

Parents' concerns about their children

Briefing note



Summary

- Top parental concerns include child's anxiety (40%), electronic device use (40%), sibling conflicts (38%) and attention issues (36%).
- Parents of children with complex needs reported significantly higher concerns about mental health and bullying.
- Almost all parents (96%) reported at least one concern about their child and four in five indicated at least one moderate or large concern.
- The most common concerns differed depending on child age: younger children (tantrums, not following instructions); older children (chores, school attendance, social media, mental health).
- Parents with concerns about their child tended to report higher psychological distress, and they were less likely to have trusted individuals they could turn to for advice and less likely to turn to family first for support, compared to parents who did not report concerns.
- School attendance, bullying and social media use were also common parental concerns.



Context

Parenting inevitably involves some level of concern about your children. Accessible and acceptable parenting support and resources being available in the local community that address common parental concerns, can support parents in their parenting role.

Professionals can play an important role in increasing parents' awareness of universally available supports and parenting programs that have strong evidence for addressing some of the most common parental concerns.

And connecting parents to easily available resources about child mental health, bullying, social media use and other concerns can be the catalyst to change that parents and children need.

The 2022 Parenting Today in Victoria survey results provide valuable insights into parents' concerns about common childhood issues.

These findings inform support pathways for parents and carers across key areas including common child behavioural issues (e.g., inattention, whining, fighting) but also extending to parental concerns such as about their child's mental health, school attendance, bullying, and social media use.



What parents told us about their concerns

Overall, 96% of parents who completed the Parenting Today in Victoria survey had at least one concern about their child. Close to four in five parents (78%) indicated that at least one common concern was a large or moderate concern¹ for them.

Around two in five parents reported that the following were a concern for them:

- child's worries, fears or anxiety (40%)
- child's use of computer games or electronic devices (40%)
- child arguing or fighting with siblings (38%)
- child not paying attention (36%).



Parents of younger children had greater concerns about the child's eating, whining, not doing as asked, sleep and tantrums.

Other concerns mentioned by parents were children not doing as asked (34%), eating behaviours such as fussiness about food, over-eating or under-eating (33%), not doing chores (32%), whining (30%) and lack of persistence with tasks (30%).

Less frequently cited concerns included a child being bullied (17%), being depressed or withdrawn (16%), lying (15%), not attending school (11%), child bullying others (7%) and violence or aggression towards the parent or their partner (7%).

Child age differences

Parents tended to have different concerns depending on the age of their child.

For example, parents of younger children had greater concerns about the child's eating, whining, not doing as asked, sleep and tantrums.

In the secondary school years, parents were more concerned about their child's worries, fears or anxiety, playing computer games or using electronic devices, use of social media and not doing chores.

And even though parent concerns about the child's worries, fears and anxieties and about the child's use of electronic devices were common for at least one in five parents of 3-5-year olds, the prevalence of these concerns increased to one in two for parents of adolescents (see Figure 1).

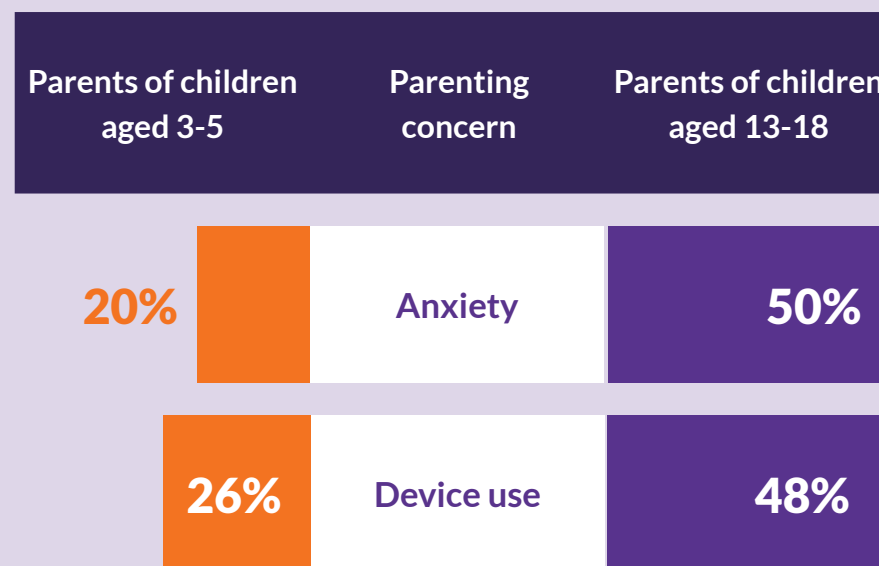


Figure 1. Parent concerns about child anxiety and use of electronic devices.

