

Briefing note

Parenting Today in Victoria

# Participation in parenting programs

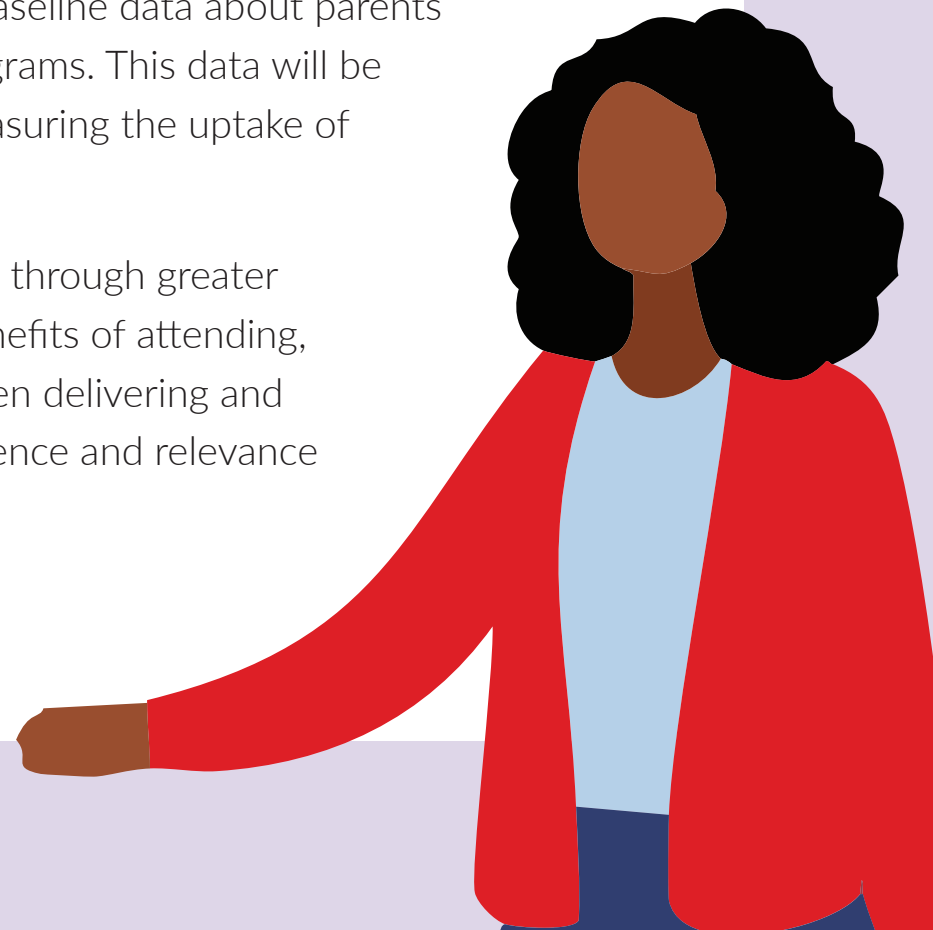
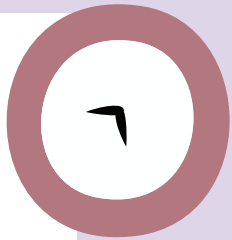


## Summary

- Research shows that parenting programs, both online and in-person, are an effective and cost-efficient way to improve outcomes for children.
- One in eight parents attended an in-person parenting program in the 12 months leading up to our 2022 survey.
- One in five parents attended an online parenting program during this time.
- Almost twice as many mothers attended online parenting programs compared to fathers.
- Parents are interested in parenting programs. One in five said they were extremely likely or very likely to participate in a parenting program in the future. A further two in five said they were 'somewhat likely' to participate. Only two in five said they were not likely to participate.



- Many parents don't know how or where to access parenting programs. Of parents who said they did not attend a parenting program in the last 12 months, three in five said they were not aware of programs for them to access.
- Parenting Today in Victoria findings provide valuable baseline data about parents who are attending in-person and online parenting programs. This data will be useful to service planners and service providers in measuring the uptake of programs over time.
- Participation in parenting programs could be increased through greater promotion of available programs, promotion of the benefits of attending, and attending to the features preferred by parents when delivering and promoting parenting programs, which include convenience and relevance to their circumstances.



