

Parenting support in the early years

Key insights

- Most parents were confident about where to get parenting help, and most were satisfied with help received from their children's GPs, educators or mental health specialists.
- Over 90% of children participated in either day care or kindergarten, and most parents were satisfied with their communication with staff.
- Most parents attended Maternal and Child Health (MCH) First-Time Parent Groups and found them helpful, but few attended other parenting groups.
- Those less likely to attend a MCH parent group were parents with below-average household income, who spoke a language other than English at home, and who were not in paid work.
- Lower parenting confidence was related to less confidence in seeking help.
- Fathers, parents who spoke a language other than English at home and those with lower parenting confidence played and read less with their children.

What are the experiences of services and formal support for parents of young children?

This Research Brief derives from the 2016 Parenting Today in Victoria Study conducted and analysed by the Parenting Research Centre, and funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

Context

The early years are a critical time for children's development. Parents' engagement in their children's early development and learning has an impact on children's later educational and life experiences^{1,2}, and parents differ in their levels of engagement. In addition, some children have less exposure than others to early learning environments, such as kindergarten and child care, that promote development. These disparities highlight the need to understand influences on parents' engagement with services, helping professionals and other supports, particularly when it comes to support for their parenting.

We explore parenting support in the early years from a number of perspectives. We examine parents' reports on their experiences with early education and care, parenting groups, information sources, and professional help. In doing so we identify factors that are related to help-seeking and support experiences, such as parent demographic characteristics, wellbeing, and parenting confidence. We have also explored the implications of these results for policy and practice.

Findings

What were the characteristics of parents of young children?

We used weighted data from the Parenting Today in Victoria survey representing the views of 757 parents of children aged 0–5 years who were not yet at primary school. This was divided into two sub-samples: parents who had infants aged 0–2 years ($n = 454$) and parents who had children aged 3–5 years ($n = 303$).

Parent characteristics were similar for the two child age groups. The only significant difference was parent age: parents with younger children were more likely to be younger themselves. While not statistically significant, there was a trend toward higher rates of psychological distress, lower parenting confidence and greater likelihood of single parenting for parents of children in the older age group.

1 Heckman, J. (2006). Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science*, 312 (5782), 1900-2.

2 Shonkoff, J.P. (2016). Capitalizing on advances in science to reduce the health consequences of early childhood adversity. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 170(10), 1003-1007.

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Table 1. Characteristics of parents of children in the two age groups

Parent characteristic	Child 0-2 years (%)	Child 3-5 years (%)
Father	45.3	43.1
Does not live with partner	12.9	21.0
Parent aged 16-34 years (vs 35+)*	59.1	39.3
Low education (high school only)	36.4	34.2
Not in paid work	26.2	28.3
Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander	1.1	0.9
Language other than English at home	17.1	12.2
Low-income household	36.2	33.7
Income from wage or salary (vs other source)	77.4	71.3
Regional (vs metro)	21.1	20.6
Parent in poor health	10.1	13.4
(Women) History of postnatal depression	13.0	14.9
Current or historical depression, anxiety or substance issue	10.7	18.2
Feeling less confident as a parent ^a	18.4	22.4
High current psychological distress ^b	2.4	5.0

^a Parents completed the Me as a Parent Scale (MaaPs)¹. The lowest-scoring 25% of parents were defined as being less confident as parents.

^b Kessler 6 score = 13+²

*p<.001

What are parents' experiences of parenting groups?

ATTENDANCE AT PARENTING GROUPS

A large proportion of parents attend Maternal and Child Health (MCH) First-Time Parent Groups and playgroups (see Figure 1). Fewer parents reported attending other parenting groups (such as Triple P, 123 Magic or smalltalk).

For MCH parent groups, factors associated with attendance included the focus child being a first-born child (70% vs 61% for non-first children), the parent speaking English at home (67% vs 52% language other than English spoken at home) and household income being above average (69% vs 58% of those with below-average income).

Child age was the only factor that was related to attendance at playgroups - younger children were less likely to have attended playgroups than children aged 3-5 years. There were no significant predictors of attendance at 'other' parenting groups.

