

Parents' knowledge about child and youth mental health

Briefing note



Summary

- One in four parents are not confident they would know if their child or adolescent was developing a mental health problem.
- Parents who report low confidence in identifying mental health concerns in their child also tend to:
 - report lower parenting self-efficacy
 - report that tiredness gets in the way of being the parent they would like to be
 - find it hard to forgive themselves when they make mistakes as a parent
 - not view parenting as a rewarding experience
 - have poorer self-care and self-compassion as a parent
 - not have a trusted person in their life they could turn to for advice if needed
 - not turn to family first for help raising their child
 - have felt uncomfortable talking with their children's educators about their child.



- One in four parents said they would not know where to go for professional help if their child was experiencing mental health difficulties.
- Parents who report low confidence in knowing where to go for help for their child's mental health also tend to:
 - report lower sense of parenting efficacy
 - report that tiredness gets in the way of being the parent they would like to be
 - report greater parenting shame or guilt
 - find it hard to forgive themselves when they make mistakes as a parent
 - not have a trusted person in their life they could turn to for advice if needed
 - have had limited recent contact with parenting groups, GPs or other health professionals for parenting support
 - have had negative experiences of interactions with their children's educators.



Why these results matter

Although estimates differ¹, recent reports of rising rates of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents^{2,3} — often described as a ‘mental health crisis’ — highlight an urgent need for attention.

Researchers, mental health advocates and politicians agree that we need to better understand why many children and adolescents are missing out on the treatment and supports that are likely to benefit their mental health.

In addition to gaps in the availability of services and resources, some research points to low parent knowledge about mental health problems and the help-seeking process as a key barrier to low treatment access for child mental health concerns.⁴

This briefing note extends on the [Child mental health and parent help-seeking briefing note](#) we wrote based on analysis of data from the population representative Parenting Today in Victoria survey, where we examined parents’ experiences with their children’s mental health concerns and parent help-seeking in relation to child mental health.

Parenting Today in Victoria data collected in 2022 revealed that 25% of parents were not confident they would know if their child was developing a mental health problem. In addition to this, 25% of parents felt they wouldn’t know where to go if they needed professional help with child mental health concerns.



This briefing note provides additional exploration of parents' confidence identifying child mental health concerns and associated help-seeking by exploring how a range of parent characteristics and parenting experiences relate to confidence associated with management of child mental health.

In doing so, this briefing note provides enhanced understanding about what might get in the way of families getting the support they need to identify and then to address child mental health difficulties.

What parent characteristics are related to confidence in identifying child mental ill-health?

We know from the Child mental health and parent help-seeking briefing note that fathers are less confident about identifying mental health concerns in their children compared to mothers.

And fathers, as well as parents of preschoolers, are less confident they'd know where to go for professional help for child concerns.

But are there other groups of parents who also express lesser confidence? And what other factors might be related to low self-confidence in identifying children's challenges and finding support?

Our analysis of the Parenting Today in Victoria data from 2022 identifies parent characteristics that are associated with confidence around identifying child mental health concerns.

We identified some differences⁵ between parents reporting high versus low confidence knowing whether their child was developing a mental health problem.

The largest of these significant differences are shown in Figure 1.

Parenting characteristics related to confidence in identifying child mental ill-health

