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Parents struggle to spot mental health warnings in kids, new poll finds

New research released today from The Royal Children's Hospital (RCH) has found the majority of Australian parents aren't confident in identifying or responding to signs of a mental health problem in their child.

The latest [RCH National Child Health Poll](#) revealed that only a third (35%) of Australian parents are confident they could recognise the signs of a mental health problem in their child, with a further third of parents believing a child's mental health problems might be best left alone to work themselves out over time.

Director of the RCH Poll, paediatrician Dr Anthea Rhodes said that less than half of parents (44%) reported being confident they would know where to go for help if their child was experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties.

"Children can develop many of the same mental health difficulties as adults, but sometimes they can manifest in different ways making them harder to recognise," Dr Rhodes said.

The poll revealed that a third of parents did not recognise that persistent sadness and frequent tearfulness and crying is not normal in children, while 27 per cent of parents weren't aware that ongoing physical complaints can be a sign of social or emotional problems in children and teenagers. A third of parents reported not knowing that primary school-aged children can get depression.

"Even if parents are unsure, there is no harm in having a conversation with their GP or school counsellor about any emotional, social or behavioural difficulties they think their child may be experiencing," Dr Rhodes added.

Dr Rhodes said it was particularly concerning to see the poll revealed a third of parents believe a child's mental health problems might be best left alone to work themselves out over time.

"Research shows that early intervention for child mental health problems can improve long-term outcomes for children and teenagers, so seeking professional help sooner rather than later is really important," she said.

"Ignoring signs that may indicate a child is in need of help can result in the problem becoming more entrenched and much harder to treat," Dr Rhodes added.

The poll revealed that parents who reported connecting with their kids most days of the week were more confident they would recognise a mental health problem in their child if it was present. Despite regularly focusing on and connecting with their kids, one in three parents said it was hard to find the time to do so and some parents of young children reported being unsure of what to talk about or how to connect with their child.

"Life is busy and full of distractions, but parents can make a difference to the mental health and wellbeing of their kids by finding ways to focus on and connect with them as part of everyday life. It can

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be as simple as taking the time to read them a book, eating a meal together or having a chat on the way to school," Dr Rhodes said.

She said that the findings suggest a need to educate and support parents to better recognise early warning signs of mental health problems, and to help them navigate their way to the right support.

"The first step in seeking help for a problem is to recognise that the problem exists. It's typically up to the parents and carers in a child's life to spot the issues and help children access the help they need. If parents are not equipped with the knowledge and understanding to recognise mental health concerns in their child, the problems are more likely to become embedded and more difficult to treat.

"In this poll, parents reported their GP, teachers and school counsellors as potential sources of help for addressing concerns they might have about their child's mental health. This highlights the importance of investing resources to adequately train and support staff in schools and primary care providers to meet this need," Dr Rhodes said.

For more information on the RCH Poll and to view the detailed report, see www.rchpoll.org.au

Note: The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll was formerly known as the Australian Child Health Poll. Please now refer to the poll as The RCH National Child Health Poll.

Data source

The eighth RCH National Child Health Poll is a survey of a nationally representative sample of 2,032 adults aged 18 years and older. Collectively respondents had a total of 3,733 children. The survey is conducted by an independent research agency on behalf of The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. Each sample is subsequently weighted to reflect the latest Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics census data.

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Tips for recognising and responding to mental health problems

Signs of a social, emotional or behavioural problem in a child or teenager can be hard to spot. Patterns of emotion or behaviour that are particularly intense, go on for more than a few weeks and affect a child's ability to cope with everyday life at home, school or kinder may be a sign of a mental health problem.

Signs of a possible mental health problem in a younger child include:

- Sadness a lot of the time
- Ongoing worries or fears
- Obsessions or compulsive habits that interfere with everyday life
- Ongoing problems getting along with other children or fitting in at school, kinder or child care
- Aggressive or consistently disobedient behaviour, such as frequent yelling, kicking, hitting, biting or damaging things around them
- Frequent physical complaints, such as headaches or tummy aches
- Sleep problems, including nightmares.

For older children and teenagers, signs of a possible mental health problem include:

- Having trouble coping with everyday activities
- Seeming down, feeling things are hopeless, being frequently tearful or lacking motivation
- Having trouble eating or sleeping
- Difficulties with attention, memory or concentration, a drop in school performance, or suddenly refusing to go to school
- Avoiding friends or withdrawing from social contact
- Complaints of frequent physical pain, such as headache, tummy ache or backache
- Being aggressive or antisocial, for example, missing school, getting into trouble with the police, fighting or stealing
- Losing weight or being very anxious about weight or physical appearance
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol
- Self-harming behaviours.

How parents can get help

- Start by talking with their child about their concerns and helping them to access professional help
- Speak with their GP, who may help their child directly or refer them to another professional
- Speak with their child's school, kindergarten or child care centre for advice and support in getting appropriate help
- Speak with a psychologist, counsellor or social worker

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- Parents with younger children can also speak with their child health nurse
- Call a helpline for immediate support from a trained mental health professional, like [beyondblue](#)'s 24 hour service (1300 22 4636)
- For other helpful online resources, visit the [RCH Poll website](#).

If a child talks about suicide or is at immediate risk of harming themselves or others, parents and carers are advised to seek urgent medical attention by contacting their local emergency service or calling 000.