

Parenting supports that help children with disability thrive

Parenting Today
Insight Brief



Parenting Today is a national research initiative led by the Parenting Research Centre, designed to build a clearer and more contemporary picture of parenting in Australia.

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Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

Prepared by

Dr Catherine Wade, Elly Robinson, Dr Natalie Day, Leigh Wilks, Dr Kate Lewis

Contact

Catherine Wade, Lead Investigator

Parenting Research Centre

Email: cwade@parentingrc.org.au

Phone: 0407 941 056

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Parenting Research Centre

info@parentingrc.org.au

www.parentingrc.org.au

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Introduction

Providing timely, relevant support to families of children with disability-related support needs sits at the core of the Thriving Kids initiative.

Findings from the Parenting Today national survey offer valuable insight into the preferences and support needs of families who are eligible for Thriving Kids services and programs.

This Insight Brief describes findings from the Parenting Today national survey and highlights how parent voice can be considered in the design of Thriving Kids.

Thriving Kids has been established to address support needs among children aged 0-8 years who have low to moderate support needs related to developmental concerns, intellectual disability, or learning, sensory, communication, and autism-related conditions.

Through Thriving Kids governments are considering how they can realign support offerings with and for families. The Parenting Today survey provides a valuable source of information to help shape this thinking.

Using Parenting Today data, we are able to better understand how parents of children with disability are faring, how parents are accessing and using services and information, and how we might be able to strengthen and improve the supports we offer parents and their children. With a large representative sample of parents who completed the survey, we can draw out information about specific groups of interest and report on their experiences.

How can Parenting Today inform Thriving Kids?

The 2025 Parenting Today national survey, conducted in 2025 by the Parenting Research Centre, asked more than 10,000 parents¹ over 122 questions to gain insight into parenting experiences across a broad range of topics.

Some of the questions asked parents about their help-seeking behaviours, yielding rich detail about parents' experiences of when, how and why they access parenting information and support and how they feel about the support received.

We asked parents if they knew where to find, and their confidence in getting professional help, where they go for advice, what parenting support programs they may have accessed, where they get parenting information, their satisfaction with the support they sought out, and the barriers to engaging in supports that they couldn't access.

A focus on parents of young children with disability

Data that contributes to and informs this Insight Brief is from parents who answered the survey thinking about their experiences, behaviours, and needs concerning a child with disability, aged 0-8 years (inclusive).

This group accounted for 13.2% (n=632) of the sample who reported on a child aged 0-8 (n= 4733), and consists of parents of children who most closely align with the Thriving Kids eligibility definition, that is the child had:

- an intellectual disability or developmental delay and/or
- learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or who show slow progress and/or
- sensory or speech conditions such as sight, hearing, speech, or language difficulties and/or
- autism or Asperger's syndrome.

In this Insight Brief, we describe these children as 'Thriving Kids-aligned'. However, it is important to note this group also includes children with a greater-than-low-to-moderate need for support who may be eligible for the NDIS.

¹ Note: The word "parents" in this Insight Brief is inclusive of anyone playing a parenting role for the target child in the Parenting Today survey, including family, carers and kin.

What Parenting Today tells us about parents of children with disability

Parents of children with disability experience higher levels of emotional strain.

Compared to other parents of 0–8-year-olds, those from Thriving Kids-aligned families were:

- Significantly more likely to have a condition that restricts their everyday activities, e.g., mental health conditions, neurodivergence, epilepsy, intellectual disability (53.6% compared to 21.8%)
- Significantly more likely to say they:
 - often felt a sense of guilt about their parenting (51.1% compared to 42.9%)
 - were worried they were not meeting their own expectations as parents (64.6% versus 47.7%)
 - found parenting to be very or extremely frustrating (33.9% vs 21.2%)
 - found parenting to be very or extremely demanding (75.3% vs 69.3%)
 - were experiencing high distress (23.9% compared to 11.0%)
 - feel lonely at least some of the time (47.8% compared to 31.0%)
 - have fair or poor physical health (37.7% compared to 20.7%).
- Significantly less likely to:
 - engage in regular self-care (36.3% do things to relax and re-energise compared to 42.4%).