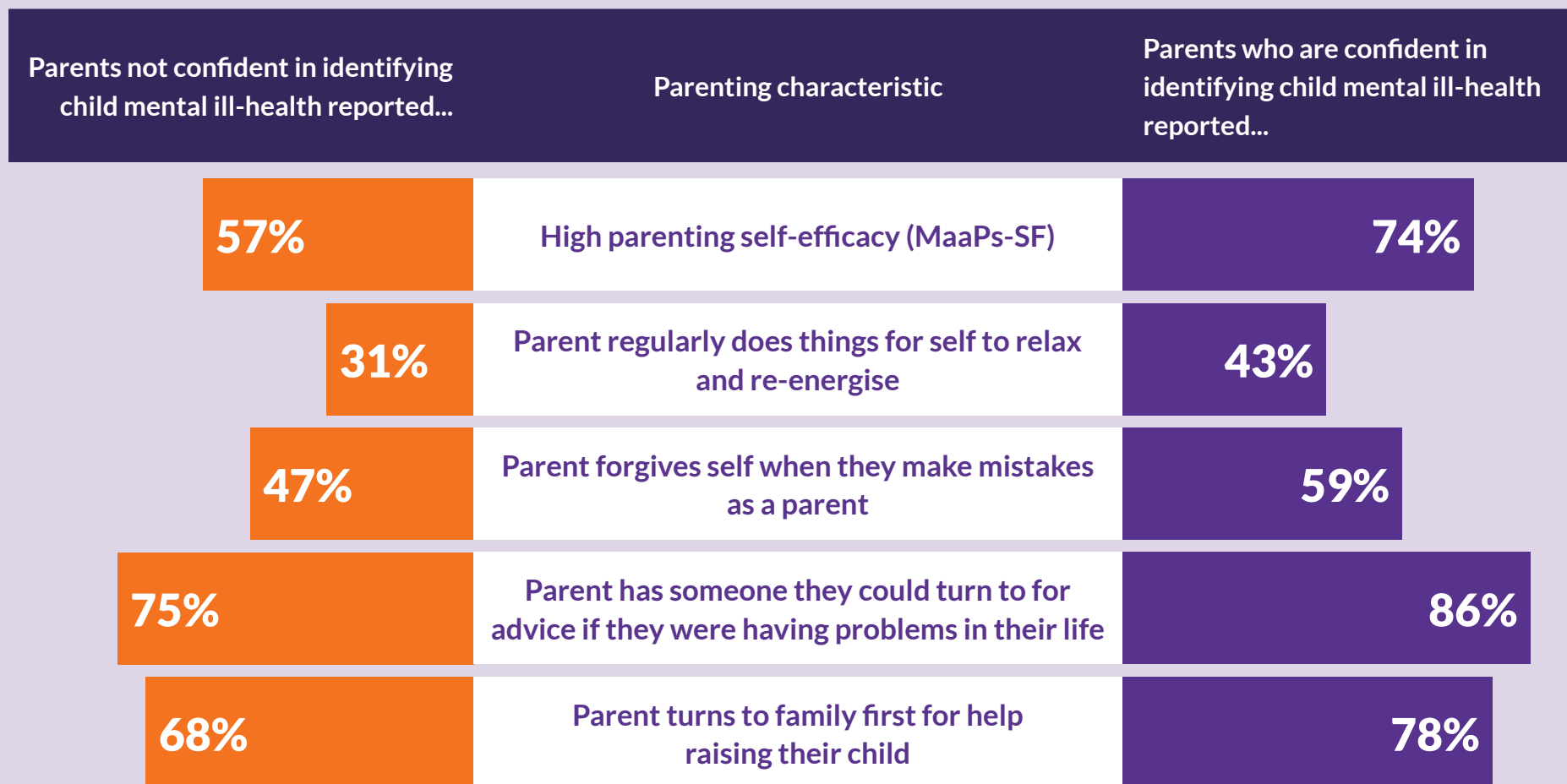
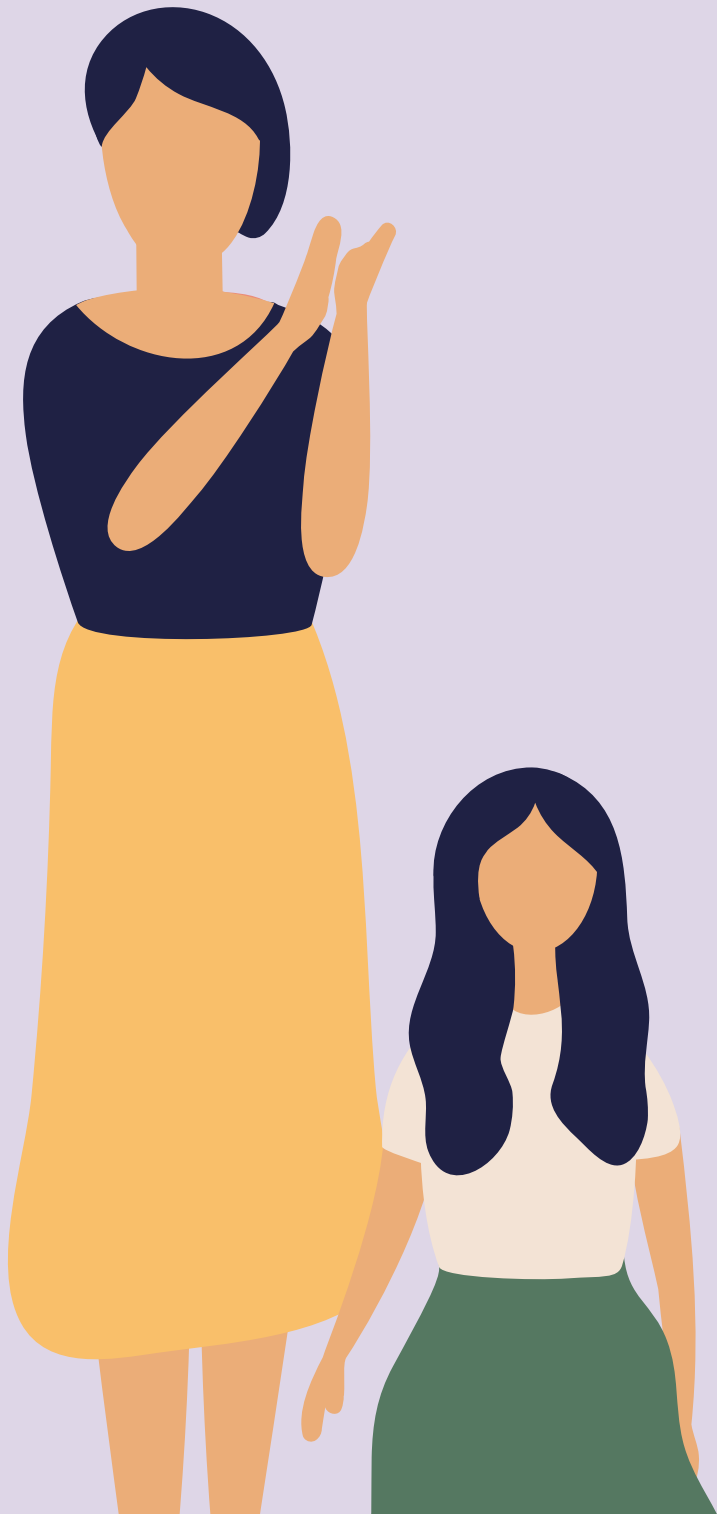


