

Research Brief

Parenting Today in Victoria:

# Parental help-seeking



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## Key insights

- Almost all parents (9 out of 10) were open to the idea of accessing professional support if they needed it.
- Over half had sought advice from a professional about raising their child and just under a third had attended a parenting group or seminar.
- Parents who reported that their children were experiencing behavioural or emotional problems were less likely to know where to get professional help.
- However, a quarter of parents said they did not know about parenting groups or seminars.
- The parents most likely to seek professional help were English speaking and had higher levels of parenting self-efficacy and a more positive sense of wellbeing.
- Being male and being in paid employment were two other factors linked to lower rates of help-seeking.

## What factors are associated with parental help-seeking?

This Research Brief reports findings from the 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria Study, conducted and analysed by the Parenting Research Centre and funded by the Victorian Government.



## Context

There is extensive evidence about the importance of quality parenting for optimal outcomes for children.<sup>1</sup> Research also shows that supporting families in their parenting is one of the most effective ways of enhancing children's development and wellbeing.<sup>2,3,4</sup> A better understanding of what's available to parents, and their experiences of help-seeking, can inform efforts to ensure parents get the support they need.

In the first instance, most families draw on informal support provided by family and friends. When this is unavailable or insufficient, families may turn to professionals for help and advice. A range of professionals are involved in providing parenting support, from specialised practitioners—such as child and family mental health and early childhood intervention services—through to universal services—such as Maternal and Child Health Nurses and teachers. Professional support for parents is delivered in a range of modalities ranging from individual consultations to groups. The type of parenting supports offered to families varies from brief consultations about specific issues to multi-session programs that cover a broader range of parenting skills and strategies. The supports offered to parents also varies in emphasis on the provision of parent support (attending to

the psychosocial needs of parents as adults) and parenting support (focussed on the development of parenting skills).

There are reasons to believe that some families do not always access the professional services that could assist them. For example, previous research had found that parents do not always recognise and seek help for their children's mental health issues.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Indeed, Australian research has shown up to 80% of children and young people with elevated risk of social-emotional problems have not accessed the professional help they needed to address their mental health challenges.<sup>8</sup> While we do not know the extent to which appropriate services were available to these families, these figures indicate many families and children in need of support might be missing out.



There are also reasons to expect differences in the way mothers and fathers seek and access parenting support. Considerable previous research shows fathers are less likely than mothers to engage in parenting supports<sup>9, 10</sup> ranging from child welfare services to targeted interventions for childhood mental health disorders and general psycho-education programs.<sup>11</sup>

This brief explores parents' patterns of help-seeking, both mothers and fathers, and what gets in the way of parents accessing the help they need. The Parenting Today in Victoria Survey provides an opportunity to explore factors associated with parental help-seeking which may assist the identification of barriers to help-seeking. These surveys are also an opportunity to examine help-seeking among parents who might be missing out, including parents of children with complex needs, parents experiencing health difficulties and parents who speak languages other than English.



# Findings

## The role of informal support

The majority of the parents we surveyed said they had informal sources of support: 86% agreed or strongly agreed they had someone they could turn to for advice with a problem. This person is most likely to be a family member, with nearly three-quarters of respondents reporting that family were the first people they turned to for help in raising their child.

But there were some families where this was less so. Parents currently experiencing psychological distress were less likely than other parents to say they turn to family first for support in raising their child, and parents from non-English speaking backgrounds were less likely to agree or strongly agree they had a trusted person they could turn to for advice with a problem.

## Willingness to seek professional help for parenting

An overwhelming majority of parents in our study (9 out of 10) said that they would ask a professional (e.g., GP, maternal and child health nurse, teacher or psychologist) for help if they couldn't find what they needed elsewhere. Consistent with previous research, our survey found significant differences in mothers' and fathers' willingness to seek help for parenting (see Figure 1).

