

Child mental health and parent help-seeking

Briefing note



Summary

- Three in four parents feel confident they could identify mental health problems in their child, and know where to go for professional support if needed.
- Of those parents whose child has mental health problems, around three quarters report having someone in their life they could turn to for support, however, this was lower compared to parents of children without mental health concerns or other complex needs (85%).
- While many (60%) parents of children with mental health problems turn to family first when looking for help in supporting their child, this was lower than for parents of children who did not have any complex needs (80% turn to family first). Thus, parents who are concerned about their child's mental health may have limited access to informal supports, and be more reliant on professionals for help with their child.
- For parents of children with mental health problems, around four in five say they know where to go for professional support for their child.

- Yet, around a third of parents of children with mental health problems felt dissatisfied with the support they received from a GP or health professional and one in ten felt blamed or judged by those professionals. Parents of children with mental health concerns felt this way more so than parents whose child did not have any complex needs.
- Fathers were less likely to express confidence knowing whether their child was developing a mental health problem or knowing where to get professional help for child mental health.
- Compared to school-aged children, parents of pre-school children were less likely to know where to seek professional help for their children's mental health.





Why these results matter

Child and youth mental health has been high on the agenda of government in recent years.

Following the 2021 *Royal Commission report into Victoria's Mental Health System*¹ and the *Productivity Commission's Mental Health Inquiry Report*² the year before, state and federal governments have endorsed a National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy.

Focus on mental health literacy

Priority actions within the Strategy include increasing parent and carer mental health literacy and their skills to support child mental health and wellbeing.

Actions to increase parent mental health literacy include offering evidence-based

parenting programs and resources to parents, as well as nation-wide promotion of parenting programs such as Triple P Online.

It will be important to monitor the uptake and impact of these programs over time, to understand how government-initiated responses to mental health inquiries might make a difference in the lives of families.

How our study data helps

Population representative data available through the Parenting Today in Victoria study offers a way to monitor families' experiences in the context of large-scale child mental health reforms.

The Parenting Today in Victoria survey has been conducted every three years since 2016, and the

The 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria data provides insights about parents' mental health literacy and help-seeking experiences, and offers a baseline to assess change in parent awareness about child mental health and options for support

focus of each survey is guided by emerging areas of interest to the Victorian Government and other important stakeholders.

For the most recent survey in early 2022, parent mental health literacy was identified as an interest to the Victorian government, and to [Growing Minds Australia](#) – an initiative focused on promoting child mental health and wellbeing and increasing parent access to evidence-based support.

What parents told us about their mental health literacy

Mental health literacy includes knowledge about mental health concerns, identifying a mental health problem, and knowledge about where to go for professional support.³

We asked about parent confidence in knowing if their child is developing a mental health problem⁴ and knowing where to go if they need professional help with their child's mental health (asked separately for emotional and behavioural problems)⁵.

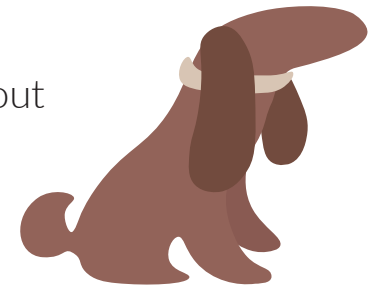
They know how their child is feeling

Of all parents who responded to the 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey, 75% agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in knowing if their child was developing a mental

Parents of children with mental health concerns were more literate about professional supports than parents in general

health problem, while 7% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 18% were unsure.