Parents of children with disability share the same concerns as other parents, but more so

Compared to other parents of 0–8-year-olds, those from Thriving Kids-aligned families were significantly more concerned about their child's:

- Worries, fears or anxiety (44.5% versus 17.3%)
 - School attendance (20.1% versus 6.2%)
 - Being violent towards them or their partner (24.9% versus 6.6%)
 - Being bullied (19.2% versus 8.2%)
 - Bullying others (9.1% versus 6.3%)
 - Sleep (29.6% versus 20.2%).
- Parents of children with disability are highly engaged help-seekers

Parents of children with disability are highly engaged help-seekers

While parents of children who would be eligible for support under Thriving Kids are less likely to have someone they could turn to for advice if they were having problems (71.0% compared to 82.0%), they are highly engaged help-seekers.

For example, parents of 0-8 year old children with disability are more likely than other parents to seek parenting support from:

- a GP (61.6% compared to 48.6%)
- other health professionals (86.1% versus 48.2%)
- their children's educators (62.9% versus 41.8%).

And parents of children with disability are more likely than other parents to participate in:

- parenting programs (30.4% had attended in-person programs compared with 21.3%)
- parent support groups (21.1% versus 12.4%)
- peer support groups (16.8% versus 3.3%).

Many parents of children with disability said they were likely to participate in a parenting program in future (31.8% said they would be very or extremely willing to take part in future, compared to 23.3%).

There are, however, barriers to attending parenting programs. Nearly half of parent respondents (49.4%) said they wanted to attend programs but were unable to. The biggest barriers were timing of programs, caregiving and work responsibilities, cost, own mental health/distress, and a need to focus on other areas of concern in their lives (such as financial distress, housing).

Nevertheless, most parents feel confident and comfortable accessing support.

We can build on this strength.

Parents of Thriving Kids-aligned children have high confidence in understanding their child's needs (74.5% are confident they could recognise if their child was developing mental health concerns), and know where to go for help (73.2% said they knew where to go for help if needed).

Parents of Thriving Kids-aligned children are actively seeking information online (83.2% went online for parenting information and advice in the previous 12 months).

Among parents who seek parenting information online, social media was the most commonly used source, with almost two-thirds of parents of children with disability using it for parenting information (65.3%). This reliance on a source where information may not be evidence-based is notable, particularly as only 5.8% reported being very confident in its reliability.

More than half of parents of children with disability used general parenting information websites (52.5%). Podcasts and parenting apps are used by a smaller but still notable number (39.0% and 29.0%, respectively).

When choosing which online resources to use, parents prioritise credibility and expertise over format or convenience. A high proportion of parents of children with a disability prioritised content made by a qualified professional (81.8%), and almost three-quarters value resources from a credible organisation (74.6%).

Summary

These findings from the Parenting Today national survey provide useful direction for the development of effective supports for families raising young children with disability.

Providing timely, appropriate assistance to families of children with low to moderate disability support needs, including those associated with developmental delay and autism, is a central objective of Thriving Kids.

The Parenting Today survey offers important evidence about the experiences, preferences and support requirements of families who are likely to be eligible for Thriving Kids, alongside those whose children have more complex needs. Together, these findings can help inform the design and implementation of the Thriving Kids initiative.

The survey indicates that parents whose circumstances align with the Thriving Kids target group are neither disengaged from services nor hesitant to seek assistance. Rather, they are actively drawing on a range of supports, consulting professionals, participating in parenting programs and connecting with peers. At the same time, their experiences highlight several points of friction within existing pathways that may limit accessibility, effectiveness and overall acceptability of existing supports.

The findings also reveal considerable unmet demand for parenting programs, with participation constrained by a combination of practical, financial and psychosocial barriers. In addition, initiatives such as Thriving Kids may be well positioned to address the trust deficit that appears to exist in online information environments. Many parents turn to online sources for guidance and advice, yet report limited confidence in the reliability of the information they encounter, particularly through social media channels.

Parents of children with disability are ready to receive supports and are actively seeking guidance, but current support systems present practical hurdles. Many supports are not convenient to families, or have limited evidence behind them, and these are things that parents view as important. Addressing the community-level barriers to reliable information and support ensures that families of children with disability receive the right support at the right time.

