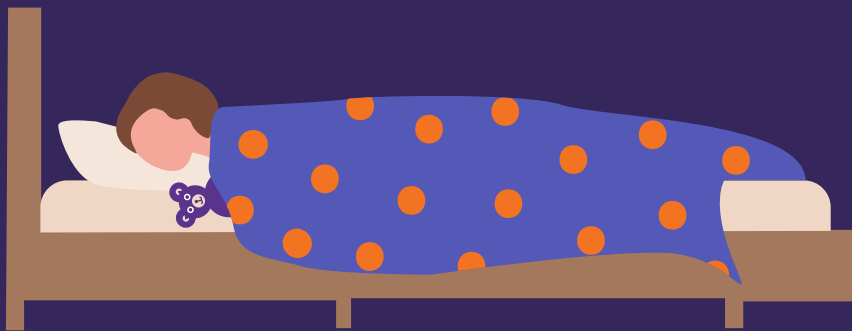


Research Brief

Parenting Today in Victoria:

Child sleep

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Key insights

- Around one third of parents say their child's sleep is a problem for them, including parents of teens.
- Parents of children with complex needs were at least three times more likely to report that their children's sleep was a problem.
- Parents with a history of mental health issues were twice as likely to report a problem with their children's sleep.
- The effect of other potential influences on child sleep (e.g. parent education, gender or income) were not significant once parent mental health and child complex needs were considered.
- Children's sleep problems were related to the amount a child slept and this was true regardless of child age. Across the board, parents reporting more child sleep problems had children who slept fewer hours per night.

What problems do parents experience with their children's sleep, and who is more likely to have these problems?

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

Child sleep presents a big challenge for many parents. Consistent with previous research suggesting 30–50% of parents describe their child's sleep as problematic^{1,2}, we know from Australian data that child sleep is a common challenge identified by parents across all child age groups^{3,4}. This Research Brief presents findings related to parents' experiences of their children's sleep using data from the Parenting Today in Victoria surveys of parents conducted in 2016 and 2019.

State and federal governments in Australia have expressed interest and invested in initiatives in the area of child sleep. This includes an initiative by the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services to expand the number of Early Parenting Centres across the state so that families with young children experiencing significant issues with sleep are able to access intensive support. In addition, the 2018-2019 Parliamentary Inquiry into the Sleep Health of Australians [Report from 2019](#) included recommendations related to funding research on the prevalence of sleep disorders, especially in under-researched population groups and with a focus on the effect of digital devices and electronic media on sleep health.

The 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria Study has the potential to establish a baseline to assist in evaluating the impact of other child and infant sleep support initiatives.



1 Fricke-Oerkermann, L., Plück, J., Schredl, M., Heinz, K., Mitschke, A., Wiater, A., & Lehmkuhl, G. (2007). Prevalence and course of sleep problems in childhood. *Sleep*, 30(10): 1371-1377.

2 Meltzer, L.J., Johnson, C., Crossette, J., Ramos, M., & Mindell, J.A. (2010). Prevalence of diagnosed sleep disorders in pediatric primary care practices. *Pediatrics*, 125(6), e1410-e1418.

3 Parenting Research Centre. (May 2017). *Parenting Today in Victoria: Technical Report 2016*. Melbourne: Parenting Research Centre.

Available at: <https://www.parentingrc.org.au/publications/parenting-today-in-victoria/>

4 Parenting Research Centre. (October 2019). *Parenting Today in Victoria: Technical Report 2019*. Melbourne: Parenting Research Centre.

Available at: <https://www.parentingrc.org.au/ptiv2019>

Findings

Reported problems with children's sleep

In 2016 and again in 2019, many parents reported that their children's sleeping patterns or habits were a problem for them (see Figure 1 below).