Figure 1. Some of the main items where there was a statistically significant ($p < .001$) difference between parents who agreed/strongly agreed they were confident knowing if their child was developing a mental health problem and those who were not confident they would know.



Specifically, parents with greater confidence they could identify their child was experiencing mental ill-health were significantly more likely to:

- describe parenting as very or extremely rewarding
- report high parenting self-efficacy (as measured by the MaaPs-SF⁶)
- do things for themselves that helps them relax and re-energise
- forgive themselves when they make mistakes as a parent
- say there is someone they trust that they could turn to for advice if they were having problems in their life
- turn to family first for help raising their child
- feel comfortable talking with their children's educators about their child.

And parents with greater confidence they could identify their child was experiencing mental ill-health were significantly less likely to report that tiredness gets in the way of being the parent they would like to be.

Conversely, there were no differences⁷ between parents reporting high versus low confidence knowing whether their child was developing a mental health concern for the following variables:

- parent mental health (psychological distress, measured using the K6⁸)
- parent physical health
- household income
- ratings about parenting being frustrating or demanding
- parental worry, guilt or shame
- parents feeling under time pressure
- parents being overly harsh on themselves for not being the parent they want to be
- parents' use of a range of different supports for their parenting over the previous 12 months (such as going online, parenting programs, a GP or other health professionals, friends or other parents, children's educators).