## Context

**The 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey was the first time we had an in-depth look at attendance and experience of parenting programs, and in particular online parenting programs.**

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

Actions within the Strategy include continued funding of evidence-based parenting programs, and the nation-wide promotion of Triple P Online.

This briefing note provides valuable baseline data about parents who are attending in-person and online parenting programs in Victoria. It also provides information that can guide efforts to engage parents in parenting programs.

*We gathered information about who is and who isn't attending parenting programs. We also gathered information about what would influence parents to access parenting programs.*



# What is a parenting program?

**Parenting programs are educational programs focused specifically on building parenting knowledge, skills, and confidence.**

While parenting programs typically bring benefits for parents themselves, the aim of parenting programs is usually improved parenting skills and positive developmental outcomes for children.<sup>3</sup>

Evidence-based parenting programs have a strong scientific base, and commonly draw on social learning theory and cognitive-behavioural principles.<sup>4</sup>

Key components of parenting programs typically include:

- establishing a supportive and collaborative relationship with parents

- using clear guidance around positive parenting
- modelling of specific parenting skills
- feedback to parents as they practice newly acquired skills.<sup>5</sup>

Parenting programs can be offered in a range of formats:

- they can be brief (e.g. single sessions.), or offered over an extended period of time (e.g. weekly sessions for 6 months or more)
- they can be held as individual sessions or group sessions, in a range of settings, including at home, at a clinic or in a community setting
- they can be delivered in person or online.

Online parenting programs are parenting programs that involve online or digital delivery, but are

similar to the definition of parenting program, in that they focus on parenting skills. They are more than online information and advice (e.g. a parenting website) and go beyond parenting advice that might be provided to parents in the context of telepractice.

## Effectiveness of parenting programs

Authoritative recent reviews show in-person and online parenting programs have a strong evidence base for improving outcomes for children and for parents themselves.

Such outcomes are observed in parent-child interactions, child behavioural, emotional and mental health outcomes, and parent wellbeing.<sup>6,7,8,9</sup>



There is also evidence for the cost-effectiveness of both in-person<sup>10</sup> and online parenting programs.<sup>11</sup> It is important to note that not all parenting education programs or seminars available to parents in the community are evidence based.

In our 2022 survey, we asked parents if they had participated in a face-to-face parenting education group or seminar (e.g. Triple P, Tuning into Kids). We also asked if they had participated in an online parenting education program or seminar.

The question was designed to seek information from parents about their attendance at evidence-based parenting programs. As some parents may have misunderstood what was meant by “parenting education program or seminar”, some parents in our sample may be reporting on attendance at programs or seminars that are not evidence-based and do not fit the definition of parenting programs as defined earlier.

## Numbers of parents attending parenting programs

Of the 2602 parents we surveyed:

- 13% had been to an in-person parenting program in the previous 12 months
- 18% had been to an online parenting program in the previous 12 months
- 11% had attended parenting programs online only, 5% had attended in-person only, and 7% had attended both online and in-person parenting programs in the previous 12 months
- 76% had not attended a parenting program in the previous 12 months.

*Even though our survey came at a time when Victorian parents were emerging from a period of extended COVID-19 lockdowns (March 2022), we found many parents had attended parenting programs in the 12 months prior.*