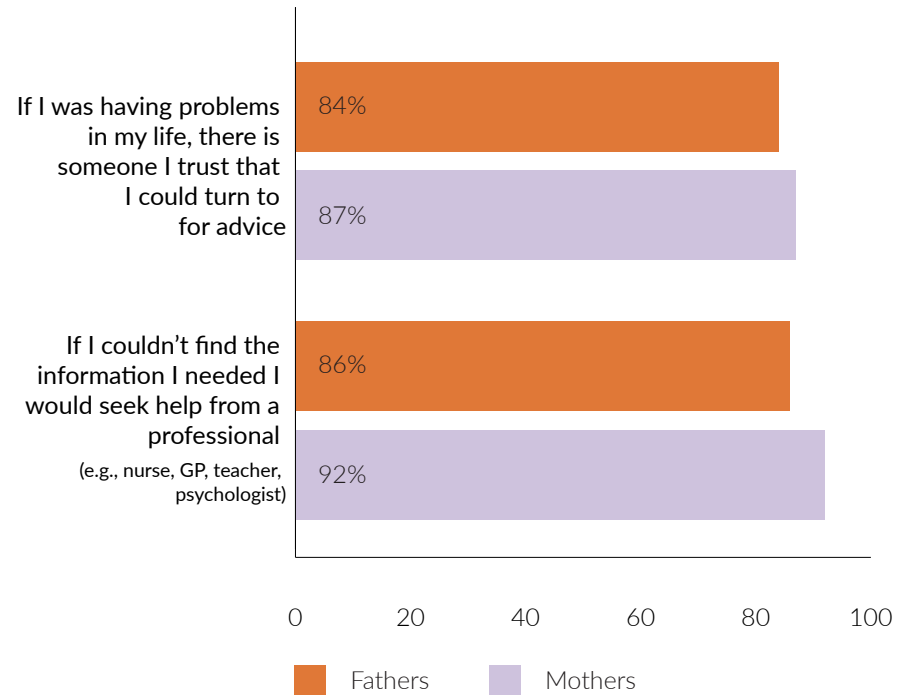


Figure 1. Mothers' and fathers' help-seeking for parenting (agreed or strongly agreed)

## Perceived availability of help

Most parents (84%) said they knew where to go for professional help, but a quarter said they did not know about parenting groups or seminars in their area. Parents with higher parenting confidence and personal wellbeing scores were more likely to agree they knew where to get help. We also found significant differences between men and women in perceived availability of help: 80% of fathers and 87% of mothers said they knew where to get help from a professional with parenting if needed. Parents who spoke a language other than English were also less likely to say they knew where to find professional help for parenting if they needed it (75% vs 85%) and didn't know about parenting groups that were available to them (37% vs 24%). Parents who reported that their child experienced emotional or behavioural difficulties were also less likely than other parents to agree or strongly agree that they knew where to get professional help if they needed it (75% vs 84%).



## Actual use of professional support

We also asked parents about the professional supports they had accessed. Nearly three quarters of parents had sought help from educators, over half (57%) had sought help from a GP, and about the same proportion (56%) had sought help from another professional, such as a speech pathologist, psychologist, or family support worker. In addition, nearly three-quarters of parents had attended a Maternal and Child Health service first-time parents' group, playgroup or a parent support group. And close to one third of parents said they had attended a parenting group or seminar.

Parents of children with a medical condition or sleeping problem were more likely to have asked for advice from a GP. Parents of children with medical conditions were more likely to have sought help from other types of health professionals too. But interestingly, parents of children with behavioural or emotional difficulties (such as ADHD, conduct disorder, autism spectrum disorder, depression or anxiety), or who reported their child's behaviour was difficult to manage, were less likely to say they had accessed professional support and advice than other parents. And parents of children with difficult behaviour were no more likely than other parents to have attended a parenting group or seminar – many of which are designed to help children with these difficulties.

We were particularly interested in understanding why parents chose not to participate in parenting groups. The most common reason parents gave for *not* attending was, 'I don't feel like I need help with parenting or child issues' (42%). Although, parents who spoke a language other than English at home were much less likely to offer this reason for not participating in parenting groups (29%). Parents who had not attended parenting groups or seminars were also less likely to say they found parenting demanding (73% compared to 80% of parents who had attended parenting groups or seminars). There are also a number of beliefs about parenting that may influence parents' decisions about participating in parenting programs. Our findings show that parents who had *not* attended such groups or seminars were more likely to believe that parenting comes naturally, less likely to think parenting advice would be helpful, and less likely to agree there is a role for government in parenting support. Parents who believed government had a role to play in parenting support were also more likely to have accessed GPs and other professionals for parenting support.

