

# Child mental health problems: **Can parents spot the signs?**



## Poll report

Dr Anthea Rhodes, Director

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### Report highlights

- Only a third (35%) of Australian parents are confident they could recognise the signs of a mental health problem in their child
- Despite research showing that early professional help for child mental health problems can improve outcomes, a third (35%) of parents think these problems might be best left alone to work themselves out over time
- A quarter of parents (27%) do not know that ongoing physical complaints can be a sign of social or emotional problems in children and teenagers
- A third (33%) of parents do not recognise that persistent sadness and frequent tearfulness and crying is not normal in children
- Parents who reported connecting with their kids most days of the week were more likely to be confident they could recognise a mental health problem in their child, yet one in three parents say it's hard to find time to connect with their children
- Less than half (44%) of parents report being confident that they would know where to go for help if their child was experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties

**In a survey conducted during July 2017, Australian parents were asked a series of questions about their understanding, experiences and opinions in relation to the behaviour and social and emotional wellbeing of their children. A sample of 2,032 parents yielded data on a total of 3,733 of their children aged between one month and 18 years. Of these 3,733 children, 572 were infants and toddlers (aged zero to less than three years), 720 were preschoolers (aged three to less than five years), 1,456 were primary school-aged children (aged six to less than 13 years) and 985 were teenagers (aged 13 to less than 18 years). The median number of children per parent was two with a range from one to six.**

## Recognising the signs of social, emotional and behavioural problems

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 identify possible health concerns and help children access the help they need. 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. Signs of behavioural, social and emotional problems in children include mood changes like ongoing sadness or withdrawal, intense or overwhelming emotions, changes in behaviour including aggression or agitation and trouble concentrating or functioning at home, kinder or school. Physical complaints like headaches, tummy aches and unexplained weight loss as well as self-harming behaviours can also be signs of a social or emotional problem in a child or teenager.

In this poll parents were asked to rate how confident (confident, somewhat confident or not confident) they are

to recognise the signs of a mental health problem in their child. A mental health problem was defined as including challenges, difficulties or problems with social, emotional or behavioural wellbeing. Only a third (35%) of parents reported being confident they could recognise the signs of all three types of mental health problems in their child (social and/or emotional and/or behavioural problems). There was some variation in the level of confidence across the three aspects of mental health, with parents least confident about recognising social problems (see Figure 1). Less than half (45%) of parents reported being confident they could tell if their child was having social difficulties, such as ongoing problems making and keeping friends. Just over half (52%) reported being confident they could recognise emotional problems in their child, such as being sad for a long time or overly anxious. Parents were slightly more confident they could recognise behavioural problems, with 57% reporting they were confident that they could tell if their child was having behavioural problems, such as ongoing difficulties with concentration, impulsivity, arguing back or aggression (see Figure 1).

There was no significant difference in rates of reported confidence among parents by age of child, with parents of teenagers reporting similar levels of confidence to parents of younger children. Parents with a regular GP providing care to their child were more likely to indicate confidence in recognising emotional and behavioural problems than those without a regular GP.

Parents were asked to identify factors that might improve their confidence in recognising social, emotional and behavioural problems in their children. Just over half of parents (56%) said spending more time talking to and connecting with their child might help them to recognise signs of a mental health problem. Around half of parents indicated they could benefit from learning more about the social and emotional health and development of children (49%) and the day-to-day signs of social,