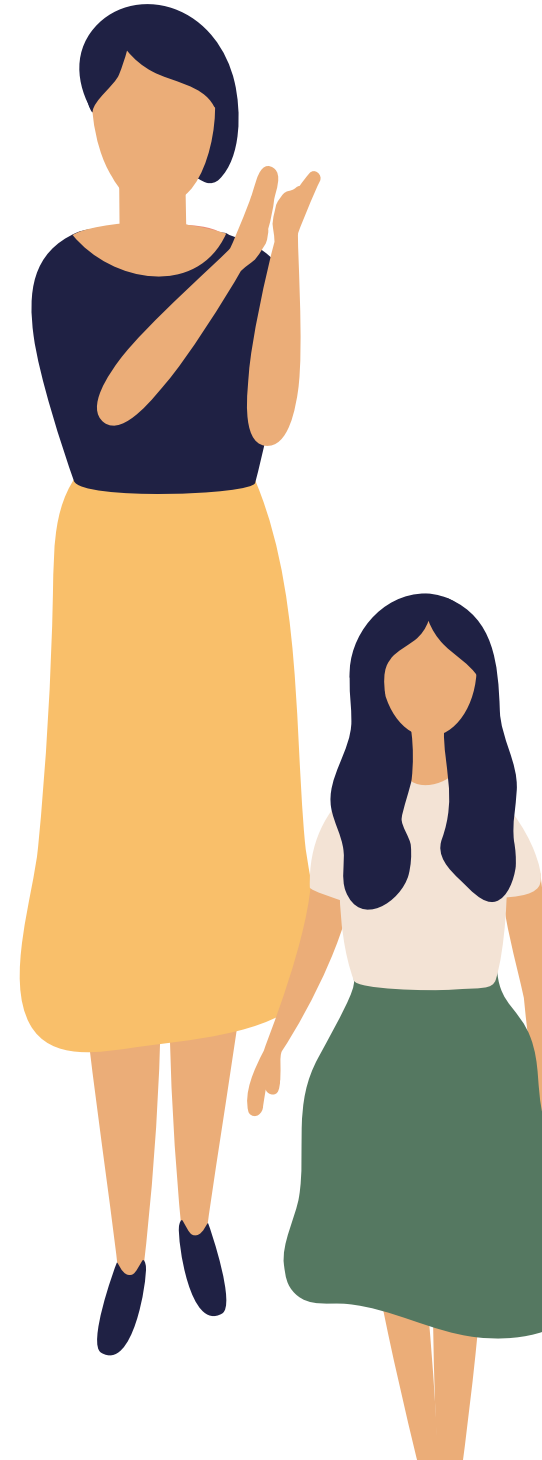
Parents of children with behavioural problems such as ADHD or conduct disorder (78%) and parents of children with emotional problems such as anxiety or depression (77%) had similar levels of confidence in knowing if their child was developing a mental health condition compared to parents of children without mental health concerns or other complex needs (76%)⁶.



They know where to get help

It is encouraging to note that many parents of children with mental health concerns know where to go for professional help if they need it:

- 75% of all parents agreed or strongly agreed they would know where to go if they needed professional help with their child's emotional problems, while 13% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 13% were unsure.
- Parents of children with behavioural problems (84%) and parents of children with emotional problems (81%) were more likely to say they know where to get professional support for emotional problems compared to parents of children without any complex needs (73%).
- Almost three quarters (72%) of all parents who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they would know where to go to get professional help with their child's behavioural problems, while 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement and 14% were unsure.
- Parents of children with behavioural problems (82%) and parents of children with emotional problems (76%) were more likely to say they know where to get professional support for behavioural problems compared to parents of children without any complex needs (70%).



Dads are less confident

Our survey revealed some areas where mental health literacy could be enhanced.

Fathers were less likely to say they were confident they would know their child was developing a mental health problem (67% compared to 81% in mothers), and that they knew where to get professional help for child emotional problems (66% compared to 78% in mothers) and for child behavioural problems (68% compared to 75% in mothers).

More confident by primary school

Compared to parents of school-aged children, parents of pre-school children were less likely to know where to seek professional help for emotional and behavioural problems.

Fathers were less likely to express confidence knowing whether their child was developing a mental health problem or knowing where to get professional help for child mental health



Finding support from family, friends and community

Parents' reliance on professional supports may not always be needed, particularly if informal supports are available.

Of those parents whose child has mental health concerns, most have someone in their life they could turn to for support (72% for parents whose child has behavioural problems and 77% for parents of children with emotional problems), however, this was lower compared to parents of children without any complex needs (85%).

Thus, it seems that parents raising children with mental health challenges might be



missing out on important support from family and friends.