As expected, patterns of actual help seeking between mothers and fathers varied in the same direction as their reported willingness to seek help, with mothers reporting higher participation than fathers in all forms of professional support (see Figure 2).

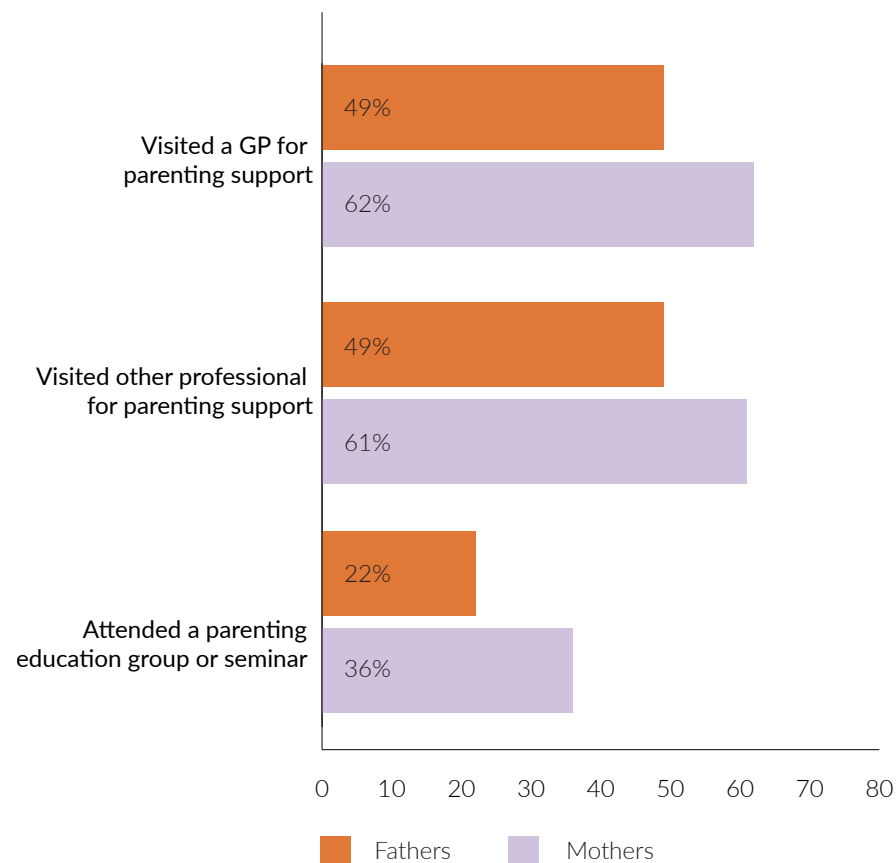


Figure 2. Mothers' and fathers' previous help-seeking for parenting

## Parents' experiences of receiving help

Most parents (77%) were satisfied with the help they received, however, when parents with high levels of current psychological distress saw professionals for parenting support, they were more likely to feel judged, blamed or criticised by them. There was a reduced tendency<sup>12</sup> for fathers to have felt judged, blamed or criticised in their interactions with professionals.

When they did seek professional help, parents of children with behavioural or emotional difficulties were also more likely to have had negative experiences (Figure 3).