Children with complex needs

Parents with a child who has complex needs² or disability were significantly ($p<.001$) more likely to have concerns across most common child issues compared to other parents (see Figure 2).

Parenting concerns about common child issues

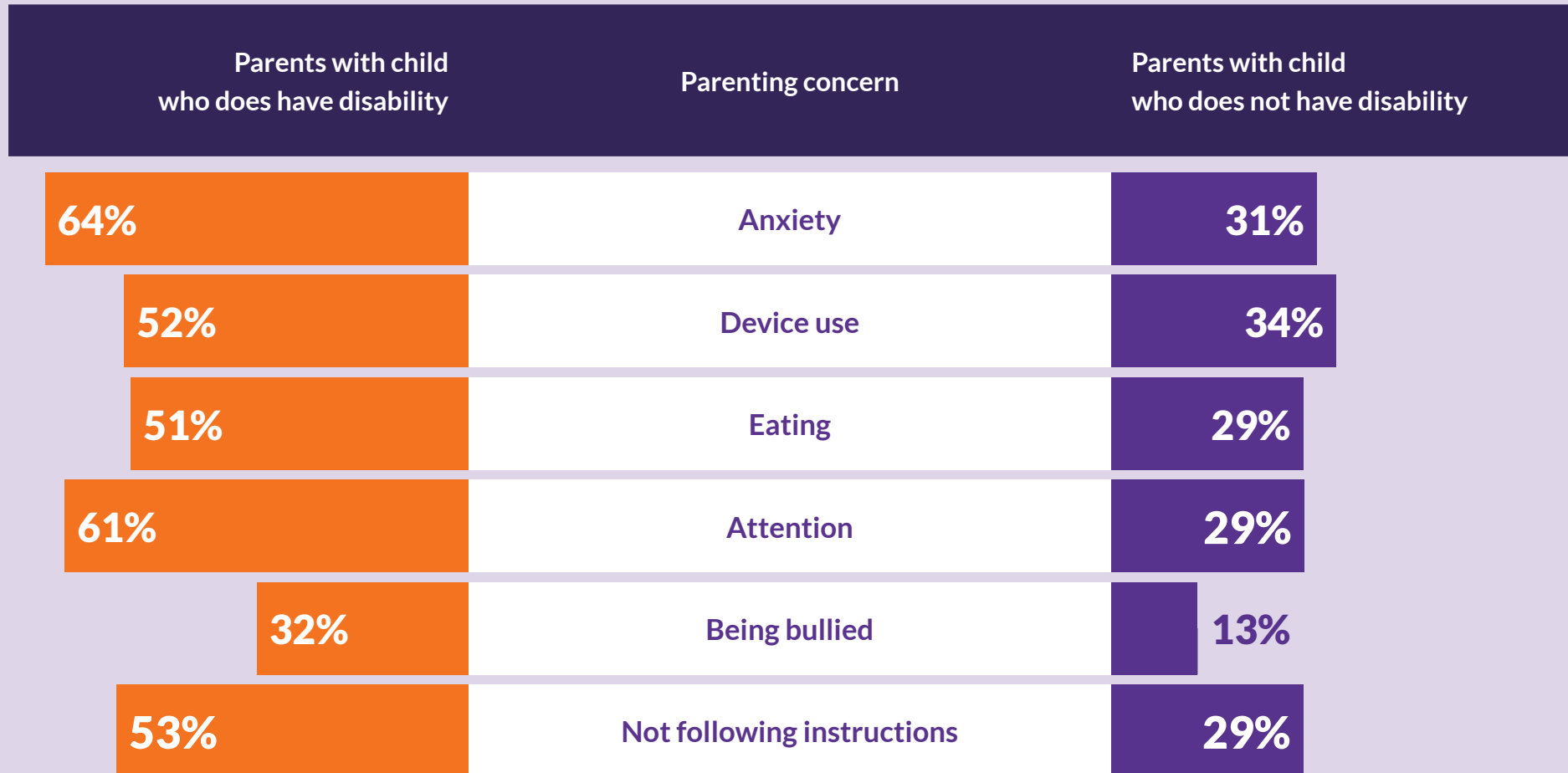


Figure 2. The differences between parents of children with and without complex needs that are reported in this graph are all statistically significant different at $p < .001$

Parent concerns about school attendance

A child not attending school (looking only at 6–18-year-olds) was reported as a concern by 11% of parents overall. School attendance concerns were:

- Significantly ($p<.001$) higher among secondary school parents (16%) than primary (9%)
- Significantly ($p<.001$) higher among mothers (13%) than fathers (9%)
- Significantly ($p<.001$) higher for parents of children with complex needs (17% vs 5%)

Parent concerns about a child's non-attendance at school tended to coincide with concerns about the child's mental health, including being bullied.