# The majority of parents find parenting programs helpful

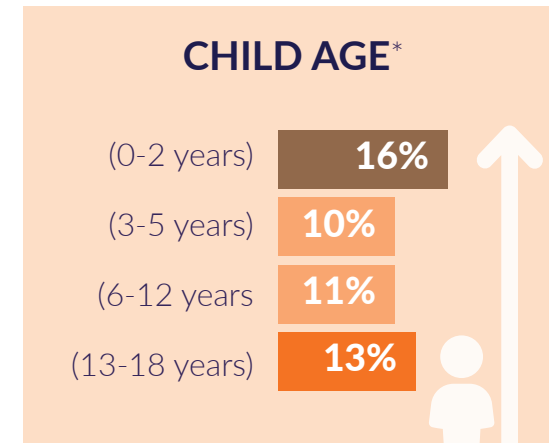
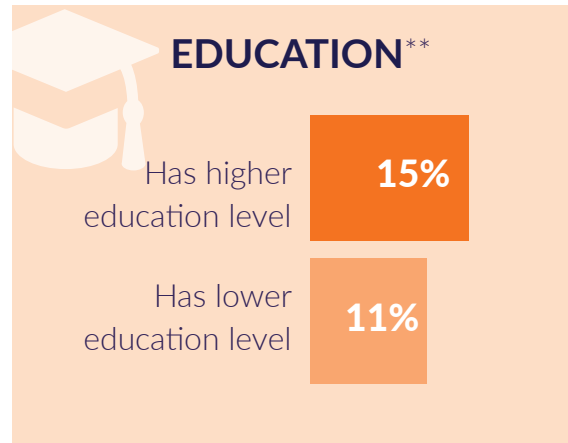
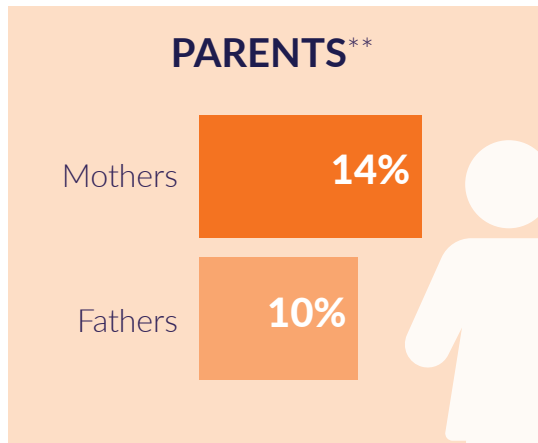
- More than half reported that the parenting programs they attended were 'extremely helpful' or 'very helpful' (54% online; 52% for in-person). Only 2% of parents said the parenting program they attended was 'not at all helpful'.
- Parents were slightly more likely to report that they completed online parenting programs (86%) compared to in-person programs (79%).
- Parents were slightly more likely to attend an in-person parenting program with their partners (47%) compared to parents who attended online programs (41%).
- Parents who said they had participated in an online parenting education program or seminar were asked 'Did you do the program by yourself or with the help of a professional?' The majority (68%) said they did it by themselves, while a third (32%) said they were helped by a professional.
- Parents who said they did not participate in in-person parenting education groups or seminars (76% of those surveyed) were asked about their awareness of 'any parenting programs that are available to them to access' – 3 in 5 said they were not aware of programs for them to access.
- Fathers were less likely to be aware of programs (34%) than mothers (46%).\*\*\*
- Parents of adolescents were less likely to be aware of programs (34%) compared to parents of younger children (49% of parents of children aged 0-2 years, 41% of parents of children aged 3-5 years, and 40% of parents of children aged 6-12 years).\*\*\*

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$



# Who attends in-person parenting programs?

Summary of who attended in-person parenting programs in the 12 months prior to the survey.