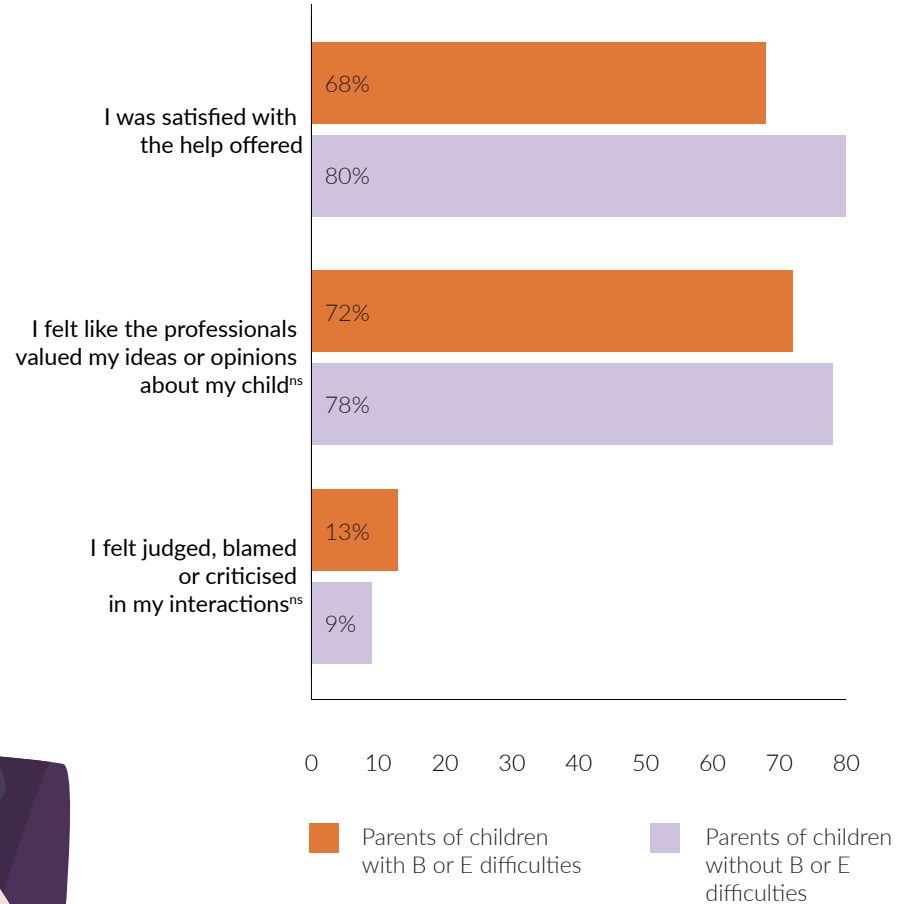


Figure 3. Interactions with professionals for parents with and without children with behavioural or emotional difficulties (agreed or strongly agreed)

Note: ns indicates not statistically significant at  $p < .001$



## Conclusions and implications

### **Most parents have informal supports, especially from their extended family**

Almost three-quarters of parents in Victoria turned to their family for help and advice in raising their child. This finding that most parents rely on informal rather than formal support has been reported in other large-scale Australian research.<sup>13</sup>

Our study revealed parenting self-efficacy and personal wellbeing were linked to having a trusted person to turn to for advice and seeing family as a primary resource for parenting support. While it is not possible to determine the direction of the association between parenting self-efficacy and informal support seeking, nor that the support offered by family and friends is appropriate or accurate, it is likely that having access to support builds parenting confidence, but it's also possible that a degree of self-efficacy is necessary to seek or ask for the support you need.

But having access to informal support is not universal. A quarter of parents said they do not turn to family for help, and, according to our findings, these parents were more likely to be experiencing vulnerable circumstances. For example, parents experiencing psychological distress were less likely to seek support from friends and families and more likely to turn to a professional.

### **Most parents are willing to seek professional help, and know where to go**

Around three quarters of our respondents had accessed professional services for parenting advice and an overwhelming proportion claimed they would seek such assistance if required. And the vast majority of parents say they know where to go for professional help if needed. This suggests that lack of awareness or knowledge of available services, or at least where to start to find help, is not a major issue for most parents.

Teachers, GPs and nurses are the first port of call for most parents seeking help. This reinforces the importance of primary care and universal services in responding to parenting support needs. Our findings underscore continued efforts to bolster the capacity of universal services to provide timely and effective parenting support and/or facilitate access to appropriate specialised services, and suggest some specific areas that might warrant additional capacity building—working with distressed parents and working with parents of children who have emotional or behavioural difficulties.