What parent characteristics are related to knowing where to get professional support?

Three in four parents said they would know where to go if they needed professional help with their children's emotional problems (that is, worries, fears, anxiety or depression).

Parents reporting higher confidence knowing where to go for help if their child was experiencing emotional problems were significantly⁹ more likely to:

- have poor mental health themselves
- report high parenting self-efficacy
- regularly do things to relax or re-energise
- disagree that tiredness gets in the way of them being the type of parent they want to be
- forgive themselves when they make mistakes as a parent
- disagree that they struggle with feelings of guilt or shame about their parenting
- report having someone in their life they could turn to if they were experiencing problems
- have participated in an in-person parenting program or seminar in the previous 12 months
- have participated in an online parenting program or seminar in the previous 12 months
- have spoken to a GP or other health professional for parenting information or advice in the previous 12 months
- report feeling satisfied and comfortable with their interactions with their children's school or child care and more welcome in those locations.

Figure 2 illustrates the largest of these statistically significant differences.

Parenting characteristics related to confidence in getting professional support for child mental ill-health

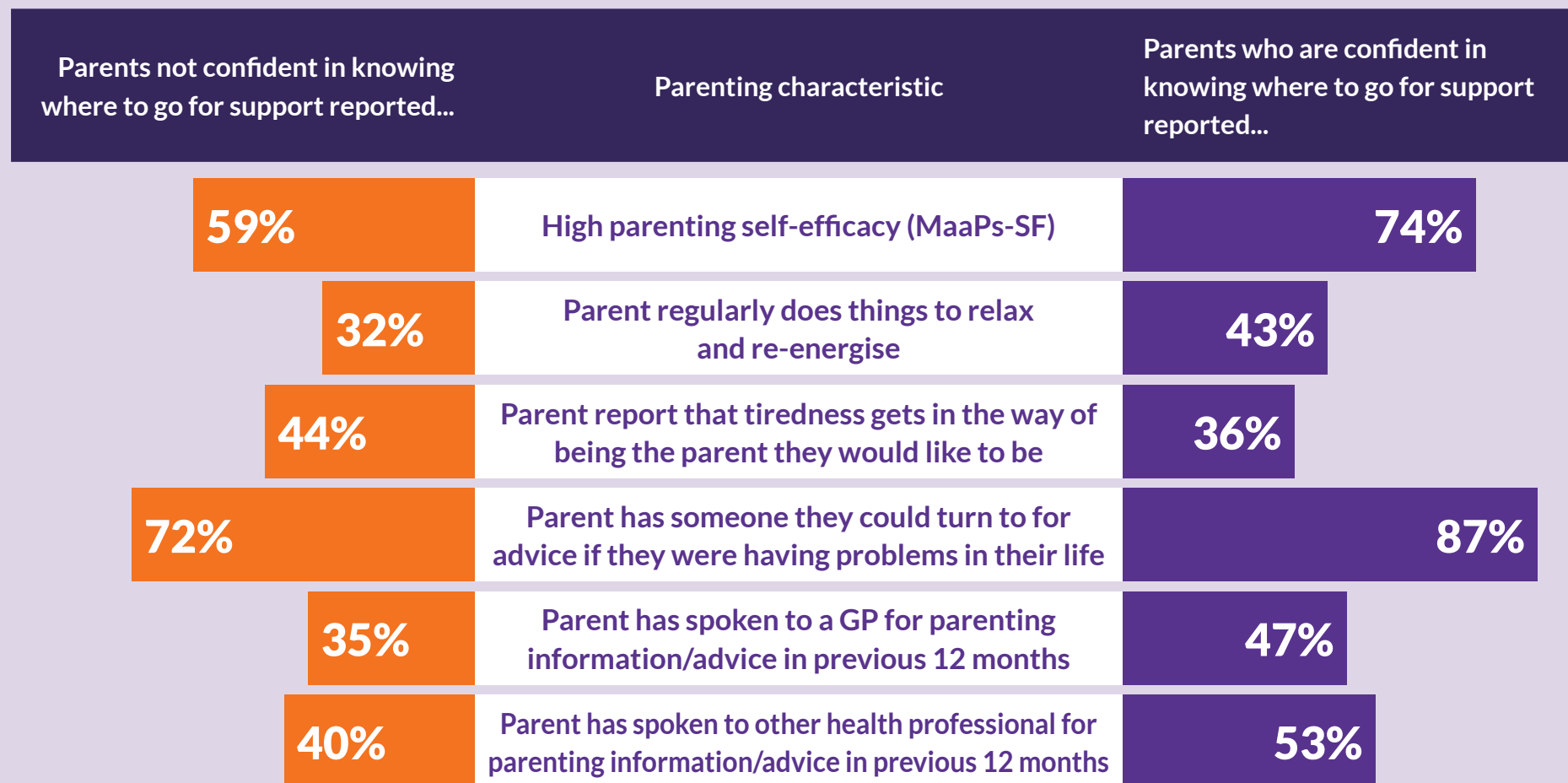
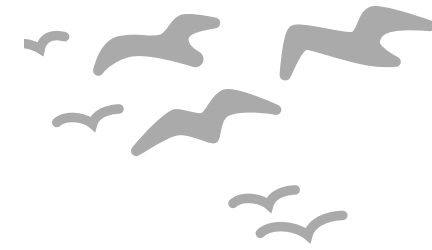