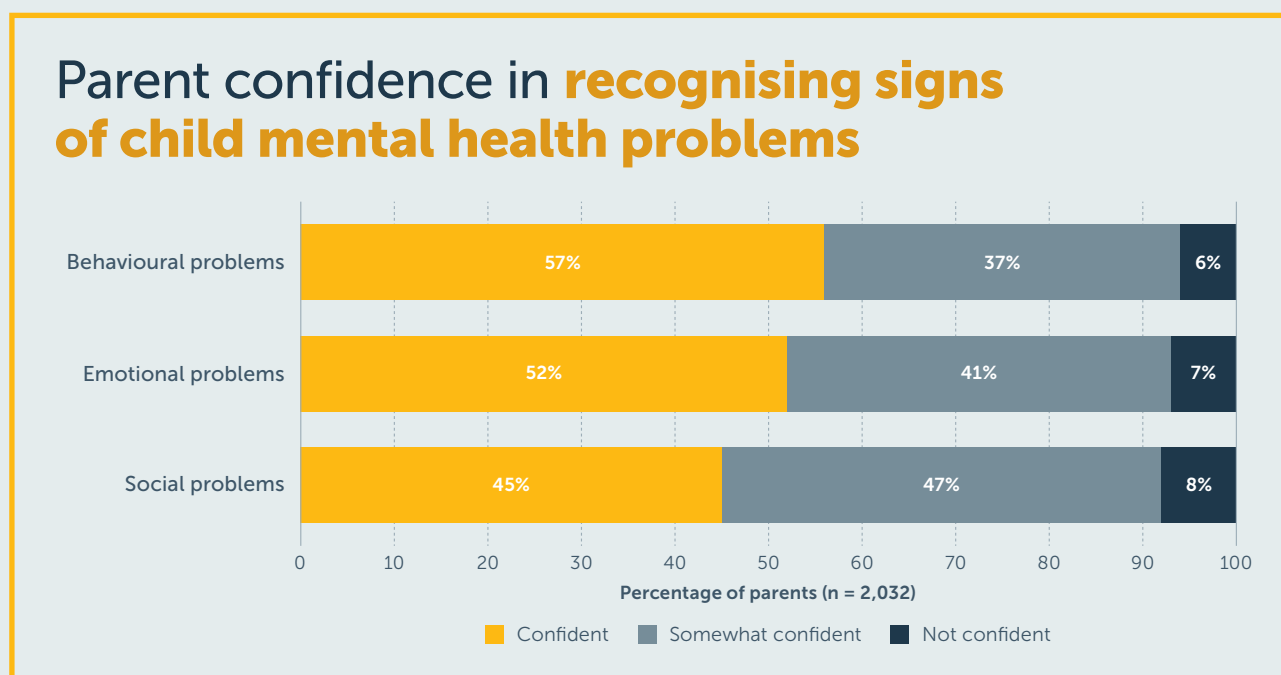


Figure 1.

emotional and behavioural problems in children (54%). Forty-three per cent of parents said that more information about their child's progress at school might be helpful, and a third (31%) said having a doctor or psychologist to discuss things with could help them to recognise signs of a problem (see Figure 2).

## Understanding and beliefs about behaviour and social and emotional health

This study found that knowledge is low among parents about some aspects of child mental health and wellbeing.

Most parents were able to recognise some signs of depression in children and teenagers, with 83% knowing that depression affects children's thinking, memory and concentration and 78% knowing that a drop in school performance may be a sign of a social or emotional problem in a child or teenager. Parents showed less knowledge about depression in younger children with a third (33%) not knowing that primary school-aged children can get depression. A third of parents (33%) did not recognise that persistent sadness, frequent tearfulness and crying is not normal in children. One in five (21%) parents incorrectly believe it is normal for children to have ongoing guilty or negative feelings about themselves or their life, and a further 22% were unsure about this. Only half of parents (56%) recognised that it is not normal for teenagers to avoid seeing their friends and two thirds of parents (65%) did not recognise that it's not normal for teenagers to have ongoing trouble coping with everyday activities.

Knowledge about the signs of behavioural problems in young children was low, with over a third (41%) of parents

not knowing that persistent difficulties with anger management and aggression are not normal in primary school-aged children and only 57% knowing that it is not normal for preschoolers to be consistently disobedient.

Some parents demonstrated low levels of knowledge about infant mental health, with nearly one in five female parents (17%) and one in four male parents (24%) incorrectly believing that a baby's brain is too immature to develop social and emotional problems, and a further 30% of parents being unsure about this. Only 61% of parents agreed that the health of a mother during pregnancy can affect the social and emotional health of her child.

Research suggests that early support and treatment for mental health problems in children can improve outcomes, yet a third of parents (35%) felt these problems may be better left to work themselves out over time. Male parents were twice as likely (19%) to report thinking that these problems are best left alone than female parents (11%).

## Connecting with kids

Parents who reported connecting with their kids most days of the week (four or more days per week) were more likely to be confident they could recognise a mental health problem in their child, yet one in three (30%) parents reported being so busy it is hard to find time to connect with their children. Despite time being a potential barrier, 90% of parents reported talking to or connecting with their child most days of the week about things that are important to their child. This behaviour did vary markedly by the age of the child, with parents of infants and toddlers being more likely to spend time connecting with their child every day (65%) than parents of primary school-aged children (48%) and teenagers (35%).