Further evidence of an informal support gap for these families is seen in our survey findings, with parents of children with behavioural problems (59%) and parents of children with emotional problems (62%) less likely to turn to family first when looking for help in supporting their child, compared to parents of children without any complex needs (80%).



Sources of parenting information

Parents were asked where they went over the past 12 months when they needed information or advice about raising their children.

1. Online and friends

The most highly endorsed sources of parenting information or advice were online (85% had used) and asking other parents or friends (84% had used).

2. Teachers

Half of the parents surveyed said they had accessed parenting information or advice from their children's educators (50%).

3. Health professionals

Health professionals such as a maternal and child health nurse, social worker, speech pathologist or psychologist (50%) were also highly endorsed.

Parents of children with mental health problems were more likely to say they sought advice in person from a GP (64% of parents of children with behavioural problems, 56% of parents of children with emotional problems, 38% of parents of children without any complex needs).

However, lower proportions of parents of children with mental health problems used many other sources, compared to parents whose child did not have a complex need.

For example, parents of children with mental health problems were slightly less likely to say they used friends or other parents (77% behavioural, 82% emotional, 85% no complex needs), books (43% behavioural, 45% emotional, 50% no complex needs), and first-time parenting groups (5% behavioural, 4% emotional, 12% no complex needs).

Parents of children with mental health problems were more likely to use some sources of parenting support compared to parents of children without any complex needs.



Many parenting programs have good evidence of effectiveness for helping to reduce the impact of child mental health challenges on family members



Awareness and use of parenting programs

Parenting programs are one way parents can access the information they need to address their family's needs in relation to their child's mental health and their own wellbeing.

Parents of children with emotional and behavioural problems have a similar level of awareness about parenting programs compared to parents of children without any complex needs.

- About 2 in 5 parents of children with behavioural problems (44%), children with emotional problems (38%) and children without mental health problems or other complex needs (40%) were aware of parenting programs available to them.
- Parents of children with mental health challenges were more likely than other parents to have participated in an in-person parenting program in the last 12 months (19% of parents of children with behavioural problems, 17% of parents of children with emotional problems, 11% of parents of children without any complex needs).

These results point to the perceived value of parenting programs for families in need of support.

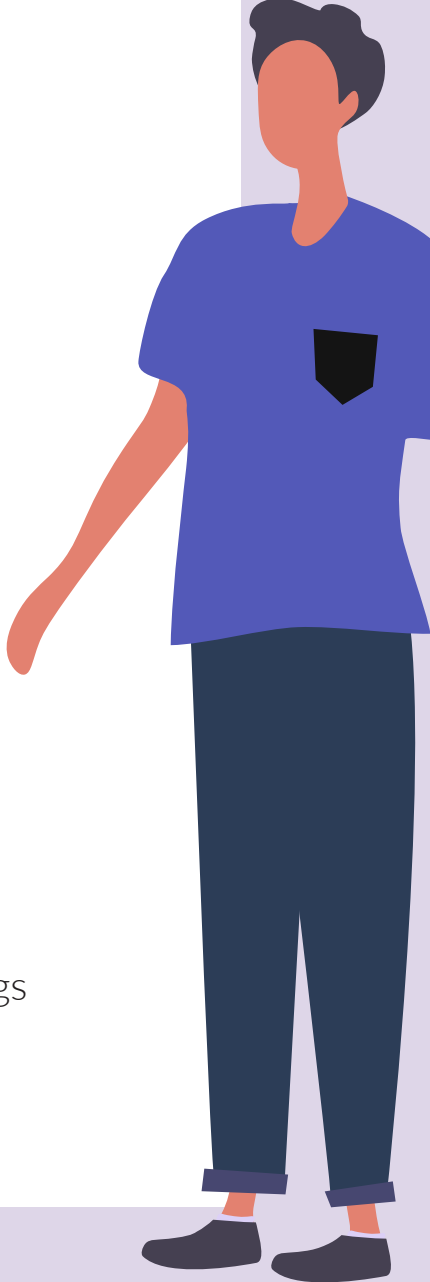


Satisfaction with support from health professionals

Most parents of children with behavioural problems (62%) and emotional problems (68%) were satisfied with the support they received for their child from a GP or health professional.