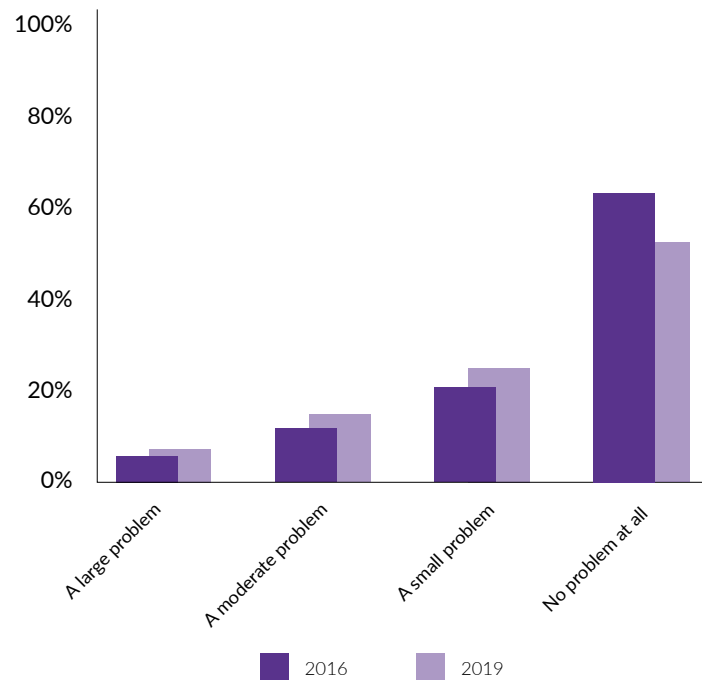


Figure 1. Percentage of parents reporting the degree to which their child's sleep was a problem

We heard this from over a third of parents in 2016 (36%); and in 2019, nearly half (44%) of the parents we surveyed reported child sleep was a problem. A substantial proportion

of these parents clearly struggle with their children's sleep – for 20% of parents in 2019, it was a large or moderate problem.

Also consistent across 2019 and 2016, parents of very young children were more likely to find their child's sleep a problem (see Figure 2 below). Although sleep was still at least a moderate or large concern for more than 20% of parents of adolescents.

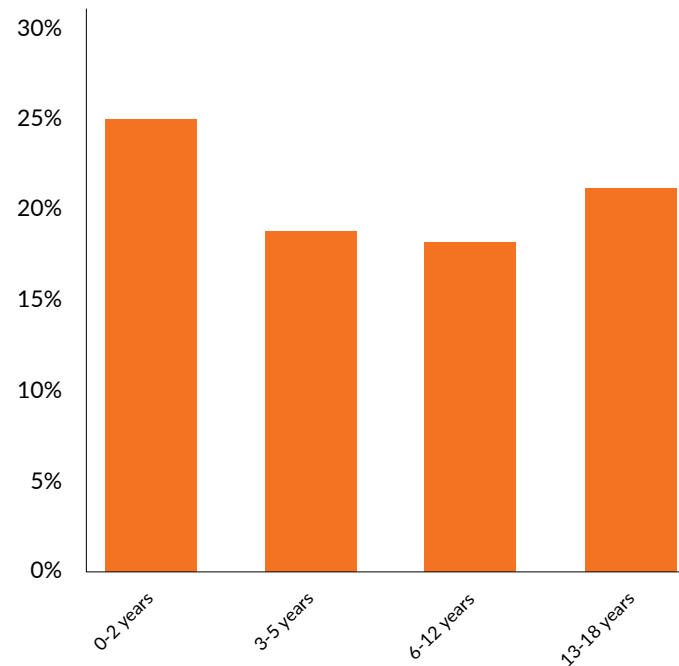


Figure 2. Percentage of parents reporting their child's sleep was a moderate or large problem by child age (2019 data)

Problems are often subjective – for example, it is possible that a toddler sleeping eight hours a night might be perceived as a problem by one parent, but not another. And naturally, older children sleep less than younger children (see Figure 3 below). But our data shows a real relationship between the amount of sleep a child gets and whether sleep is a problem for the parents. This means that, regardless of child age, less sleep for children relates to increased problems for parents.

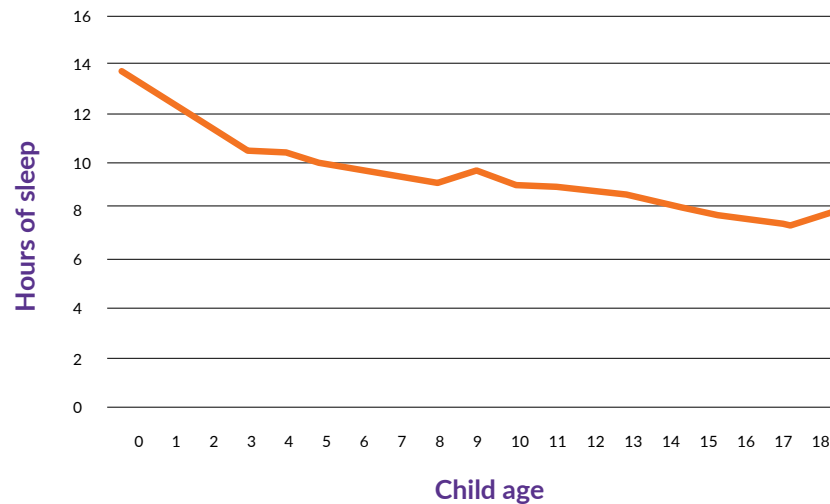


Figure 3. Average hours of sleep on a typical weeknight (or in 24 hours for children below 5 years), by child age (2019 data)