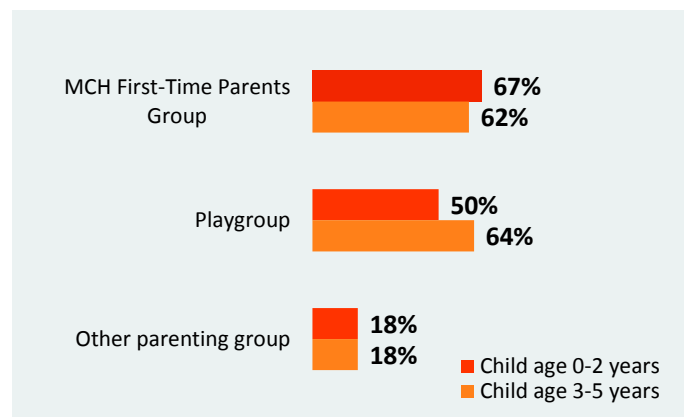


Figure 1. Parent or partner attendance at parenting groups (parents of children 0-2 & 3-5 years)

1 Hamilton, V.E., Matthews, J.M., & Crawford, S.B. (2014). Development and preliminary validation of a parenting self-regulation scale: "Me as a Parent". *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24, 2853-2864.

2 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.

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HELPFULNESS OF PARENTING GROUPS

Regardless of child age, 60% of those who attended a MCH parent group found it very or extremely helpful. Similar results can be seen for the other parenting groups (see Figure 2).

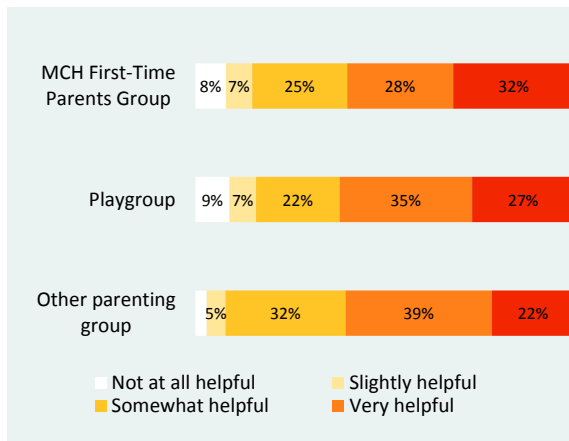


Figure 2. Helpfulness of parenting groups (parents of children 0-5 years)

INFLUENCES ON PARTICIPATION IN PARENTING PROGRAMS

Figure 3 shows a number of factors relating to parents' participation in parenting programs. Most parents who had attended a parenting program rated the factors as highly important, with the facilitator's gender being the least important.