- However, these rates were lower than the rate of satisfaction with GPs or health professionals among parents of children without any complex needs (78%).
- Parents of children with behavioural problems (13%) and parents of children with emotional problems (8%) were more likely to feel blamed or judged by their GP or health professional compared to parents of children without any complex needs (5%).

These findings are important given the potential for perceived stigma and feelings of personal responsibility and guilt to get in the way of help seeking by parents.



Conclusion

While our findings suggest that most parents feel confident they would know when and how to seek support for child mental health concerns, other Parenting Today in Victoria findings suggest that parents might not always have access to the right kinds of support when they need it.

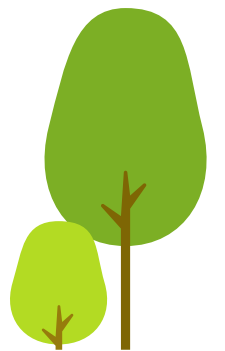
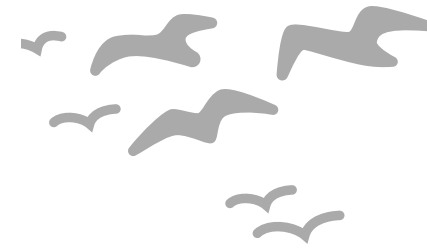
For example, among all parents who had not attended a parenting program in the last 12 months, 3 in 5 of them were not aware of available parenting programs. This same level of awareness of parenting programs was reported for parents who reported current child mental health problems and for those who did not.

Concerns about challenges accessing and navigating mental health support are also reflected in the key findings of the *Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System*⁷.

We know from our own study data that parents often go to online sources, their child's educators, maternal child health nurses, and GPs for parenting information and advice⁸. When parents go to these first-line sources for parenting information and advice, it is important that they receive support that normalises help-seeking, and does not result in parents feeling judged, blamed, or criticised.

Further, information about high-quality online information and evidence-based parenting programs should be available to educators, GPs and Maternal Child Health Nurses so they can share this information with parents as needed.

While the majority of parents in our study are confident they can identify child mental health concerns and know where to go for



professional support, about a quarter of parents are unsure where to go. Educators, health services, and evidence-based parenting websites (e.g. Raising Children Network) can play an important role in normalising seeking support for child mental health concerns, and increasing awareness about where parents can go for professional support.

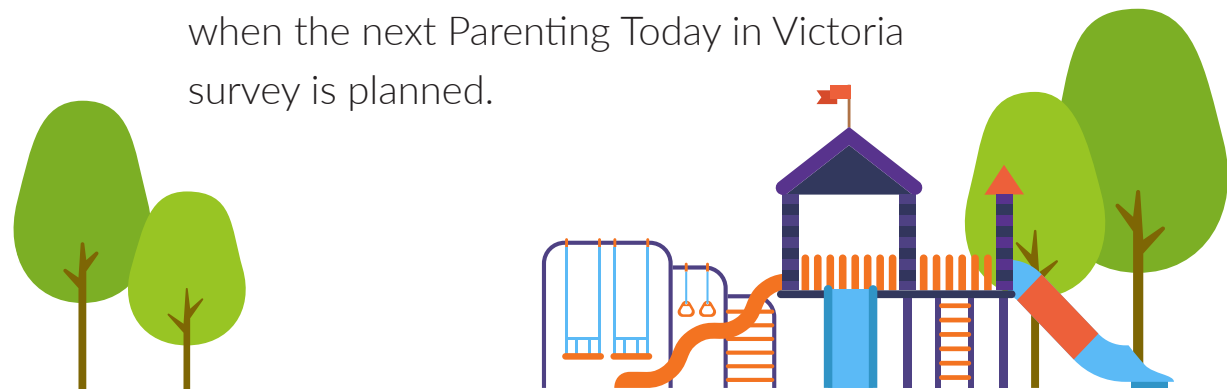
Our findings suggest that fathers and parents of pre-school children in particular would benefit from increased efforts to normalise parental helpseeking for child mental health.