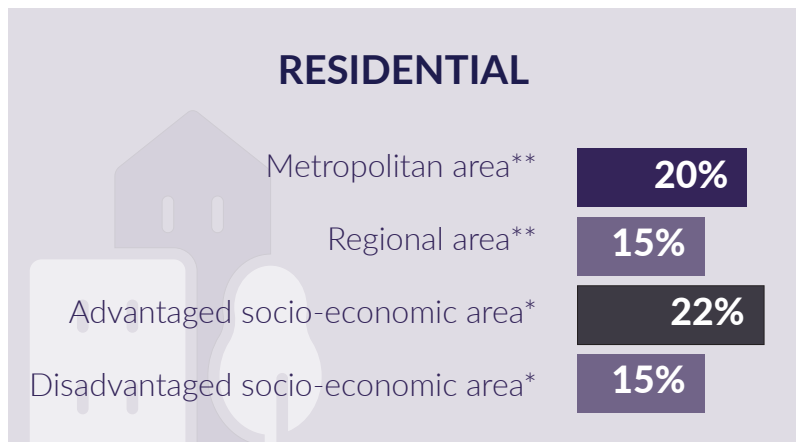
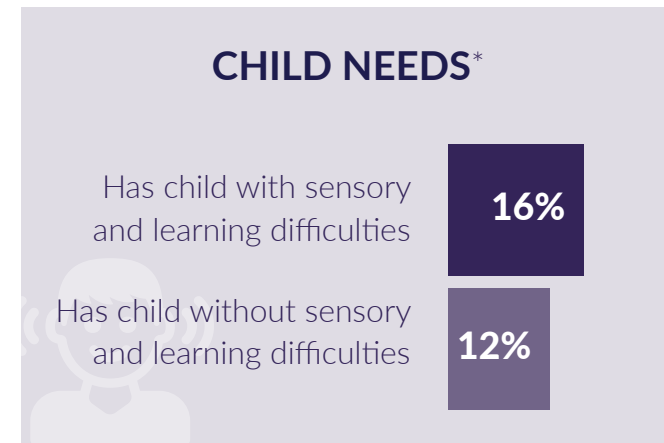
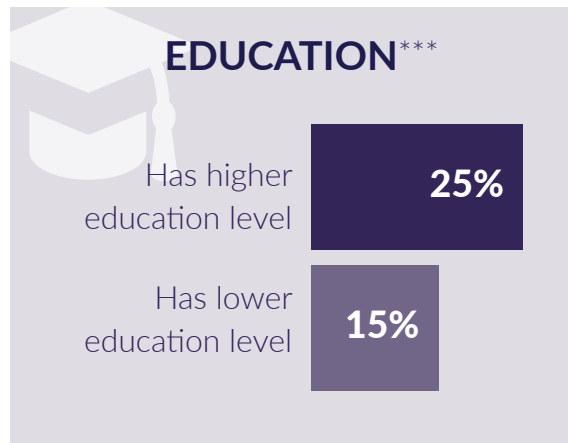
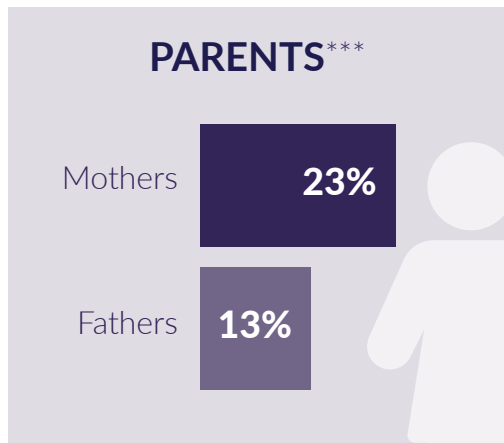
No differences in attendance at in-person parenting programs between:

- parents from metropolitan compared to regional areas
- parents from disadvantaged compared to advantaged socio-economic areas
- parents from different income groups.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

# Who attends online parenting programs?

Summary of who attended online parenting programs in the 12 months prior to the survey.



No differences in attendance at online parenting programs between:

- parents of children with and without complex needs (except for sensory difficulties)
- parents with children of different age groups.

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

# Wellbeing and self-care of parents who attended in-person parenting programs

Summary for those who did and did not attend in-person parenting programs in the 12 months prior to the survey.

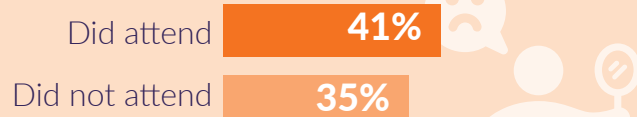
## Describe their diet as healthy\*\*\*



## Get regular exercise\*\*



## Say they are hard on themselves\*

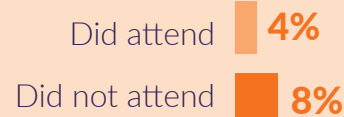


*Our results suggest an association between attendance at parenting programs and greater self-care, but also with greater levels of stress and fatigue.*

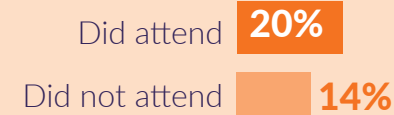
## Experience moderate levels of distress\*



## Experience high levels of distress\*



## Say their work performance suffers because of personal and family commitments\*\*



\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

# Wellbeing and self-care of parents who attended online parenting programs

Summary for those who did and did not attend online parenting programs in the 12 months prior to the survey.