Parent concerns about bullying

Questions about bullying were asked of parents with children aged 4 to 18 years. While 17% of parents indicated that their child being bullied was a concern, and 7% indicated bullying others as a concern, almost one in seven (14%) parents had concerns about their child both being bullied and bullying others.

Some interesting statistically significant ($p<.001$) differences were noted in rates of parental concerns about bullying:

- Parents living in regional areas had greater concern about their child being bullied (21% vs 16% for metropolitan parents)
- Parents of children with complex needs had greater concern about their child being bullied (25% vs 10%)

- Parents of children with disability had greater concern about their child being bullied (32% vs 13%)
- Parents living in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage were more likely to be concerned about their child being bullied³ (45% of parents in the two lowest socioeconomic groups, compared to 29% in the two highest socioeconomic groups).

Parent concerns about social media use

More than a quarter (27%) of parents expressed concern about their child's social media use.

This concern is significantly ($p < .001$) higher for parents of 13-18-year-olds (41%) compared to parents of 6-12-year-olds (18%).

Parents who indicated concerns about their child's social media use were asked to specify their concerns. The primary issue, mentioned by 62% of parents, was the amount of time spent on social media, followed by concerns about exposure to inappropriate content, peer pressure, social comparison and cyberbullying.

Mothers and fathers

Mothers tended to report the greater concern than fathers in some areas (see Figure 3).



