

Parent mental health and wellbeing

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.

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Introduction

Parent mental health is no longer a peripheral family issue. It is a population level determinant of children's development, workforce participation, service demand, and long term social and economic outcomes.

At a time when governments are investing heavily in child mental health, early intervention, productivity, and prevention, the mental health and wellbeing of parents remains largely invisible in mainstream policy frameworks. This analysis challenges that gap.

What do we mean by parent wellbeing and mental health?

Wellbeing describes a person's overall functioning, emotional state, and capacity to cope with everyday pressures. It is more than just physical or mental health, wellbeing is all the interconnected parts of life that shape how we feel.

Factors such as reliable support, community connections, culture, access to services, and socioeconomic conditions all play a significant role in shaping our wellbeing (Armstrong et al., 2005). When wellbeing is strong, we have the emotional, social, physical, and practical resources that we need to deal with life's challenges, build and maintain positive relationships, and lead meaningful, satisfied lives (Cahill & Gowing, 2024).

Parent wellbeing is a powerful driver of children's healthy development. When parents experience strong wellbeing, it positively influences the ways they interact with their children.

Parents with higher wellbeing tend to show greater warmth, patience, and emotional availability in their daily interactions, helping children to feel secure and supported, features that are foundational for healthy development (Chen et al., 2019).

Importantly, parents who report good wellbeing are also more likely to do the things that are associated with effective parenting, building stronger and more responsive parent-child relationships (Newland, 2014).

Studies show that when parents receive targeted support to enhance their wellbeing, children show improvements in behaviour, emotional health, and the quality of their relationships with their parents (e.g., Sanders et al., 2019).

Taken together, the evidence is clear: supporting parent wellbeing is not only beneficial for parents themselves but has a direct and meaningful impact on children's development and overall wellbeing. It is therefore essential to understand how parents are faring.

How did the Parenting Today survey capture parent wellbeing?

The 2025 Parenting Today national survey asked more than 10,000 parents a range of questions to deepen understanding of the wellbeing and mental health of parents across Australia.

The survey drew on decades of research identifying what matters most for wellbeing and for optimal child development. It included questions about parents' confidence, warmth and consistency, self-compassion, and social connectedness, as well as broader circumstances like financial pressures, work-life balance and neighbourhood amenities.

The survey included a brief version of the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K6), a widely used and validated measure of psychological distress that assesses feelings of nervousness, hopelessness, restlessness, depression, worthlessness, and whether everything feels like an effort. Taking a multifaceted approach to the measurement of wellbeing recognises that many interconnected elements shape our overall mental health and sense of wellbeing.

By asking parents how various facets of their lives contribute to their wellbeing, the Parenting Today survey allows us to see not just how parents are faring, but what conditions make the biggest difference.

Parenting Today is a national research initiative led by the Parenting Research Centre, established with foundational support from the Minderoo Foundation and the Victorian Government to build a long-term picture of how families are faring across Australia.

What parents told us about their mental health and wellbeing

Findings from the Parenting Today national survey show that many parents are doing well across key indicators of wellbeing.

More than three-quarters report good, very good, or excellent physical health (77%), around 9 out of 10 report low or moderate levels of psychological distress (88%), and 78% report having at least one trusted person they can turn to when life gets tough. Many also feel confident as parents (73%) and describe parenting as a rewarding experience (83%).

Yet beneath these positive experiences, some parents report considerable pressures. More than half feel lonely at least occasionally (57%), and nearly half experience moderate psychological distress (45%) – the kinds of worries, low mood, or fatigue that, while not indicative of serious mental ill-health, still weigh heavily in day-to-day life.

A further 12% report high distress, marked by serious emotional strain such as anxiety or depression. Around one in four parents (27%) also live with a disability or chronic health condition that affects daily functioning. Tiredness (49%) and self-doubt (47%) also remain common among parents.

Disrupting the narrative – new drivers for parent mental health and wellbeing

As our understanding of contemporary parenting practices evolves, it is increasingly important to understand the interconnected factors that influence parent mental health and wellbeing.

Deeper analysis of our data shows that good mental health is shaped more strongly by relational factors and emotional experiences than by static characteristics, such as parents' gender, education, or postcode, or household structure such as being a sole caregiver.