## Describe their diet as healthy\*\*



## Get regular exercise\*\*\*



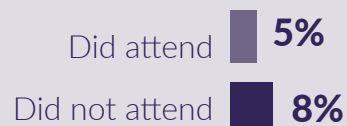
## Feel that tiredness stops them parenting the way they would like\*\*



## Experience moderate levels of distress\*



## Experience high levels of distress\*



## Say they are hard on themselves\*\*\*



## Say their work performance suffers because of personal and family commitments\*\*



## Struggle with feelings of guilt or shame about parenting\*\*



## Feel under time pressure\*\*



\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

## Future attendance

All parents were asked 'how likely is it that you will participate in a parenting program in the future?'

- One in five (21%) parents said they were 'extremely likely' or 'very likely' to participate in a parenting program in the future. A further two in five (41%) said they were 'somewhat likely' to participate. Almost two in five (38%) said they were not likely to participate in a parenting program in future.
- Parents of children aged 0-2 years were more likely to participate in future (74%) compared to parents of older children (68% parents of children aged 3-5 years, 63% parents of children aged 6-12 years, and 48% parents of children aged 13-18 years).\*\*\*

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Parents of younger children reported a higher level of likelihood to participate in future.*



- Mothers (67%) reported a higher level of likelihood to participate in future compared to fathers (56%).\*\*\*
- When comparing parents from metropolitan versus regional areas, different socio-economic areas, or parents of children with or without complex needs, there were no differences in whether they were likely to participate in a parenting program in future.



## Influences on attendance

All parents were asked to identify the features of a parenting program that would influence their decision to participate, with the top six answers being that the program:

- is held at a convenient time of day (93%)
- is held in a convenient location (90%)
- addresses personally relevant issues (90%)
- has been demonstrated to be effective (89%)
- is easy to access (88%)
- is offered in my language (87%).

Many parents endorsed features common to online programs – features such as being able to complete the program in the parent's own time (83%) and online (80%) were rated higher than being able to complete the program in-person (61%) or in a group (49%).

## Program features that ranked higher for sub-groups of parents

**The most popular features of parenting programs were largely consistent across sub-groups of parents. However, some program features were ranked as more important by some sub-groups compared to others.**

### Having a trained practitioner present

Parents who had attended a parenting program in the past 12 months felt having trained practitioners conduct the program was important.

This feature was ranked sixth by parents who had completed an online program (92%) or in-person program (91%) yet was ranked eighth by parents who had not attended a parenting program (85%).

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

*Mothers endorsed more program features as important compared to fathers. Nonetheless the rank order of features were similar across mothers and fathers.*

Parents from more disadvantaged areas were less influenced by the program being conducted by trained practitioners (79% for second most disadvantaged group vs 88% for least disadvantaged group).\*\*\*

### Language options

Parents in regional areas felt having the program presented in their own language was important.

Responses from parents in regional areas suggested that programs being offered in their own language (90%) was as important for this group as convenience in time and location (90% and 89%, respectively).

## Co-delivery by a parent

Parents from more disadvantaged areas were more influenced by the program being delivered or co-delivered by a parent (60% for most disadvantaged group vs 49% for least disadvantaged group).\*\*\*

## Parents with younger children

Parents with younger children were more influenced by certain features compared to parents with older children.

Parents of children aged 0-2 years were more influenced by the program being easy to access (94%), addressing personally relevant issues (94%), being professionally produced and presented (91%), offering ongoing or post-program support (86%), being delivered in person (70%), and delivered or co-delivered by a parent (57%).\*\*\*

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$





# Implications and recommendations

The information in this briefing note is important for two reasons. Firstly, it provides a baseline for future investigations into parent use of parenting programs. Secondly, it provides insights into how policy makers and service providers can act now to increase parent participation in parenting programs.

## A baseline for the future

Repeating this survey at three-year intervals provides a valuable opportunity to monitor changes in parent engagement in parenting programs over time.

Monitoring this change is of interest to policy makers and program funders, to service providers and to researchers, especially given significant recent government investment in both online and in-person parenting programs.

