frequent disagreement or felt unsupported by their partner were more likely to seek information from parent groups and health professionals.



Conclusions and implications

The use of online sources of parenting information is nearly universal and occurs at close to the same frequency as using informal sources of information and advice, such as talking with friends and other parents. Indeed, when we factor out informal-social information support, the internet is now the predominant source of information on parenting regardless of gender, parent educational attainment or socio-economic status. Without denying the existence of a socially shaped digital divide, the observation that differences based on individual and social factors such as gender, education and socio-economic disadvantage were smaller for online information than most other information sources suggests that online delivery is one of the most universal and inclusive platforms available to us.

The finding that younger parents are even more frequent users of online information sources suggests that the generational trend away from traditional sources of information (e.g., books) to online sources will continue. The COVID-19 pandemic – which began after this survey was conducted – is also likely to increase parents' reliance on the internet for information about their parenting. While further research is needed on what online information sources parents are

using, and how they are making those choices, our findings reinforce ongoing efforts to increase the reach and effectiveness of technology-supported parenting information and support.

Having said that, parents are not solely reliant on the internet and typically use multiple sources of information. This suggests those designing and delivering parenting information programs, especially of a public health nature, need to consider how to leverage multiple information channels rather than rely solely on an online platform. The enduring and timeless importance of informal information sharing suggests the ongoing need to look for effective ways of 'resourcing' those conversations with accurate and reliable information that is easily shared. Creative use of social networking channels is an example of how this might be accomplished.

41% of respondents to the 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria survey were fathers. Given that much of what we know about the modern experience of parenting comes predominantly from studies of mothers, this research provides a unique insight into fathers' patterns of parenting information use.

Conclusions and implications (continued)

Contrary to widely held assumptions, our data suggests that fathers are active consumers of parenting information and that the overwhelming majority draw on more than one source of information on parenting. However, the finding that fathers use some parenting information sources less frequently than mothers – including online resources and some professional support services – indicates more could be done to make those resources relevant, accessible and useful to fathers.

Trusted professionals continue to be important sources of information for parents. Our finding that 70% of parents see their children's educators as a source of parenting information and advice suggests that systematic efforts to strengthen educator-parent partnerships and increase educators' skills and confidence in responding to parents' questions and concerns are needed. Our survey also reminds us that health professionals, such as GPs, and providers of parenting groups, will encounter parents presenting with parenting related concerns, who are also experiencing psychological distress and/or stresses in the inter-parental relationship. This means that in addition to building the capacity of health professionals to respond effectively to parenting issues, they also need skills and confidence in identifying and addressing associated adult wellbeing issues.





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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