

How are fathers faring?

Briefing note



Summary

- The Parenting Today in Victoria survey indicates that overall fathers are engaging in positive parenting practices, feel confident in their parenting and find parenting rewarding.
- However, many fathers face difficulties maintaining their health and wellbeing while balancing family roles with work commitments.
- Self-care among fathers is on the decline, which is concerning, given its impact on mental and physical health.
- There are ongoing challenges for many fathers in accessing the support they need for their parenting and for their children's mental health.
- Online parenting information shows promise for meeting the mental health and parenting needs of fathers, who tend to prefer doing their own research for parenting advice rather than seeking professional input.



Why these findings matter

Fathers' involvement in family life and specifically in interactions with their children has been associated with behavioural, social and cognitive benefits for children.¹

Research suggests Australian fathers, despite working long hours, are actively involved in caring for their children. A comparative review² of data collected across Australia, USA, Denmark, Italy and France indicates globally fathers are dedicating more time to childcare and expanding their range of caregiving responsibilities when compared to previous decades.

Furthermore, the evidence indicates that Australian fathers are doing more than their comparators in other nations².

However, until recently, limited research had focused on describing fathers' experiences of parenting.

The Parenting Today in Victoria study helps to fill this gap, and two recent publications of data collected in 2016 through this large-scale representative survey provided insights about fathers' parenting experiences, their mental health and their helpseeking preferences^{3,4}.

This report extends on those publications with data collected in the 2019 and 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria surveys, which also explore fathers' self-care actions and the extent to which they feel able to meet their children's mental health needs.

How do fathers feel about their parenting?

Overall, 2023 data show fathers feel confident in their parenting skills and believe they are doing a good job at parenting.

- 87% said they have the skills to be a good parent
- 82% said they know they are doing a good job as a parent
- 88% said they have confidence in themselves as a parent.

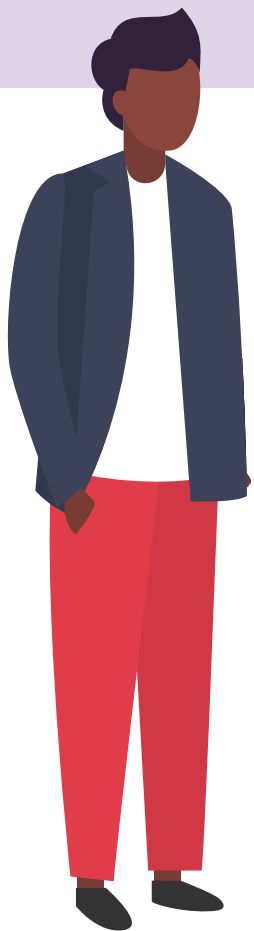
Fathers' confidence in their parenting has been relatively stable over recent years. Earlier Parenting Today in Victoria surveys found similar levels of confidence, with 93% saying they had confidence in themselves as parents in 2016 and 92% in 2019.

What about parenting practices?

When we looked at the parenting practices fathers said they used with their children, we found that many fathers used age-appropriate positive parenting practices.

- 93% of fathers of 0–5-year-old children said they held, cuddled, or used positive physical contact to calm or soothe their child
- 90% of fathers of children over the age of 6 years said they tried to talk and reason with their child when they were misbehaving
- less than 2% said they smacked their child when they misbehaved.





Work/life balance

Many fathers struggle with competing responsibilities and managing a balance between paid employment and family life.

- Less than half of fathers said they were satisfied with the amount of time they can give their children
- 62% said they would like to work less
- 42% said they felt under time pressure
- 32% said they were distracted by work during time spent with their family.

Nonetheless, in 2022 the majority of fathers reported their work provided sufficient

flexibility to enable them to fulfill parenting responsibilities, with 70% agreeing or strongly agreeing their work provides enough flexibility. This is a slight improvement over the results from 2019, when 66% of fathers said their employment provided them sufficient flexibility to fulfill their parenting responsibilities.

