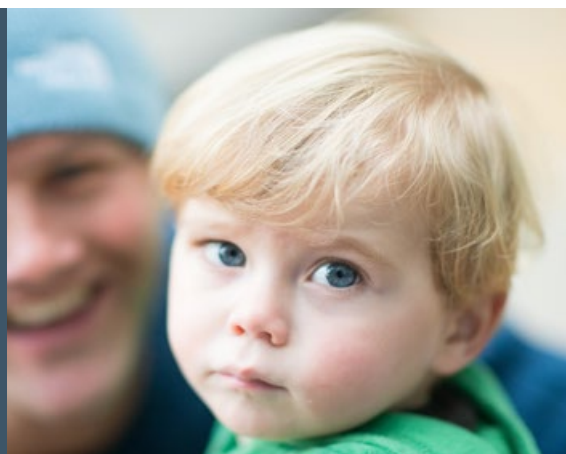


What the public thinks

Sources of child health information: what parents use and trust



Poll 2, March 2016

Detailed report

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Report highlights

- Parents report high levels of use of websites, blogs and online forums for child health information, yet a third of parents do not trust them at all
- Nearly 50% of Australian parents report using a hospital, including Emergency departments, for health advice about their child in the past six months
- More parents reported using the school teacher and the pharmacist for child health advice than a paediatrician or telephone advice helpline
- Alternative health therapists, social media and celebrities are among the sources most frequently reported as rarely or never used and not at all trusted by parents for child health advice
- General practitioners are the child health information source most commonly identified as used and trusted a lot by Australian parents, with 90% having used their GP for child health advice in the last six months and three out of four reporting they trust them a lot

Child health information sources used by parents in the last six months Percentage of respondents

1. General practitioner	92%	9. Speech therapist, occupational therapist, other allied health	35%
2. Friends, family	78%	10. Well child nurse	34%
3. Pharmacist	78%	11. Social media	34%
4. Websites, blogs, online forums	61%	12. Telephone advice helpline	31%
5. Books, magazines, newspapers	53%	13. Psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor	29%
6. Hospital, including Emergency	48%	14. Alternative health therapist	29%
7. School teacher, childhood educator	48%	15. Celebrities	12%
8. Paediatrician	40%		

Figure 1.

In a survey fielded in January 2016, Australian parents were asked to rate their levels of use and trust of 15 child health information sources. The comprehensive list of child health information sources reflected current patterns of health information consumption and was formulated using existing local and international health information research, along with input from the Australian public via a pilot survey. Listed information sources included traditional health care providers such as general practitioners and paediatricians; allied, nurse and alternative health practitioners; online sources; telephone advice helplines and the media. Participants rated their use of each child health information source in the last six months, as 'often', 'occasionally', or 'rarely or never'. In a separate question, parents were asked to rate their level of trust in each information source as 'a lot', 'somewhat' or 'not at all'.

Reported use of child health information sources

Figure 1 lists the child health information sources from most frequently to least frequently rated as 'used often or occasionally in the last six months' by Australian parents.

The general practitioner was the child health information source parents most frequently reported as used (92%), followed by friends and family (78%), pharmacist (78%) and websites, blogs and online forums (61%). Other sources used included hospitals (48%), school teachers (48%), and paediatricians (40%).

Child health information sources used by fewer parents included telephone advice helplines (31%), alternative health therapists (29%), and celebrities (12%).

Parents' use of health information sources for their child varied by age of first born child (see Figure 2). Parents of preschool aged children indicated more use of online health information sources (73%) than parents of teenagers (51%). Parents of children aged less than five years were almost twice as likely to indicate use of telephone advice helplines (42%) than those of children aged over 12 years (24%). Across all age groups parents identified the general practitioner most frequently as a health information source used in the past six months (>90%).

Reported use of online child health information sources (websites, blogs, online forums) varied across some demographic subgroups. Parents of younger children, those who reported speaking a language other than English at home and those who had completed secondary education more frequently indicated going online for child health information than parents of teenagers, those speaking only English at home, and those with incomplete secondary education.

Of note, overall ratings for the top ten most used child health information sources did not differ significantly by age, gender, household income, or geographic location of respondent.