While these demographic factors have traditionally been recognised as having strong associations with mental health outcomes, our findings challenge long-held narratives that have focused on categorical markers, obscuring more meaningful influences embedded in the social environment.

They highlight additional influences that emerge when we consider parent-reported experiences, including self-efficacy, relational factors (like support from a trusted person) and structural elements like neighbourhood amenities and geographic connectedness – modifiable aspects of parents' lives.

Psychological distress

Our analysis found that the strongest three factors associated with parent psychological distress were loneliness, self-doubt and low self-compassion. This means that, as parents, what matters most for our wellbeing is the quality of connections we have, how supported we feel, and the emotional climate in which we're parenting.

1. **Loneliness emerged as the most powerful risk factor.** Even after taking other demographic and contextual factors (like parent age and household income) into account, lonely parents had 3.6 times higher odds of reporting high psychological distress. Loneliness cannot be considered in isolation, it's shaped by many personal, social and contextual experiences. Despite this, we found that even a small shift in loneliness made a notable difference. Parents who described themselves as 'hardly ever' lonely reported far less psychological distress than those who felt lonely even 'occasionally'. Supported by existing research (Barjaková et al., 2023), this means that reduced loneliness acts as a protective factor.
2. **Self-doubt, that is, worrying if we're making the right decisions or doing a good job as a parent, and self-compassion (forgiving ourselves when making a mistake) were also strong factors associated with psychological distress.** Those who reported more self-doubt were 2.4 times as likely to report high distress than those who did not report self-doubt. Those with higher self-compassion had 46% lower odds of reporting high psychological distress, indicating a protective effect.
3. **Having a trusted person to rely on was associated with a small but statistically significant reduction in psychological distress,** suggesting that an emotionally safe and consistent source of support may also help to buffer against distress.

In our data, very weak associations were found between distress and parent gender, education, income and child age/parenting stage. Parenting self-efficacy (a belief that 'I can do this'), turning to family first for parenting support, solo-caregiver household status and neighbourhood amenities all showed predictive, albeit weak associations with distress.

This is not to say these factors aren't important; rather each contributes only a small amount on its own or interacts modestly with the factors we have already identified as having a much stronger association with parent wellbeing. Parents' self-efficacy, for example, is weakly associated with distress, but much of its contribution overlaps with parent self-doubt.

These findings highlight the critical importance of social connection and self-compassion, for all parents, whether they live in a solo-caregiver household, whether they parent infants or teens, or whether they are a mother or a father.

At the same time, we must acknowledge that some parents experience these pressures more so than others. For example, parents who care for children with complex needs such as developmental delays, chronic health conditions, disability or significant behaviour or emotional difficulties. Their experiences are real and supported by a wealth of research showing that increased caregiving demands can heighten loneliness and self-doubt and reduce opportunities for rest and support.

Recognising that the strongest predictors of parent distress are shared widely across the parent population doesn't diminish the additional pressures among these groups. Instead, it highlights a broader truth: that every parent benefits from relational and contextual support to help buffer the demands of caring for a family.

This need becomes clearer when we look at trends over time. One of the most consistent patterns emerging over the past decade is a steady decline in parent mental health among parents in Australia. For example, the proportion of parents reporting high levels of psychological distress in our Parenting Today in Victoria survey data has nearly tripled, rising from 4% in 2016 to 11% in 2025.

This shift doesn't happen in vacuum. It reflects the growing weight of societal and contextual pressures, from increasing cost-of-living strain to reduced informal support networks, expanding the load placed on caregivers. Wellbeing is not only at the individual level, but within the broader systems and environments that shape daily family life.

Our findings point to the most influential factors that contribute to parent feelings of high or low psychological distress, providing strong evidence and guidance for shaping necessary context-specific supports.

Why this matters – impacts for parenting and ultimately for children

The pressing question for parents, family support services, government and policy makers is: how does all this impact children and their outcomes?

When we look at the associations between things like parent loneliness, self-doubt and self-compassion and how parents interact with their children, we start to understand how children may be impacted by their parents' own wellbeing.

Our data suggest that as parents, our sense of self-doubt and psychological distress are fairly highly linked to the parenting practices we use in our day-to-day interactions with our children. Parents who report higher levels of distress and greater self-doubt also report a stronger desire to be less impatient and more consistent with their children.