We found that beliefs about the role of government in supporting families and beliefs about whether parenting support would be helpful was associated with willingness

to seek help. This suggests that promoting the idea that parenting is learned and learnable, and greater emphasis on helping parents understand when and how professional support can help, may be required to increase parent engagement with parenting support services.

### **Some parents may be missing out on the support they need**

While most parents report a willingness to seek professional help if needed, we did find willingness to seek help was lower among fathers and parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. And it may be the case that some parents, though willing, are still not accessing the support they need.

#### **Parents who speak a language other than English**

were less likely to use professional support for child rearing. These parents may face barriers to help-seeking that have implications for services. Barriers relating to language and to cultural acceptability and community norms can be addressed by providing information about parenting support and advice in community languages, using non-stigmatising and culturally sensitive language, and by making parenting supports available in the places where families feel most comfortable (e.g., through local community groups, their children's school, and places of



worship). In addition, it would assist families if universal services such as maternal and child health, GP clinics, early education and schools were mindful of families' needs for formal and informal support and supply information and advice about appropriate specialist services. These approaches, though relevant for all families, are particularly important for culturally diverse communities. There is still much to learn about how this can be done well, especially with regard to improved accessibility and acceptability of parenting support in particular communities. Our findings may be useful to other researchers exploring how culturally diverse communities access health information and engage with services, with the aim of improving families' health and social outcomes.



**Fathers** were also less likely to access formal help which, given the importance of father involvement in child rearing, poses a challenge for services to address. Our findings showing men's lower engagement in parenting programs are consistent with previous Australian research.<sup>14, 15</sup> The gendered nature of help-seeking behaviour is likely to be influenced by a range of factors.<sup>16, 17, 18, 19</sup> These could include the negative connotations associated with men seeking help and the traditional division in parenting responsibilities with women more likely to be responsible for the wellbeing of family members. It is also highly likely due to many professional services, including parenting support, only being offered during business hours, thus men, as well as women in the paid workforce, are less likely to be able to attend due to time limitations or perceived or actual inflexibility in work arrangements.

Consideration of this published research on father participation will help identify what needs to change in policy and practice settings to better engage men in parenting supports. Varying the timing and medium of delivery might make parenting programs more accessible generally. Framing the way we talk about parenting could increase the likelihood that fathers see information being relevant to them as well as to mothers. Specifically, targeting information to men about where to obtain advice and help on parenting may improve

the reach of parenting supports across the gender divide. There are some modes of delivery that may suit fathers. For example, our previously reported findings on **information seeking** are instructive: we know both fathers and mothers are equally and highly likely to access parenting information online (over 80% say they do so).

Among those who reported lower use of professionals and parenting programs were **parents of children with additional needs**. This is consistent with research which found that children with socio-emotional or behaviour issues may be missing out on the supports they need.<sup>20</sup> Such difficulties influence how a child engages with learning, how they deal with life's challenges, and how they care for and respect themselves and others. The right support is vital for both the immediate and long-term wellbeing and development of these children. However, more parents of these children reported that they either don't know where to seek help or were less satisfied with the help they received. Parents in these situations were also more likely to feel judged, blamed or criticised by the professionals they turned to for support. So, it is possible that the parents most likely to benefit from parenting programs and other types of professional support, are the ones who are missing out. There is clearly a role for services to assist these parents who would particularly benefit from preventative parenting programs.



# Footnotes

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## Study details

The 2016 and 2019 Parenting Today in Victoria surveys used computer assisted telephone interviewing to randomly survey 2600 Victorian parents and carers of children aged 0-18 years in each year. In each family, one parent was interviewed in their preferred language and asked questions about one child (the focus child). Each sample was weighted to match Victorian parents in the Australian Census (using the 2011 Census for the 2016 survey, and the 2016 Census for the 2019 survey), with key characteristics of our samples adjusted in 2016 and 2019 for education level (sample education was lowered) and residential location (sample was adjusted towards more metro/city dwellers), and also for parent age in 2016 (sample age was adjusted upwards).

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