Mothers v fathers and parent concerns

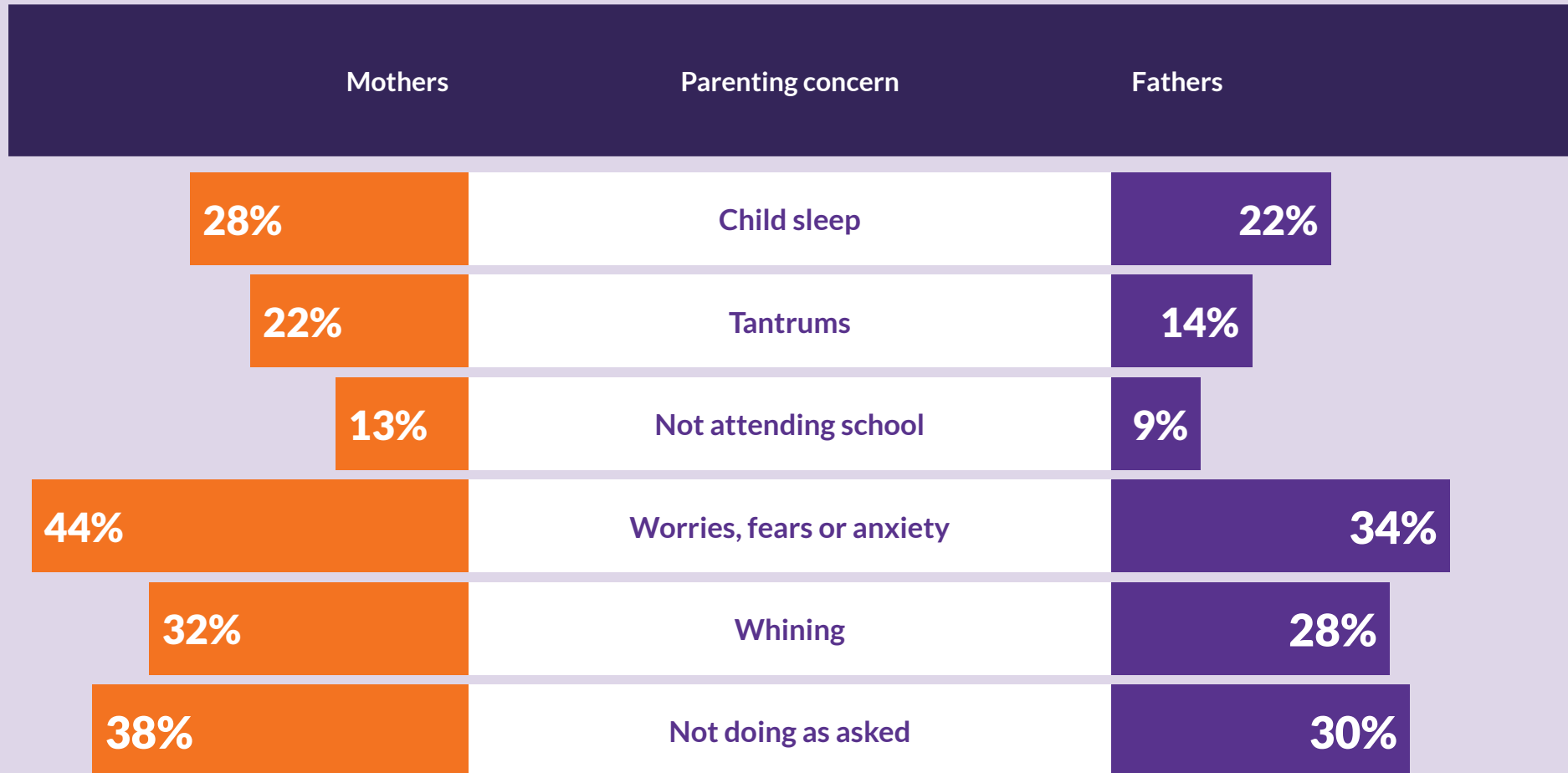


Figure 3. The differences between mothers and fathers that are reported in this graph are all statistically significant different at $p < .001$

Relationship between parent concerns and help-seeking

To understand whether parents with concerns about their child had access to support which might be helpful to address or cope with these concerns we examined use of different sources of advice alongside parents' concerns, which we grouped into three categories:

- **Category 1:** Concerns about their child's defiance and lack of attention⁴
- **Category 2:** Concerns about their child's mental health, being bullied or not attending school
- **Category 3:** Concerns about their child's aggression towards others.

We found that parents with concerns about defiance/attention (Category 1) were significantly ($p<.001$) less likely to have a person they trusted in

In each category, parents who reported higher level of concerns were also significantly ($p<.001$) more likely to report high levels of psychological distress.

their life who they could turn to for advice (76%) compared to parents with no concerns about child defiance or attention (85%).

Parents with concerns about mental health/ bullying/school attendance (Category 2) were significantly ($p<.001$) less likely to have trusted advisors (73%) compared to parents who did not have concerns about their child's mental health, bullying or school attendance (86%).

Parents with concerns across all three categories were significantly ($p<.001$) less likely to turn to family first for support (around two thirds of those with concerns said they turned to family first versus three quarters for those without concerns).

These findings are linked to parents' confidence in their parenting. Parents with concerns across all three categories tended to report lower parenting confidence.

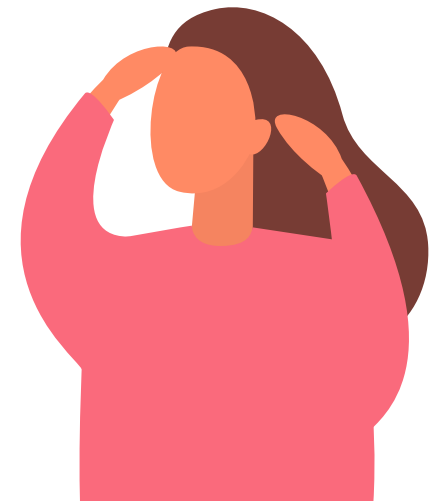
This difference was most pronounced in Category 1, where parents were almost twice as likely to report low parenting confidence if their concerns related to their child's defiance or lack of attention (51% compared to 26%).

It is unclear, however, whether low parent confidence existed prior to the child's issues or not. Nonetheless, while we don't know whether the child's behaviour or mental health challenges decreased parental confidence, or whether parents with low confidence did not know how to deal with the child concern, it is likely to be beneficial to support parents with strategies to deal with these concerns regardless of the direction of effect.

Relationship between parent concerns and parent distress

In each category, parents who reported higher level of concerns were also significantly ($p < .001$) more likely to report high levels of psychological distress.⁵ This was particularly apparent for Category 2, where high levels of parent distress were almost four times more likely to be reported for parents with concerns about child mental health, bullying or school attendance (19%), compared to just 5% for parents reporting low levels of distress.

Again, it is unclear whether parent distress preceded the child's issues or not.



Conclusion

Parental concerns are almost universal, with most parents experiencing moderate to large concerns about one or more common childhood issues.

Many concerns relate to developmentally typical behaviours – such as inattentiveness, sibling conflict, and difficulty following instructions – that are frequently addressed in parenting programs.

These programs are not only effective and cost-efficient but also well-received by parents, particularly those with younger children (see our separate [Briefing Note on parenting programs](#)).