To a lesser extent there were also associations between parents' psychological distress and a tendency towards an increased likelihood of smacking their child and arguing or yelling at their child about their behaviour or attitude. Self-doubt was also positively associated with harsher parenting behaviours, including arguing or yelling at one's child. Self-compassion (forgiving oneself for parenting mistakes) and parent loneliness were also somewhat associated with parenting practices, in that higher self-compassion and lower levels of loneliness were associated with more positive parenting.

These findings help explain why parent mental health matters for children and the environments they grow up in and aligns with existing knowledge about how daily parenting practices, such as consistency, patience, and other parenting behaviours, are linked with children's emotional regulation, behaviour and sense of security.

Physical Health

Alongside psychological distress, physical health contributes to our sense of wellbeing. Our data shows that the same factors that are associated with mental health are also associated with physical health.

While these associations to physical health are slightly weaker, they still highlight how interconnected the drivers for wellbeing are. Like mental health, physical health is shaped by parents' experiences of loneliness and self-doubt.

At a closer look, the connection between loneliness and physical health faded once we accounted for parents' overall psychological distress. It appears that the psychological distress behind the loneliness, rather than the loneliness on its own, plays a bigger role in shaping physical health. The findings show that the strongest association was between physical health and not taking time to, or not having time to, rest and recharge.

Parents who rarely engage in activities that help to restore their energy reported noticeably worse physical health.

Some possible explanations

Loneliness, physical health, and mental health are closely intertwined. While each plays its own role, loneliness is especially linked to the quantity and quality of parents' social relationships (see Barjakova et al., 2023).

This shows just how interconnected these experiences are, highlighting the complexity of isolating any single factor that can fully explain parents' overall wellbeing. Together with evidence from research by others, the Parenting Today data show that parent wellbeing is shaped by multiple influences.

A contributing reason for a decline in parent mental health and wellbeing over time may in part be due to evolving social narratives about mental health and pressures on what 'good' parenting looks like. Self-doubt may be a response to how parents feel they measure up to parenting ideals that may feel unrealistic and unattainable for many of us.

An abundance of and ease of accessing a vast amount of information online and via social media may contribute. Evolving societal expectations also shape these parenting ideals and can culminate in a set of socially driven activities that parents may feel inclined to follow, if they are to play their role as parent well (Faircloth, 2023).

What this means for the ways we support parents

Together, these findings shift the focus from traditionally looking at who parents are to what they are experiencing.

The conditions shaping parent mental health and wellbeing seem not to be fixed but are relational and environmental circumstances that change over time in line with changing societal values. These circumstances can be changed through the right supports, suggesting that universal and stigma-free approaches to informing and supporting parents are needed. Loneliness, self-doubt, and low self-compassion are common across the parent population, so strengthening connection, confidence, and emotional support may benefit all parents, not just specific demographic groups. Emotional loads can be lightened by improving access to practical and relevant help across communities.

The findings of the Parenting Today national survey suggest that parent wellbeing and mental health is best understood within an ecosystem - parents seem to thrive when their own coping strategies are strong, but also when the environments around them help to create conditions that reduce loneliness and validate their parenting experiences. Meaningful improvements in parent mental health and wellbeing may also come from approaches that challenge social narratives that fuel unrealistic expectations of 'best-practice' parenting.

Relevance of these findings to the national context

While Australia's National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy acknowledges families as central to children's wellbeing, parent mental health remains largely implicit rather than a defined investment focus.

Findings from the Parenting Today national survey provide concrete evidence for why parent wellbeing must be treated as a system input, not a downstream concern.

In addition, the Productivity Commission found Australia's mental health system remains crisis-oriented and weak on prevention and early intervention. The drivers of parent psychological distress identified here, loneliness, self-doubt and low self-compassion, sit squarely within the prevention gap identified by the Productivity Commission. They represent modifiable risks that are currently poorly addressed by a system oriented toward acute care rather than upstream support.

Furthermore, internationally, parent wellbeing is increasingly recognised as foundational child mental health infrastructure. WHO and UNICEF frameworks position universal and progressive parenting support as core public health investment, not discretionary family policy.

Policy implications

The findings from the Parenting Today national survey have clear implications for public policy. They suggest that improving parent mental health and wellbeing is not solely a health system issue, but a cross portfolio priority with implications for child mental health, education, workforce participation, productivity, and long term service demand.