In the 12 months leading up to the 2022 survey, more parents attended online parenting programs

than in-person programs. One in five parents attended an online parenting program and one in eight attended an in-person program. While this may reflect COVID-19 restrictions to in-person interactions, it will be worth tracking this into the future, as parents tell us that convenience is an important influence on their help-seeking preferences.



## Most parents endorse the idea of parenting programs

One in five parents said they were very or extremely likely to participate in them in the future.

Mothers and parents with higher levels of education may be more likely to attend parenting programs. And parents who attend in-person parenting programs tend to have younger children or children with complex needs.

*Parents who attend online parenting programs are more likely to struggle with feelings of guilt or shame, to feel under time pressure, and to feel that tiredness gets in the way of parenting.*



## Correlation with self-care – but higher feelings of guilt

Parents who attend both online and in-person parenting programs tend to be more likely to engage in self-care (e.g. exercise and healthy diet), yet are also likely to be hard on themselves as parents.

They are also more likely to report moderate levels of psychological distress.

These findings suggest that parenting programs may be attracting parents who are self-critical and set overly high standards for themselves and their parenting. This highlights the need for parenting programs to address parent wellbeing, including feelings of guilt and shame.

These findings provide intelligence about who is likely to be gaining benefit from parenting programs and may be useful



in understating how to tailor parenting support options into the future.

Future investment in online programs is likely to tick the box for many parents – including more fathers – who are seeking accessibility and personal relevance in the way supports are provided to them. However, studies show that attrition rates from universally provided online parenting programs can be very high<sup>13</sup>, suggesting that parent reports of attendance and completion may be influenced by social desirability bias.

## **Opportunity for online programs**

Parenting Today in Victoria findings suggest that 85% of parents are accessing parenting information or advice online.

For example, 35% of parents said they have used raisingchildren.net.au, which has almost doubled since the previous survey (18% in 2019).

*Reaching tired, distressed and busy parents via digital delivery modalities is an insight that service providers can build upon.*



Yet only 18% say they take part in online parenting programs.

Online programs offer an opportunity for increasing engagement in parenting programs due to convenience and accessibility. Online programs – especially asynchronous programs<sup>14</sup> – also allow for increased tailoring and personalisation of content compared to in-person programs.



There is also emerging evidence that online programs can be delivered at lower cost to service providers without loss in achievement of outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, online programs offer increased accessibility for all parents, and especially for underserved groups who may find it difficult to access in-person programs (e.g. fathers, parents of children with complex needs, parents in remote/regional areas).

Parenting programs targeting specific language groups might be more efficient if delivered online, as they can reach a larger group who may be geographically dispersed.

This is especially likely for parents living in regional areas who may need to travel long distances to attend a parenting program delivered in their preferred language.

## Increasing parent participation in parenting programs

Policy makers and service providers should consider the preferences of parents, specifically that:

- programs are held at a convenient time of day and at a convenient location
- programs are offered in community languages
- programs are targeted to specific needs and are effective
- programs are easy to access
- resources are professionally produced and presented
- trained practitioners deliver the program, however parents as co-presenters should be considered
- the program is structured yet allows flexibility so that it can be tailored to the needs of individual parents to address personally relevant issues.

## Promotion of parenting programs

It seems that many parents are unaware of the availability of important parenting supports.

Of parents who said they did not attend a parenting program in the last 12 months, three in five said they were not aware of programs for them to access.

Awareness-raising efforts are required to ensure families most in need of support do know there are options available to them.

*Our findings offer potential solutions for increasing parent participation in parenting programs.*