Sleep problems at different ages

Parents reported different sleep problems depending on how old their children were.

The following image shows the most common sleep problem at different ages (2019 data).

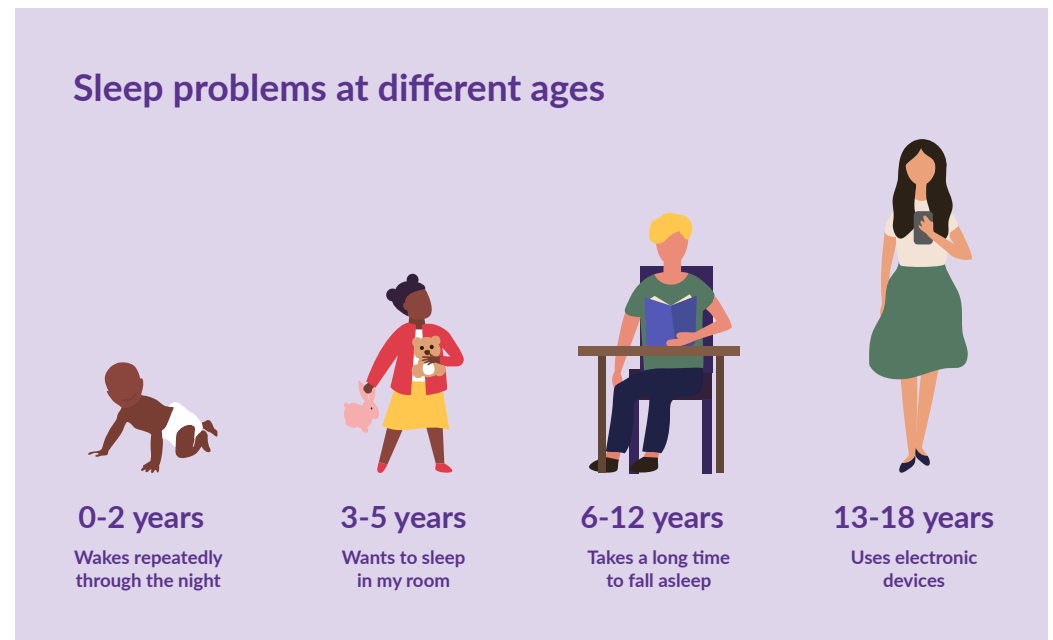


Figure 4. Sleep problems at different ages.

Parent mental health and child sleep problems

Among the parents in the 2019 survey, there was a strong and highly significant relationship between parents reporting problems with their children's sleep and reporting a history of their own mental health challenges.

About one in three parents who had experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress since becoming a parent reported their child's sleep was a moderate or large problem, compared with one in ten parents without these experiences. What we don't know from this data is the direction of the association – are parents with mental health concerns more likely to view their child's sleep as a problem for them, or does problematic child sleep exacerbate parent mental ill-health? What we do know is that age for age, the children of parents with mental health issues reported the same types of sleep problems as children of parents without mental health issues.

Sleep problems in children with complex needs

Children's sleep is more challenging for parents of children with complex needs, such as a medical condition or learning difficulty. In both 2016 and 2019, these parents were more likely to say their child's sleep was a problem.

Compared with parents of typically developing children, the challenges are considerable. In 2019, parents with children of complex needs were at least three times as likely to report issues with their child's sleep.

Other examples of challenges due to child sleep faced by this group of parents included:

- 57% of parents of children with behavioural issues reported sleep problems compared with 17% of parents of children without behavioural issues
- 50% of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder reported sleep problems compared with 19% of other parents
- 44% of parents of children with anxiety reported sleep problems compared with 17% of other parents.

Although sleep problems were a greater concern for parents of these children, the problems themselves were similar to problems reported by parents of typically developing children of the same age (see earlier image).