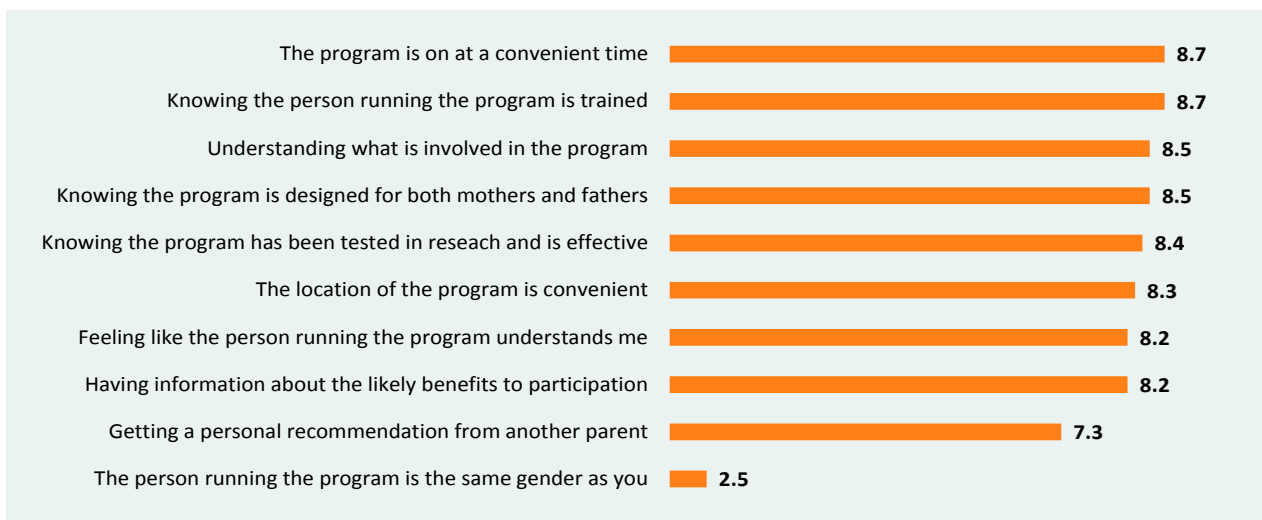


Figure 3. Importance (scale 1-10) of factors relating to participation in parenting programs (parents of children 0-5 years)

We asked parents why they did not participate in parenting programs. The most endorsed reason was that they did not feel they needed help for parenting issues (33%) followed by not knowing about the programs (19%) and having no time to participate (15%). Those in paid work were more likely (17%) than those not in paid work (4%) to report non-participation due to time constraints.

Where do parents obtain information, advice and help?

Parents sought information, advice and help about their young children from a number of sources. Overall, parents reported using informal sources (88%), own research (94%), individual professionals (85%) and their own family (86%), with similar proportions for the two child age groups (see Figure 4 on next page).

In general, parents were confident about knowing where to get parenting help from a professional if needed, with around two-thirds of parents saying they were very or extremely confident. The only factor associated with lower confidence in help-seeking was being less confident as a parent. Sixteen percent of parents with low parenting confidence reported they were not at all or slightly confident in knowing where to get parenting help. By comparison, only 7% of parents with higher parenting confidence said they were not at all or slightly confident in knowing where to get help.

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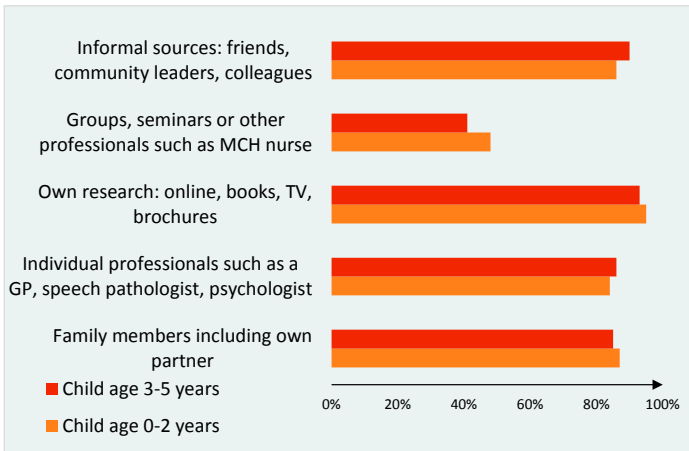


Figure 4. Sources of information, advice and help (parents of children 0-2 & 3-5 years)

Parents were asked whether they had ever sought help for their children from their children’s educators, a general practitioner (GP) or mental health specialist. Sixty percent of parents of children aged 3-5 years and 62% of parents of children aged 0-2 years had sought help from a GP, and those with a child with a medical condition or learning difficulty were more likely to do so. More parents of children aged 3-5 years (40%) than parents of children aged 0-2 years (15%) had sought help from their children’s educators. Parents with lower parenting confidence were less likely to seek help from their children’s educators. Few parents reported seeking help for their children from a mental health specialist (1% of parents of children aged 0-2 years and 8% of parents of children aged 3-5 years). Parents who reported depression, anxiety or substance issues since having children were more likely to do so.

We asked parents how they felt about experiences with professionals – whether they felt valued, or blamed or criticised. Most parents who obtained help from their children’s educators, a GP or mental health specialist reported positive experiences. Parents who had only one child were more likely to report negative experiences with GPs. Parents who said they spoke a language other than English at home were more likely than English-speaking parents to report poorer experiences when seeking support from educators and GPs.