Figure 2. Items where there were the largest statistically significant ($p < .001$) difference between parents who agreed/strongly agreed they were confident knowing where to go if their child was experiencing emotional problems and those who were not confident they would know.



Implications

Parents are not always well-equipped to recognise the signs that their child may be experiencing mental health concerns.

Up to one in four parents told us they don't feel confident that they would be able to recognise poor mental health in their child.

However, it is unreasonable to expect parents to be experts in mental health. The important implication is that parents know enough to act on any concerns that do arise. For example, they know to talk to a GP about their concerns.

Given the cross-sectional nature of the data collection that we are reporting on, our analyses reflect correlation between variables at a single point in time. Therefore, we cannot claim causal links between parent characteristics and their

confidence understanding child mental health. Nonetheless, we did find associations between parent confidence identifying mental health problems in their child and a range of factors.

Negative feelings impact parenting

Parents may be at higher risk of not identifying child and adolescent mental health concerns if they have more negative feelings about their own parenting.

A low sense of parenting self-efficacy, a diminished sense that parenting is rewarding, and poor self-care and self-compassion as a parent (e.g., taking time to relax, recharge and to forgive yourself for parenting mistakes) are all associated with lower parent confidence that they could identify child mental health problems.



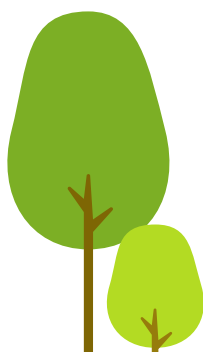
Parents may also be more at risk of not identifying child and adolescent mental health concerns if they have fewer trusted friends, family or professionals to provide support and advice when needed.

Parents unsure where to get help

Gaps in the availability of informal supports in a parent's life has implications for help-seeking. In the absence of family and friends to provide guidance, parents may rely on professional supports for parenting information and advice.

Yet one in four parents told us they wouldn't know where to go for professional help if their child was experiencing mental health difficulties.

Parents don't necessarily need to understand the complex system of mental health supports that are available in our service system – they just need to know where to start.



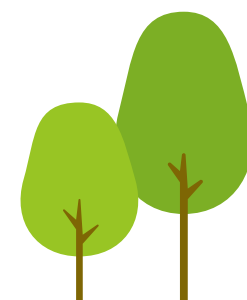
Knowledge is power

In your work with parents you can help by providing them information about where to seek advice. This might include credible websites like BeyondBlue, raisingchildren.net.au or Reach Out, and apps like Raising Healthy Minds.

And for children and young people with moderate to severe mental health problems there are specialist services, including Headspace and Orygen and the network of Infant, child and Youth Mental and Wellbeing Services across the state of Victoria.