Is parenting fulfilling for fathers?

Yes – 92% of fathers said they strongly agreed or agreed they found parenting rewarding.

This is consistent across diverse groups of fathers, for example 95% of fathers living in regional areas and 90% in metro areas said they found parenting rewarding.

Many fathers face difficulties maintaining their health and wellbeing while caring for their children and juggling family demands.



Wellbeing and self-care among fathers

Our data suggest self-care by fathers is declining...

In 2019, 62% of fathers told us they regularly did something for themselves to relax or re-energise, but by 2022 this had decreased to 47%.

...which can impact mental health

Less than half of fathers said they got enough sleep, exercise, and regular activities to relax and re-energise.

Poor self-care can influence fathers' mental and physical health. In 2022, approximately one third of fathers said they were experiencing moderate to high levels of distress (high distress=4%, moderate=34%, low=62%). In previous waves of data collection, fathers were less likely to report moderate levels of distress (K6 high=4%, moderate=28%, low=67%) and 2016 (K6 high=3%, moderate=21%, low=76%).

In 2022 approximately 17% of fathers described their health as poor or fair, which was an increase from 2016 when 12% described their health as fair or poor.

Are fathers getting the support they need?

It appears to be getting harder for fathers to find support. Social support plays a crucial role in preserving overall wellbeing. The evidence from 2022 indicates a decline in the availability of adequate social support among fathers compared to 2016 and 2019.

In 2022, 80% of fathers reported having someone they could turn to for advice when facing life challenges. This percentage has decreased from 88% in 2016 and 84% in 2019.

Where are they seeking support?

The primary sources of parenting information used by fathers include 'advice from friends and family' and 'online sources of information', both of which 79% of fathers reported using in the previous 12 months.

When fathers accessed online parenting information the most common sources were parenting information websites (63%) and child health websites (60%). Other common sources of online parenting information used by fathers included YouTube (39%), podcasts (32%), social media (32%) and apps (28%).

Using online information to promote fathers' self-care may be an effective method to increase fathers' wellbeing and access to a range of support services.



Are fathers feeling resourced to meet their child's mental health needs?

Close to a third of fathers may be ill-equipped to identify and address their children's mental health needs.

68% of fathers said they knew where to get professional help for their child's behavioural problems, and 70% said they knew where to get help for their child's emotional problems.

67% of fathers said they were confident they would know if their child was developing a mental health problem.

Conclusions and implications

Over the past seven years fathers' sense of parenting efficacy had remained fairly high; most feel they are doing a good job at parenting and feel they can balance their family and work roles.

There is continuing evidence that fathers rely on their own independent research to locate supports for their parenting.

New data reveals that many fathers are not confident identifying mental health problems in their children, and have limited understanding of support options for their children.

Online delivery of parenting information and programs is an acceptable format for fathers. We need to ensure fathers have awareness of and access to credible parenting information in formats that allow access anywhere and anytime, and that allow individual exploration.

Endnotes

- 1 Sarkadi, A., Kristiansson, R., Oberklaid, F., & Bremberg, S. (2008). Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a systematic review of longitudinal studies. *Acta Paediatrica*, 97(2), 153–158
- 2 Craig, L. & Mullan, K. (2012). Australian fathers' work and family time in comparative and temporal perspective. *Journal of Family Studies*, 18(2-3), 165-174.
- 3 Wade, C., Matthews, J., Forbes, F., Vertkas, L., Burn, M., & Cann, W. (2023). Focus on Fathers: Exploring the parenting experiences of fathers using a large population-level sample. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 52, 801–828.
- 4 Wade, C., Matthews, J., Forbes, F., Burn, M., May, F. & Cann, W. (2022). Influences on fathers' information- and support-seeking for parenting. *Journal of Family Issues*, (online early). doi: 10.1177/0192513X221107450



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, 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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