What are parents’ experiences with early childhood education and care services?

FACTORS RELATING TO ATTENDANCE

About a third of children (34%) aged 0-2 years attended day care. Of children aged 3-5 years, 91% attended an early childhood education and care program, with 26% attending day care and 65% attending kindergarten. Therefore, 9% of 3-5 year olds did not attend either day care or kindergarten.

Parents with post-secondary school education were more likely to have children aged 0-2 years at day care, compared with parents who had high school only education (38.4% vs 21.8%). Parent education was not related to day care or kindergarten attendance for parents of children aged 3-5 years.

The small group of parents who were experiencing current psychological distress were more likely to have their children aged 3-5 years at day care (not kindergarten), compared with those parents who had no indication of current psychological distress (66% vs 27.2%).

Parent age was a factor, with older (35+ years) parents more likely to have children aged 3-5 years attending early childhood education and care compared with younger (16-34 years) parents (96% vs 82%).

COMMUNICATION WITH STAFF: PARENT CONFIDENCE AND SATISFACTION

Parents of children attending day care and/or kindergarten were asked about their satisfaction with the way their children’s early education and care staff communicated with them. There were no significant differences between the two child age groups, therefore, ratings for parents of the two child age groups are combined. Overall there was a high level of satisfaction with the way early childhood educators communicated with parents (see Figure 5).

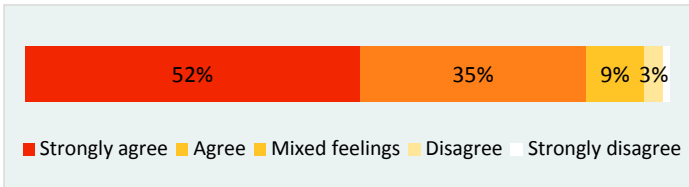


Figure 5. Extent of agreement – satisfaction with communication in early education settings (parents of children 0-5 years)

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Of parents with children attending kindergarten, 72% strongly agreed that they were confident talking to their children’s educators, compared with 66% of parents with children in day care only (not kindergarten). Confidence in communicating with educators was significantly related to overall level of parenting confidence. That is, those who were less confident interacting with early childhood educators also tended to have lower parenting confidence scores than parents who were more confident interacting with educators.

What are parents’ views on the importance of early years’ experiences?

Ninety-six percent of parents considered the activities they did with their children in the home such as reading and playing to be extremely or moderately important to their later development. We asked how often they did these activities with their child. Parents of younger children (0–2 years), engaged in these activities less often than parents of children aged 3–5 years. And fathers of younger children engaged in these activities less often than their mothers did.

Irrespective of child age, parents who spoke a language other than English at home engaged in these activities less often than parents who spoke English at home. And the parents who had less confidence as parents reported engaging in these activities less often than the parents who were more confident as parents.

Eighty-nine percent of parents considered activities out of the home such as swimming lessons, playgroup, and Gymbaroo extremely or moderately important to their children’s later development. Similar results can be seen for the importance of formal early learning settings (day care and kindergarten) in which 64% of parents felt these were extremely important, and 25% moderately important (see Figure 6).

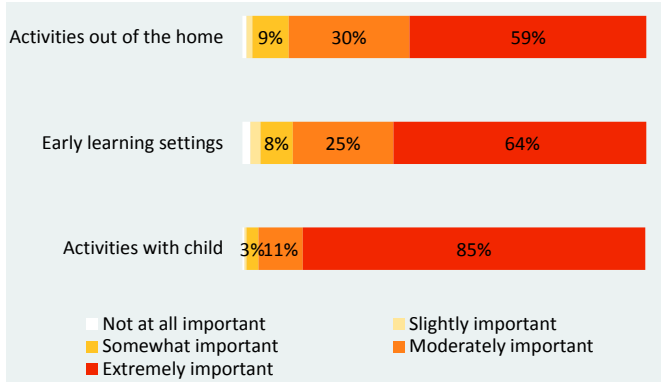


Figure 6. Importance of early learning activities (parents of children 0-5 years)

Implications for policy

This brief focused on services and formal supports for parents of below-school-age children. Participation in early childhood education and care services was high and parents were generally happy with them. However, this survey’s findings indicate there is room to increase involvement concentrating on younger parents, and those with a language other than English. Also, almost a third of parents of pre-school children did not feel confident communicating with their children’s educators, indicating an area for greater capacity building for early childhood staff.