Connection is crucial

Parents were less likely to feel confident knowing where to go if they report low sense of parenting efficacy, tiredness, parenting shame or guilt or difficulty forgiving themselves for small parenting errors, and if their access to social supports was limited.



For example, parents reported low confidence knowing where to seek help for their child if they didn't have a person in mind who could help with advice when needed, if they'd had limited recent contact with parenting groups, GPs or other health professionals for parenting support, or if they felt negative about their experiences of interactions with their child's educators.

Thus, putting parents in touch with parenting programs or support groups, and with professionals who can direct them to the right supports or provide advice about child mental health themselves is especially important for the socially isolated parent.

There are a number of evidence-based programs that help parents understand child and adolescent mental health and that have been shown to enhance family wellbeing and child mental health (e.g., the Partners in Parenting program).

Parents with mental health concerns have a head start in getting support

Confidence about where to go for help for their child's mental health was higher for parents who had poor mental health themselves.

Parents' experiences interacting with supports for their own mental health may have meant greater awareness of support options for their child.

Implications from these analyses go beyond improvements to the targeting of education and support resources for families. Research by others indicates a range of socioeconomic (e.g. low-income, single parent households, parent unemployment) factors are associated with higher prevalence of child mental health challenges.¹⁰

Yet many of these studies are based on parent report of child needs, and as such, prevalence estimates are likely to be affected by parents'

understanding about mental health. Examining the characteristics of parents who report low confidence in identifying child mental health problems may help to improve our understanding of the prevalence of child mental health problems.

Parents need access to support so children can thrive

We can help address child mental health difficulties by ensuring their parents have knowledge about where they can go for information, advice and support.

Providing parents access to this help is especially important if the parent has limited personal experience of mental health problems themselves, or if they are reporting tiredness, shame or guilt, or difficulty forgiving themselves for small parenting errors.

Isolated parents may be in particular need of support in recognising and attending to their child's mental health needs.

A good starting point for information about child mental health is raisingchildren.net.au.



Endnotes

- 1 McGorry, P.D., Killackey, E., Chen, E., & Chanen, A. (2025). Accurate prevalence estimates needed for youth common mental disorders. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 12, 327.
- 2 Harvey, S. (no date). *Addressing Australia's Mental Health Crisis: Time for Bold Reform*. Available at: <https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/news/addressing-australias-mental-health-crisis-time-for-bold-reform/>. Accessed 14th May 2025.
- 3 Smiling Mind. (December 2023). *Only 1 in 2 parents feel confident meeting the mental health and wellbeing needs of their child*. Available at: <https://blog.smilingmind.com.au/only-1-in-2-parents-feel-confident-meeting-the-mental-health-and-wellbeing-needs-of-their-child>. Accessed 14th May 2025.
- 4 Reardon, T., Harvey, K., Baranowska, M. et al. (2017). What do parents perceive are the barriers and facilitators to accessing psychological treatment for mental health problems in children and adolescents? A systematic review of qualitative and quantitative studies. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 26, 623–647.
- 5 Chi square $p < .001$
- 6 The MaaPs-SF is a 4-item short form of the Me as a Parent scale. Reference: Matthews, J., Millward, C., Hayes, L., & Wade, C. (2022). Development and validation of a Short-Form Parenting Self-Efficacy Scale: Me as a Parent Scale (MaaPs-SF). *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 31, 2292–2302.
- 7 At chi square $p < .001$
- 8 The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6) is a simple self-report measure of psychological distress consisting of 6 questions about a person's emotional state. Reference: 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 nonspecific psychological distress. *Psychological Medicine*, 32, 959–976.
- 9 Chi square, $p < .001$
- 10 Sawyer, M.G., Arey, F. M., Baghurst, P.A., et al. (2000). *Mental Health of Young People in Australia*. Mental Health and Special Programs Branch, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. Available at: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=39e37b4c93043d7655677dc202c8f25f815ef13f>. Accessed 14th May 2025.

About the Parenting Today in Victoria survey

Parenting Today in Victoria has been run three times since 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 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

The Parenting Research Centre helps 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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