Child health information sources used by parents by age of first born child

Percentage of respondents

5 years and under

1. General practitioner	94%
2. Friends, family	88%
3. Pharmacist	75%
4. Websites, blogs, online forums	73%
5. Books, magazines, newspapers	64%
6. Well child nurse	54%
7. Hospital, including Emergency	49%
8. Paediatrician	47%
9. School teacher, childhood educator	46%
10. Telephone advice helpline	42%

6 to 12 years

1. General practitioner	92%
2. Friends, family	80%
3. Pharmacist	79%
4. Websites, blogs, online forums	64%
5. School teacher, childhood educator	57%
6. Books, magazines, newspapers	54%
7. Hospital, including Emergency	49%
8. Paediatrician	43%
9. Speech therapist, occupational therapist, other allied health	41%
10. Social media	36%

13 to 17 years

1. General practitioner	91%
2. Pharmacist	77%
3. Friends, family	71%
4. Websites, blogs, online forums	51%
5. Books, magazines, newspapers	46%
6. Hospital, including Emergency	46%
7. School teacher, childhood educator	41%
8. Paediatrician	33%
9. Alternative health therapist	32%
10. Psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor	32%

Figure 2.

Child health information sources trusted 'a lot' by parents

Percentage of respondents

1. General practitioner	75%	8. Telephone advice helpline	25%
2. Hospital, including Emergency	60%	9. Friends, family	25%
3. Paediatrician	54%	10. School teacher, childhood educator	17%
4. Psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor	38%	11. Alternative health therapist	13%
5. Pharmacist	37%	12. Books, magazines, newspapers	6%
6. Speech therapist, occupational therapist, other allied health	32%	13. Websites, blogs, online forums	6%
7. Well child nurse	31%	14. Celebrities	3%
		15. Social media	3%

Figure 3.

Reported trust in child health information sources

Figure 3 presents the child health information sources most commonly identified as trusted by parents. Percentages represent the proportion of parents reporting 'a lot' of trust in the source. The general practitioner was trusted a lot by 75% of respondents, followed by hospital (60%), paediatricians (54%), psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors (38%), and pharmacists (37%). Fewer parents indicated a lot of trust in telephone advice helplines (25%) and friends and family (25%). Only 6% of parents expressed a lot of trust in websites, blogs and online forums and even fewer in social media (3%).

Over two thirds (68%) of parents reported they do not trust social media 'at all' as a child health information source. A third of parents do not trust website blogs or online forums at all, despite high levels of their reported use (61%). Only one per cent of parents indicated no trust in their general practitioner as a source of child health information (see Figure 4).

Of note, patterns of trust did not differ significantly across demographic subgroups, including age, gender, income, geographic location, and country of birth.

Child health information sources 'not at all trusted' by parents

Percentage of respondents

1. Celebrities	85%
2. Social media	68%
3. Websites, blogs, online forums	36%
4. Books, magazines, newspapers	34%
5. Alternative health therapists	30%

Figure 4.

Child health information sources what parents use and trust

Used	Rank	Trusted
General practitioner (92%)	1	General practitioner (75%)
Friends, family (78%)	2	Hospital, including Emergency (60%)
Pharmacist (78%)	3	Paediatrician (54%)
Websites, blogs, online forums (61%)	4	Psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor (38%)
Books, magazines, newspapers (53%)	5	Pharmacist (37%)
Hospital, including Emergency (48%)	6	Speech therapist, occupational therapist, other allied health (32%)
School teacher, childhood educator (48%)	7	Well child nurse (31%)
Paediatrician (40%)	8	Telephone advice helpline (25%)
Speech therapist, occupational therapist, other allied health (35%)	9	Friends, family (25%)
Well child nurse (34%)	10	School teacher, childhood educator (17%)
Social media (34%)	11	Alternative health therapist (13%)
Telephone advice helpline (31%)	12	Books, magazines, newspapers (6%)
Psychologist, psychiatrist, counsellor (29%)	13	Websites, blogs, online forums (6%)
Alternative health therapist (29%)	14	Celebrities (3%)
Celebrities (12%)	15	Social media (3%)

Figure 5.