Although attendance at Maternal and Child Health First-Time Parent Groups was moderately high (60%) there is a substantial proportion of parents who said that they, or their partners, had not attended. In particular, attendance rates were lower for parents who spoke a language other than English at home and those with below-average household income. More could be done to increase promotion of the benefits of this universal support option to these potentially vulnerable families.

Participation in parenting programs other than playgroups and MCH parent groups was low. These findings indicate the need to consider how to increase engagement of parents, and, in particular, parents not in paid work, those with below-average household income, and those who speak a language other than English. A range of strategies have been shown to be effective in increasing parent engagement in early years services (see Box 1) and these may be the key to increasing the uptake of MCH, playgroup and parenting programs by Victorian families.

Perceptions about the helpfulness of parenting groups were variable. Around 60% who had attended a parenting group (MCH, playgroup or parenting program) said they were either very or extremely helpful, meaning there is an opportunity to better address the support needs of the other 40% of attending parents. Further exploration of the expectations, preferences and support needs of parents of young children will help to better target parents. This includes parents who felt less satisfied with the offerings of parenting groups, as well as those parents who don’t attend parenting groups, many of whom are the most in need of support.

The findings of this survey offer some hints about the expectations and preferences of parents of young children; those who had attended parenting programs endorsed a range of factors that influenced their decision to participate. These include the convenience of the program, the quality of

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the trainer and the evidence underlying the program. Deeper exploration of the support needs and preferences of parents will help refine the offerings of group-based support options for parents of young children.

Parenting confidence was shown to be associated with a number of key behaviours and perceptions of parents including communication with educators, confidence in help-seeking and parent-child activities. This suggests great potential for increased attention on how to assess and promote parenting confidence when designing or providing services and supports for parents.

BOX 1. STRATEGIES THAT PROMOTE ENGAGEMENT OF PARENTS IN EARLY YEARS SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

- Provision of **individualised support** has been shown to be important for recruiting and retaining parents in programs, particularly for families experiencing the greatest barriers to participation such families with low income and poor mental health.¹
- Participation barriers may be reduced by approaches that **increase the bond** between the service provider and potential participants (such as **telephone or in-person pre-program contact**) and approaches that **provide additional support** (such as home-visits or referral to additional services).²
- Match offerings to the **needs of the community**.³
- Use **non-stigmatising entry points**, offer programs in **natural gathering places**, and **employ community members** who have appropriate skills to deliver the support.³
- **Build on existing service partnerships and networks** to identify needs, locate potential participants, build capacity and ensure continuity of the program.³
- Consider practical **accessibility** barriers such as poor public transport, longer travel distances and social isolation.³

STUDY DETAILS

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

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1 Hackworth, N.J., Nicholson, J.M., Matthews, J., Berthelsen, D., Cann, W., Westrupp, E.M., Ukoumunne, O.C., Yu, M., Bennetto, J., Bennetts, S., Hamilton, V., Johnson, N., Phan, T., Scicluna, A. & Trajanovska, M. (2013). *Early Home Learning Study: Overview and outcomes*. Final Report to the Victorian Government Department of Education and Early Child Development.

2 Ingoldsby, E. (2010). Review of interventions to improve family engagement and retention in parent and child mental health programs. *Journal of Child & Family Studies*, 19(5), 629-645.

3 Cortis, N., Katz, I., & Patulny, R. (2009). *Engaging hard-to-reach families and children* (Occasional Paper No. 26). Report prepared for the Dept of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Australian Government. Retrieved from: <https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/op26.pdf>.