

Submission to The Standing Committee on Health, Aged  
Care and Sport of the House of Representatives,  
Parliament of Australia

# Sleep Health Awareness in Australia

October 2018

## 1. Introduction

The Parenting Research Centre is an independent, not-for-profit research organisation. We seek better outcomes for children by increasing effectiveness and innovation in the way families are supported in their parenting.

The Parenting Research Centre commends the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport for the Committee's initiative to inquire into Sleep Health Awareness in Australia.

This submission focuses on the role of effective, accessible parenting information and support in improving sleep health awareness.

This submission also looks at the opportunities presented by new and emerging technology to provide such support and thus contribute to positive outcomes for families and children.

In particular, this submission draws on evidence generated by the Parenting Research Centre and the Australian government funded, evidence-based parenting website, [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au).

## 2. The impacts and costs of inadequate sleep and sleep disorders on the community

### Sleep health for Australian adults

Sleep health is an important part of overall physical and mental health for adults. Yet, according to *Asleep on the Job: Counting the Cost of Poor Sleep Health* (2017 report from Sleep Health Foundation), 39.8% of Australian adults are experiencing some form of inadequate sleep.

While the costs of treating sleep disorders themselves can be relatively small, the costs of conditions caused by lack of sleep are not. The report estimated a total cost of inadequate sleep in Australia to be \$66.3 billion in 2016-17, a total made up of \$26.2 billion in financial costs and \$40.1 billion in the loss of wellbeing (where loss of wellbeing is estimated using World Health Organisation and Australian Government metrics assessing non-financial costs of healthy life lost through disability and premature death from inadequate sleep and associated conditions).

Separate research by the same foundation also found that 33-45% of Australians have poor sleep patterns that lead to fatigue and irritability, putting them at risk of low productivity, poor mental health or unsafe behaviours. This study (n=1011) found that problems related to sleep were experienced by individuals suffering difficulty sleeping at least a few times a week or more.

### Sleep health and Australian families

In 2017, our Centre published the findings from our [Parenting Today in Victoria survey](#) – the most comprehensive look at the concerns, needs and behaviours of Victorian parents conducted to date. This research, funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training, explored the views of 2600 parents about their children's sleeping habits and routines.

This research suggests that almost 50% of Australian parents of infants and approximately 30% of parents of toddlers and preschool aged children report problems with their children's sleep. With around 315,000 births expected in 2018, this has significant impact on the infants and children involved but also on their mothers, fathers and families.

While we might have expected the result that half of parents of infants say child sleep is a problem, we also found that children's sleep is reported to be a problem by one-third of parents of children aged 3-18 years. Children's sleeping habits and patterns appear to be a persistent and chronic

problem for today's parents, and especially so for parents of children with medical conditions or learning difficulties.

### **Sleep health impacts: parents and children**

Child sleep problems can cause adult sleep problems and affect parental functioning. In particular, infant sleep problems are strongly associated with poorer maternal mental health, and poorer general health of both mothers and fathers. Fatigue and chronic sleep deprivation also impacts on the ability of women to return to work, as well as cognitive functioning, driver safety and decision-making.

Children's sleep problems, particularly those of adolescents, can also have negative impacts on the children themselves, affecting school performance and achievement, anxiety and a range of other issues. We strongly believe that there is a need for increased awareness of the connection between sleep health and its impacts parents and children.

## **3. Access, support and treatment for individuals experiencing inadequate sleep and sleep disorders**

Parents are key agents of change in their children's lives. Although parenting has a profound impact on healthy child development, parenting support is often overlooked when considering how to improve child outcomes (Michaux & McDonald, 2016).

Parenting requires a set of skills that can be learned and, as such, can be practised and improved on. Parenting support can lead to improved parental wellbeing and functioning via improved parent-child interactions and relationships.

Effective, accessible parenting support is a fundamental component of any initiative that seeks to achieve long-term, sustainable and widespread improvements in child, parent and family outcomes. As part of this support, reliable, accessible and practical supports on issues such as sleep health are critically important.

### **Raising Children Network: Online, accessible parenting support**

[raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) is an Australian government-funded website developed and maintained by the Parenting Research Centre and the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. The website currently receives more than 1.2 million visitors per month, connecting parents with information through a range of formats and actively engaging with parents via social media, email and shared parent stories such as videos.

Over 14.7 million people visited [raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au) in the past year, and it has more than 200,000 Facebook followers. Raising Children Network content is embedded into child health records in several jurisdictions across Australia and championed by child and family health nurses, paediatricians and GPs, early childhood service providers and disability organisations.

We have identified sleep related issues and topics consistently ranking among the top five pages visited since launching in 2006 (with total visits over this time of approx. 30 million). In the past twelve months alone, approximately 1.4 million parents have accessed our sleep-related resources. Solving sleep issues for babies and young children should be a national priority.

The Raising Children Network's sleep content was accessed by 1.37 million parents last year. Example sleep articles are available at:

- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/sleep/settling-routines/newborn-sleep-routines>
- <https://raisingchildren.net.au/teens/healthy-lifestyle/sleep/better-sleep-for-teens>

### **Support should draw on the best available evidence**

Evidence-based approaches to parenting support are those that have been proven to be effective in terms of what is delivered (i.e. the content of the intervention or support) and how it is delivered (i.e. evidence-based processes). In the context of finite resources – and considering the potential for harm from ineffective interventions and supports – it is important that all forms of parenting support are informed by the best available evidence.

Parenting support need not be limited to structured programs but can incorporate a range of supports such as online information and advice resources, group-based peer support, one-on-one counselling and home visits. A range of different forms of support ensures the diverse needs and preferences of parents are met, where and when they are needed.

### **Digital support as the new frontier**

Digital support for parents affords huge potential for improving sleep health awareness in Australia. Digital support has great potential to benefit parents, children and adolescents, those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, those living in rural, regional and remote areas, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

In recent years, internet and mobile phone parenting supports have been widely used, with interactive website being particularly used effectively (Sartore, Devine et al., 2016).

Parents benefit from accessing information at a time that suits them (often out of business hours), and in a format that is suitable, digestible, useable and accessible. Digital support can accommodate this.

Rural and remote families can benefit from the accessibility of online support – these families often find it hard to connect with face-to-face support services, especially around day-to-day parenting challenges such as sleep concerns.

Parents with low literacy, those from CALD communities and those not familiar with the newest technologies are often isolated from support; however, there is an opportunity for online resources to provide support to these groups or to complement traditional face-to-face support – for example, through visual resources, or resources in other languages. Of particular importance in Australia are parents with low literacy, those from CALD communities and those not familiar with the newest technologies.

## **4. Conclusion**

We believe that much more can be done to increase awareness of the Australian community on:

1. sleep health and what we know about the potential effects of poor sleep health
2. the connection between sleep health and mental health outcomes across all stages of life
3. what constitutes good sleep habits across all stages of life
4. what parents and other carers can do to improve their own sleep health and that of their children
5. family and community-level practices and interventions that can promote sleep health in individuals across all stages of life.

As part of the fourth area of action above (parenting support) we recommend further exploration and investment in the following areas:

- Priority provision of reliable, usable information and support access via digital platforms regarding common sleep problems and strategies for resolving them.
- Connecting parents with sleep experts and each other so parents can grow their awareness and confidence in how to respond to sleep concerns.
- Providing supports through real time or quasi-real time channels.
- Practical support – providing Australian families with ready-to-use tools to track individual sleep health and consult with experts on progress towards improved sleep health.

The Parenting Research Centre welcomes all opportunities to further discuss any aspects of this submission with the Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport.

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