Use versus trust in child health information sources

Notable dichotomies existed between reported patterns of use and trust in health information sources by parents (see Figure 5). Namely, websites, blogs and online forums were often reported as used (60%) yet only trusted a lot by a minority of parents (6%). Friends and family were trusted a lot by only 25% of parents, yet nearly 80% indicated they had used this source for information about their child's health in the past six months. 50% of parents used books, magazines and newspapers for child health information, yet only 6% indicated a lot of trust in this source. Psychologists, psychiatrists and counsellors were among the sources most commonly identified as trusted a lot (38%) yet least commonly identified as used in the past six months by parents (29%).

Information sources more frequently identified as both used and trusted a lot by parents included the general practitioner and hospitals, including Emergency departments. Pharmacists were the fifth most trusted source, although twice as many parents indicated a lot of trust in the general practitioner (75%) compared to the pharmacist (37%) (see Figure 3).

Telephone advice helplines were among the sources less commonly identified by parents as both used and trusted. One in four parents reported trusting telephone advice helplines a lot, and less than a third reported having used a helpline for advice regarding a health problem in their child in the past six months. Child health information sources most frequently reported by parents as rarely or never used and not at all trusted included alternative health therapists, social media and celebrities.

Interactions of parents with the general practitioner for child healthcare

Parents were asked whether they had a regular general practitioner who provides care to their child. Ninety per cent of parents responded 'yes'. The odds of having a regular general practitioner providing care to a child were 44% lower for parents of lower income (<\$1000/week) compared to parents of higher income (>\$1000/week). Almost a quarter of parents (22%) indicated that they would almost always discuss child health information they got from the internet with a doctor. 58% said they would sometimes discuss online sourced child health information with a doctor and 20% said they almost never would. Parents with a regular general practitioner were more likely to always discuss child health information they found online with the doctor (24%) compared to parents without a regular general practitioner (5%).

Implications

This study reveals a significant gap in the information sources used and those trusted by Australian parents when it comes to the health of their children. Many parents are using sources for health advice that they don't report trusting a lot. Online health information, pharmacists and the school teacher were among the sources most often used but less frequently reported as trusted. Independent, authoritative information about child health distributed through these already utilised channels has the potential to readily reach the target audience of parents and carers, making investment in improving the provision of trustworthy health information through these avenues worthwhile.

Hospitals and emergency departments are among the most used and trusted sources of child health advice for a large number of Australian parents. Whilst trustworthy, emergency departments are not well placed to service children with lower acuity conditions, prompting consideration of better ways to reach parents with quality child health information and advice. Telephone advice helplines have previously been considered as one way to tackle this issue, but this study found parents have relatively low levels of use and trust in telephone helplines.

Online health information is readily available, accessible and used by most parents, yet they do not report high levels of trust in this information source.

Online sources have the potential to be a valuable resource for Australian parents and to possibly aid in alleviating the burden of use on other health care services, such as hospitals and emergency departments. Understanding the barriers to trust in this area will be critical to its future development. The majority of parents indicated they would discuss health information obtained online with a doctor, suggesting a preference for a shared decision-making process and highlighting the need for doctors to engage in discussion about online health information as part of their consultation process.

Australian parents identify the general practitioner as the most used and trusted information source regarding the health of their children. This pattern was consistent across all demographic subgroups, highlighting the universal presence of the general practitioner as a source of health advice in the lives of Australian families. This speaks to the importance of ongoing education and professional development of general practitioners in child physical and emotional health in order to ensure this powerful source of health advice, information and care is optimised for Australian parents and children.

One in ten parents indicated their child did not have a general practitioner. Having a regular GP or 'medical home' providing health care to children and families has been shown to improve health outcomes. Parents from lower-income households were significantly less likely to have a GP caring for their children. They were also less likely to use online sources of health information, as were less educated parents. This highlights the importance of considering the specific needs of more vulnerable communities when building initiatives to improve the provision of and access to quality child health information.

Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from January 13 to February 1, 2016, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2100). All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The completion rate was 50% among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate.

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