1. Treat parent wellbeing as core prevention infrastructure

Parent mental health should be recognised as a foundational input to prevention and early intervention efforts, rather than a downstream or ancillary concern. The strongest drivers of parent distress identified in this analysis - loneliness, self-doubt and low self-compassion - are widespread, modifiable, and well suited to upstream, population level responses. Addressing these factors earlier may reduce future demand on acute mental health services, child protection systems, and education-based behaviour supports.

2. Shift from categorical risk to experience based investment

Traditional policy approaches that prioritise support based primarily on fixed characteristics (such as family structure, gender, or income) risk overlooking all parents who may experience struggles. These findings support a shift toward policies that respond to what parents are experiencing, such as isolation, lack of support, or erosion of confidence, regardless of demographic profile. Experience-based approaches enable more precise and scalable intervention.

3. Invest in universal, stigma free supports

Because loneliness and self-doubt are common across the parenting population, universal and non-stigmatising supports are likely to be more effective than narrowly targeted programs alone. Initiatives that strengthen social connection, normalise help seeking, and validate parenting experiences can benefit all parents while still allowing additional intensity for those under greater strain. Universal approaches also reduce barriers to access and avoid reinforcing deficit-based narratives.

4. Integrate parent wellbeing across service systems

Opportunities exist to embed attention to parent wellbeing across existing platforms including maternal, child and family health services, early childhood education and care, schools, primary health care, and community services, rather than relying on new standalone programs. Embedding simple relational and emotional supports within mainstream services can improve reach while strengthening system efficiency.

5. Position parent wellbeing as a multiplier investment

Supporting parent mental health has flow on benefits beyond individual wellbeing. By strengthening parents' emotional resources and social connections, governments can improve parenting practices, support children's development, and reduce cumulative risk over time. Investment in parent wellbeing therefore represents a high value intervention that amplifies returns across multiple government priorities, including child mental health reform, workforce participation, productivity, and long-term economic resilience.

Conclusion

The findings from the Parenting Today national survey make clear that parent mental health and wellbeing are not peripheral concerns but foundational conditions for children's development and for the effective functioning of families, services, and systems.

When parent wellbeing is eroded, the impacts reverberate through parenting practices and, ultimately, into children's emotional security, behaviour and development.

Our survey findings indicate that parents' loneliness, self-doubt and low self-compassion emerge as the strongest drivers of psychological distress, cutting across fixed characteristics such as gender, education or socioeconomic status.

Factors such as loneliness, self-doubt and low self-compassion can interact with family circumstances in ways that are not always visible when risk is framed narrowly. For example, when considered in isolation, parent gender may show some association with distress, yet when combined with social isolation, limited community connection or constrained support, the impact on wellbeing can be significant. Recognising the complex nature of multiple pressures helps move social narratives away from an individualised view of poor or good parenting and towards a more collective understanding of parenting as existing within an ecosystem, dependent on connection, validation and support.

This reframing has important implications for how parents are supported. The evidence points to a compelling policy imperative: supporting parent wellbeing must be treated as a core component of prevention and early intervention, rather than a downstream issue. Investment in universal, stigma free, and relational supports that reduce isolation, strengthen confidence, and normalise the realities of parenting offers a high value opportunity to improve outcomes for parents and children alike. Reframing parent wellbeing as shared social infrastructure, rather than an individual responsibility, is essential if governments are to address rising psychological distress among parents and build stronger foundations for child mental health, productivity, and long term social wellbeing.

Universally available, stigma-free approaches are likely to be most effective. Initiatives that help parents build community, share experiences, and feel less isolated could have real impact. Helping parents who might be struggling with self-doubt and poor mental health see themselves as having an experience shared by many other parents may help to remove the stigma associated with asking for help.

Social connection is an important protective factor, and even modest reductions in loneliness can meaningfully reduce psychological distress. Similarly, self-compassion emerges not as a fixed trait but as a skill that can be strengthened, helping to buffer self-doubt and psychological strain. Strategies that reduce isolation, foster community, and challenge unrealistic norms of 'good parenting' therefore hold considerable promise.

By investing in environments and supports that help parents feel connected, confident and understood, we create conditions that support not only parent wellbeing, but also the healthy development and wellbeing of children.

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