Our findings also show that parents of children with behavioural and emotional problems are less likely to turn to family first when looking for help in supporting their child, compared to children without complex needs. These parents may be more reliant on professionals for support.

State and federal governments have recently invested in a range of strategies in line with the National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, including universally available evidence-based parenting programs.^{9, 10}

Parenting Today in Victoria data will provide a baseline to evaluate the success of these mental health strategies to improve parent awareness about child mental health and options for support.

The 2022 finding that parents of children with emotional and behavioural problems have a similar level of awareness about parenting programs compared to parents of children without complex needs will be important to re-assess in 2025 when the next Parenting Today in Victoria survey is planned.



Endnotes

1 State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, Summary and recommendations, Parl Paper No. 202, Session 2018–21 (document 1 of 6). Available from: <https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/>

2 Productivity Commission 2020, Mental Health, Report no. 95, Canberra. Available from: <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report>

3 Jorm, A. F. (2019). The concept of mental health literacy. In O. Okan, U. Bauer, D. Levin-Zamir, P. Pinheiro, & K. Sørensen (Eds.), *International handbook of health literacy: Research, practice and policy across the life-span* (pp. 53–66). Policy Press.

4 Parents responded to the following item on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree: 'I am confident I would know if my child was developing a mental health problem'.

5 Parents responded to the following two items on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree: (a) 'If I needed professional help with my child's behavioural problems (e.g., temper tantrums, breaking rules) I know where to go'; (b) 'If I needed professional help with my child's emotional problems (e.g., worries, fears, anxiety, depression), I know where to go'.

6 Parents were asked 'Does [child name] have any behavioural or emotional difficulties that have lasted, or are likely to last, for 6 months or more?' If they responded yes to this question, they were asked about the specific type of behavioural or emotional difficulty. For these analyses, child mental health was defined as having a parent-identified behavioural problem (e.g., ADHD, conduct disorder) or emotional problem (depression, anxiety). The data was analysed using three groups. The first group (n =

243) was derived from those parents who reported Behavioural problems (e.g., ADHD conduct disorder). The second group (n = 235) was derived from those parents who reported Anxiety or Depression. The third group (n = 1444) is comprised of parents of children who reported that their child did not have a complex need (i.e., the child did not have any current chronic health or medical, sensory or learning, behavioural or emotional conditions that had lasted 6 months or more). The first two groups are not mutually exclusive; that is a child can have both emotional and behavioural difficulties.

7 State of Victoria, Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, Summary and recommendations, Parl Paper No. 202, Session 2018–21 (document 1 of 6). Available from: <https://finalreport.rcvmhs.vic.gov.au/>

8 Parenting Research Centre. (2022) *Parenting Today in Victoria: Technical Report 2022* [Internet]. Melbourne, Australia: Parenting Research Centre. Accessed April 20, 2023. Available from: <https://www.parentingrc.org.au/publications/parenting-today-in-victoria/>

9 Department of Health, Victorian Government. (n.d.). *A new online parenting program to support emerging mental health and wellbeing challenges* [Internet]. Accessed August 14, 2023. Available from: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/mental-health-wellbeing-reform/a-new-online-parenting-program-to-support-emerging-mental-health-and>

10 Department of Health and Aged Care, Australian Government. (5 April 2022). *\$40.6 million to support the mental health and wellbeing of Aussie kids* [Internet]. Accessed August 14, 2023. Available from: <https://www.health.gov.au/ministers/the-hon-greg-hunt-mp/media/406-million-to-support-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-of-aussie-kids>

About the Parenting Today in Victoria survey

The 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey used computer-assisted telephone interviewing to randomly survey 2602 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0–18 years. In each family, one parent was interviewed in their preferred language.

Where questions required the parent to consider a particular child, they were asked to think about the one with the most recent birthday. The sample was weighted on parent education to match Victorian parents in the 2016 Australian Census (sample education was lowered for our sample).

Find out more

- [Parenting Research Centre](#)
- [Parenting Today in Victoria snapshot](#)

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Published November 2023

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