## Factors that would help parents to identify mental health problems in their child

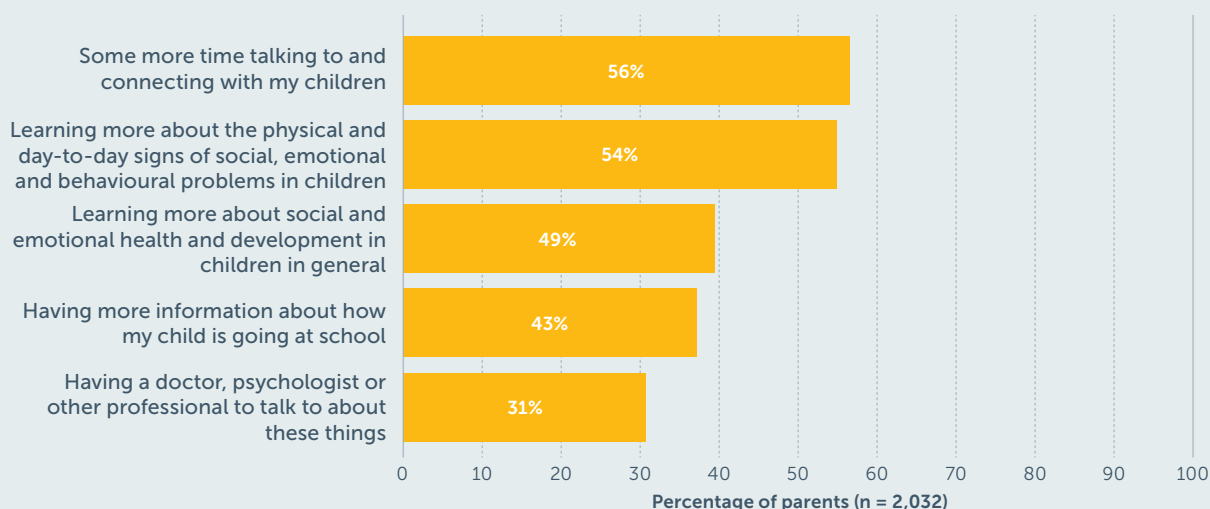


Figure 2.

Fifteen per cent of all parents felt their child was too young to talk to and connect with, with this belief being significantly more common among parents of infants and toddlers (42%) and preschoolers (28%) compared to parents of primary schoolers (10%) and teenagers (6%). Thirteen per cent of parents said they were not sure what to talk about or how to connect with their child.

Some parents reported that their child did not want to spend time talking to or connecting with them. This varied significantly by age of child, with a quarter (24%) of parents of teenagers identifying this as a barrier to staying connected with their child compared to just 8% of parents of preschoolers and 13% of primary schoolers.

## Seeking help

Just under half of parents (46%) reported being confident they might be able to do something themselves to help at home if their child was experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Among those parents who did not report being confident they could help their child at home, 40% said they would not know what they could do that would be helpful. A further 28% reported that their child would not want to talk with them about social or emotional difficulties, with this being particularly common among parents of teenagers (39%). Twenty-one per cent said that differing opinions between themselves and their partner about how to manage these issues might make it difficult to do something to help their child at home.

The majority of parents (73%) said that they have a family member or friend they would talk to if their child was experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Male parents and carers were less likely to report having someone to talk to for help (68%) than female parents (77%). Stigma around help-seeking behaviour for mental health concerns has been well described. This poll found that only one in ten parents felt their decision about whether to seek help for their child if they were experiencing a social, emotional or behavioural problem would be affected by concerns about what other people might think a medium amount (8%) or a lot (3%). One in four parents reported it would affect their decision a little (25%).

This poll found that less than half of parents are confident in knowing where to go for professional help if their child was experiencing social, emotional or behavioural difficulties (44%). Confidence rates were lowest among parents of infants and toddlers with only a third (36%) of parents saying they would know where to go for help if they needed it. Primary care and school-based services were among those services most frequently identified by parents as sources for help, with 59% saying they would be likely to seek help from the GP, 43% from a school counsellor or psychologist, 41% from a psychologist or counsellor outside of school and 37% from the school teacher.

## Implications

Child and youth mental health problems are common and on the rise. Research tells us that addressing problems early can help to improve outcomes for children and their families. It is typically up to the parents and carers in a child's life to identify possible health concerns and help children access the support 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 protracted, embedded and more difficult to treat. This poll found that a significant percentage of parents do not feel confident in recognising signs of social, emotional or behavioural problems in their child. Parents say that spending more time with their child, as well as having more knowledge about social, emotional and behavioural issues would help build confidence to recognise the signs of a problem. Many parents also do not feel confident about where to go if they felt they needed help for their child's mental health problems. These findings suggest a need to educate and support parents to better recognise early warning signs of mental health problems, and then help them navigate their way to the right support.

General practitioners were identified by parents as the leading source of potential help for addressing child behavioural, social and emotional concerns. This highlights the need to ensure that primary care providers are adequately trained and supported to meet this need. Importantly, many parents also identified teachers and school counsellors as a source of help for addressing concerns they may have about their child's mental health. School staff are readily accessible to families and are key partners in building social and emotional wellbeing in children. These data serve as evidence for investing in adequate education, support and resources within schools to meet these needs.

## 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 July 14 to July 31, 2017, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=2,032). 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. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 73%.

Email: [child.healthpoll@rch.org.au](mailto:child.healthpoll@rch.org.au)