## 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 Doyle, F. L., Morawska, A., Higgins, D. J., Havighurst, S. S., Mazzucchelli, T. G., Toumbourou, J. W., ... & Sanders, M. R. (2023). Policies are needed to increase the reach and impact of evidence-based parenting supports: A call for a population-based approach to supporting parents, children, and families. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 54(3), 891-904.
- 4 Sanders, M. R., Divan, G., Singhal, M., Turner, K. M. T., Velleman, R., Michelson, D., & Patel, V. (2022). Scaling Up Parenting Interventions is Critical for Attaining the Sustainable Development Goals. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 53(5), 941–952.
- 5 Sanders, M. R., Divan, G., Singhal, M., Turner, K. M. T., Velleman, R., Michelson, D., & Patel, V. (2022), op cit.
- 6 Doyle, F. L., Morawska, A., Higgins, D. J., Havighurst, S. S., Mazzucchelli, T. G., Toumbourou, J. W., ... & Sanders, M. R. (2022). Policies are needed to increase the reach and impact of evidence-based parenting supports: A call for a population-based approach to supporting parents, children, and families. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, 1-14
- 7 Nystrand, C., Hultkrantz, L., Vimefall, E., & Feldman, I. (2020). Economic return on investment of parent training programmes for the prevention of child externalising behaviour problems. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*, 47(2), 300-315.
- 8 Sanders, M. R., Divan, G., Singhal, M., Turner, K. M., Velleman, R., Michelson, D., & Patel, V. (2022), op cit.

- 9 Spencer, C. M., Topham, G. L., & King, E. L. (2020). Do online parenting programs create change?: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 34(3), 364-374.
- 10 Sampaio, F., Nystrand, C., Feldman, I., & Mihalopoulos, C. (2024). Evidence for investing in parenting interventions aiming to improve child health: a systematic review of economic evaluations. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 323-355.
- 11 Ingels, J. B., Corso, P. S., Prinz, R. J., Metzler, C. W., & Sanders, M. R. (2022). Online-delivered over staff-delivered parenting intervention for young children with disruptive behavior problems: Cost-minimization analysis. *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting*, 5(1), e30795.
- 12 Child 'complex needs' refers to behavioural or emotional difficulties, sensory or learning difficulties, including disability or medical conditions.
- 13 Dadds, M. R., Sicouri, G., Piotrowska, P. J., Collins, D. A. J., Hawes, D. J., Moul, C., Lenroot, R. K., Frick, P. J., Anderson, V., Kimonis, E. R., & Tully, L. A. (2019). Keeping parents involved: Predicting attrition in a self-directed, online program for childhood conduct problems. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 48(6), 881–893.
- 14 An asynchronous online program is one where information is shared across time with participants, usually through completion of guided self-directed online content that includes reading and/or videos, and may be accompanied by practitioner contact via email or text messaging. In contrast, synchronous online programs occur in real-time with a parent or a group of parents, usually using videoconferencing or webinar technology. See: [https://www.parentingrc.org.au/telepractice\\_hub/telepractice-basics/](https://www.parentingrc.org.au/telepractice_hub/telepractice-basics/)
- 15 Ingels, J. B., Corso, P. S., Prinz, R. J., Metzler, C. W., & Sanders, M. R. (2022)., op cit.

## About the Parenting Today in Victoria survey

**Parenting Today in Victoria has been run 3 times starting in 2016. It is a population level study involving 2600 parents of 0-18 year-olds at each time point.**

The survey is designed with input from Victorian policy-makers to maximise the value of the data to address key policy issues. The results released are relevant to issues such as family functioning, child safety and wellbeing, parent engagement in children's learning, and the use of technology in parenting support.

The latest survey was conducted in March 2022 as the community emerged from the COVID-19 response and provides a unique opportunity to learn how parents are faring after this unprecedented period.

It will act as a baseline for measuring future parent wellbeing.

### **In 2022 we spoke to:**

- 2602 primary caregivers of children under 19 years old, aged between 21-89 years
- 43% of these were men (n=1108)
- 2% identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
- 74% were from urban areas
- 26% from regional and remote areas
- 97% were the child's biological mother or father

Parents were interviewed in English or one of five community languages.



## About us

We help children thrive by driving new and better ways to support families in their parenting. We have been helping governments and community agencies put the best scientific evidence on parenting support into action for more than 20 years.

We work in the fields of child health, education and welfare, synthesising, translating and exchanging knowledge so that it can make a difference in the real world. As well as working with policy-makers and practitioners, we have several flagship programs that directly support parents including [raisingchildren.net.au](https://raisingchildren.net.au), and [MyTime](#) which offers free support for parents of children with disabilities.

## Find out more

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

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