Parent mental health and children's complex needs overshadow gender, education and income

Initially, it appeared that mothers, parents with less education and parents earning in the lower income bracket were more likely to report issues with their child's sleep. But these results did not hold up to further scrutiny once we factored in parent's mental health and child complex needs.

When we looked at these results in the light of our evidence around parent mental health and children with complex needs, we learned that gender, education and income were less influential in the prediction of parents' ratings of their child sleep problems than both parent mental health and child complex needs. It seems that the extra challenges of parent mental ill-health and any health or learning issues in the child are the things which make it more likely that parents will rate their children's sleep as a problem.



Child sleep problems: The broader picture

Our study uncovered a number of other correlates of child sleep problems. As with parent mental health, we can't say whether these correlates cause child sleep problems or result from them.

For example, parents who lacked confidence in their parenting abilities were more likely to say they had a problem with their children's sleep. In 2019, 19% of parents who reported they felt confident in parenting said they had a problem, compared to 34% of parents who reported little confidence in themselves as a parent.

Child sleep problems may be worse for parents experiencing higher levels of disagreement with their partner. Ninety-three percent of parents who don't report their child's sleep to be a problem said they agreed most of or all of the time with their partner on how to parent compared to 87% of parents who do report a child sleep problem.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the parents who considered their children's sleep to be a problem were fatigued themselves. These parents reported increased levels of tiredness that interfered with their parenting.

Around 20% of parents reporting a child sleep problem in 2019 did not know where to get help with parenting.

This points to an area where greater targeting of parenting information and support is needed, which is especially important given the link between child sleep challenges and parent mental health. Giving parents reliable information about child sleep and settling techniques could also help alleviate parent distress.

What isn't related to child sleep problems?

Also interesting were the factors that were not related to parents' report of sleep problems. For the whole sample, these factors did not make a difference to reported sleep problems or total hours slept by children:

- whether parents lived in metropolitan areas or regional areas
- whether parents lived in areas of greater or lesser socioeconomic disadvantage
- parent age
- number of children in the family
- the number of hours children spent using technology.

Although, when just looking at parents of teens, the amount of time teens spent using electronic devices was related to parents' reports of sleep problems.

Conclusions and Implications

A major finding from our study is that child sleep problems are common for both parents of very young children and parents of adolescents. So, in addition to providing information to parents of babies about good sleep routines and settling practices, we must attend to what's going on for parents of much older children too. One in five parents of adolescents say their child's sleep is a big problem for them.

Parents need help to improve their children's sleep. Research by others suggests child and adolescent sleep problems may be underdiagnosed by professionals⁴. Yet we know what works to improve sleep – good bedtime routines and healthy lifestyles are a start - and sleep disorders are treatable, suggesting a need for further education and support for professionals in helping families identify the nature of the sleep challenges they face, and in getting the right support to improve child sleep.

Although our study cannot show causation, there is a clear link between child sleep problems and parent mental health, as well as parent fatigue affecting parenting. Our research around parent mental health issues and poor child sleep was informative. It told us that a parent's mental health is strongly related to poor child sleep. So, when parents present

to primary care or maternal and child health providers with child sleep concerns, discussing mental health concerns in a sensitive way with parents, in concert with helping them manage their child's sleep, will go a long way to improving family quality of life. There is evidence from other researchers^{5,6} that parents' depression or anxiety may disrupt the potential benefit of sleep interventions for their children, so to be effective, strategies aimed at improving children's sleep should also focus on parent mental health.

Our study has shown that sleep support should be part and parcel of supporting the developmental needs of children with a medical condition or learning difficulty. The vast gulf in child sleep quality reported by parents of children with complex needs and those of typically developing children is evidence of an unmet support need for this group of parents. We need to target good sleep health information and tailored resources specifically at parents of children with complex needs.



⁴ Meltzer et al, op cit.

⁵ Sciberras, E., Mulraney, M., Mensah, F., Oberklaid, F., Efron, D., & Hiscock, H. (2020). Sustained impact of a sleep intervention and moderators of treatment outcome for children with ADHD: a randomised controlled trial. *Psychological Medicine*, 50(2), 210-219

⁶ Thomas, S.R., O'Brien, K.A., Clarke, T.L., Liu, Y., & Chronis-Tuscano, A. (2015). Maternal depression history moderates parenting responses to compliant and noncompliant behaviors of children with ADHD. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 43, 1257-1269



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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November, 2020