However, many parents remain unsure about how to access them, highlighting the need for better promotion of evidence-based support.

Child mental health is a concern

Child mental health is a common concern for parents, especially for parents of adolescents. Half of parents of 13-18 year olds said they were concerned about anxiety in their child.

While most parents feel confident in recognising mental health challenges and seeking help, one in four do not (see our separate [Briefing Note on parent confidence regarding child mental health](#)).

Tech use a problem

Device use and social media exposure are also prominent concerns, particularly during adolescence. Almost half of all parents of adolescents said they were concerned about their child's device use.

Parent concern about their child's use of social media increases significantly between late childhood and adolescence. It is often during the pre-teen years that children first start engaging on social media, highlighting the importance of exploring social media use with children and their parents earlier than adolescence.^{6,7}

Many of the findings from the Parenting Today in Victoria study align with research by others

in Australia and internationally, with similar rates of parents reporting concerns about child mental health and social media use.^{8,9}

Bullying and school attendance front of mind

Bullying and school attendance are significant issues, especially for children with complex needs or disabilities.

Post-COVID, school attendance remains a challenge,¹⁰ with some children avoiding school due to emotional distress or bullying.

These concerns often overlap with mental health issues, reinforcing the need for holistic support.

Support for families

The results endorse the need for a family support system that has the capacity and flexibility to respond to a broad range of needs with appropriately tailored supports.

This includes support provision at the universal level, given parent concerns are almost universal.

Our findings underscore the importance of equipping professionals – educators, GPs, and family support workers – with the tools to guide families toward appropriate support.

Trusted resources like Beyond Blue, ReachOut, and raisingchildren.net.au (including the Raising Healthy Minds app) offer accessible, evidence-based information. For many child issues, seeking effective help doesn't need to be complex or costly, as several high-quality sources of information are

freely available online (e.g. raisingchildren.net.au and the Raising Healthy Minds app), and a range of evidence-based parenting programs are freely available to parents.

Additional assistance could include access to Victorian Government-funded parenting support, as well as support through GPs, Department of Education, and Department of Families, Fairness & Housing-funded services.

Supporting parents is key to raising thriving children. When parents can recognise concerns, know where to seek help, and access it effectively, child wellbeing improves.

Free, high-quality resources and programs exist. Strengthening parent confidence and awareness is essential to addressing common childhood and adolescent concerns.

Endnotes

- 1 Parents were asked to rate how much of a problem a list of common child issues were on a four-point scale from 'no problem at all' to 'a large problem'. Where "concern" is used in the remainder of this document it refers to issues that parents indicated were a moderate or large concern for them. If the parent had more than one child, respondents were asked to answer questions for the child with the most recent birthday.
- 2 A child with "complex needs" had at the time of the survey been experiencing at least one chronic health condition or medical condition, sensory impairment or learning difficulty, or behavioural or emotional difficulties that had lasted or were likely to last at least 6 months.
- 3 Using SEIFA as an indicator of area of relative socio-economic disadvantage, where low scores (1) indicate relatively greater disadvantage and high scores (5) indicate a relative lack of disadvantage. Reference: Pink, B. (2008). *Information Paper: An Introduction to Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) 2006*. Retrieved from <https://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/DetailsPage/2039.02006>
- 4 Category 1: child not doing what you ask, child not following family rules, child lying, child whining, child not doing chores, child not paying attention/being distractable, child's persistence. Category 2: Child's worries, fears or anxieties, child being depressed or withdrawn, child not attending school, child being bullied. Category 3: Child being violent or aggressive towards you or your partner, child bullying others. The data set used for these analyses is parents of children aged 6-18-years-old.
- 5 Measured using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6), which 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.
- 6 Rideout, V., Peebles, A., Mann, S., & Robb, M. B. (2022). *Common sense census: Media use by tweens and teens, 2021*. Common Sense.
- 7 Wade, C., Almendingen, A., & Robinson, E. (2022). How parenting pre-teens compares to other child stages: Identifying opportunities to enhance adolescent mental health and wellbeing. *Children & Society*, 36, 1296-1318.
- 8 [https://about.au.reachout.com/blog/new-research-on-what-parents-and-carers-worry-about-by-reachout#:~:text=Based%20on%20a%20nationally%20representative,and%20exam%20stress%20\(52%25\)](https://about.au.reachout.com/blog/new-research-on-what-parents-and-carers-worry-about-by-reachout#:~:text=Based%20on%20a%20nationally%20representative,and%20exam%20stress%20(52%25))
- 9 <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/01/24/parenting-in-america-today/>
- 10 <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/school-refusal-needs-a-national-response>

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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