

What

parents

worry

about

Carer concerns for
youth mental health
and wellbeing

REACH**OUT**

What Parents Worry About: Carer Concerns for Youth Mental Health and Wellbeing was written by Rebecca Christidis, with assistance from Sophia Garlick Bock and Sandra Garrido. The report is based on research undertaken by Bianca Kahl, Sophia Garlick Bock and Rebecca Christidis, assisted by Camilla Chaudhary.

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We acknowledge the traditional owners of Country throughout Australia and recognise their continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, and to Elders past and present. We recognise connection to Country as integral to health and wellbeing.

We also acknowledge people with lived experience of mental ill-health and recovery, along with their carers, families and supporters. We value the courage of those who share their unique perspectives for the purpose of learning and growing together to achieve better outcomes for all. We recognise their vital contribution to the sector and to the development of ReachOut's services.



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Executive summary

Parents and carers play a critical role in supporting the wellbeing of their young people as they navigate adolescence and, in many cases, mental health challenges. This report explores the concerns that parents and carers have for the young people they care for, how parents and carers are currently seeking parenting advice, and the support they need in order to feel equipped to best assist their young people through these challenging times.

Parents and carers report that their top concerns are young people's use of social media (59%), their futures (56%), school, study and exam stress (52%), and mental health (50%).

The report also shows that parents and carers are turning more often to their friends and other parents (51%) and the internet (43%), than to professional mental health services (39%) or GPs or doctors (38%), when seeking support for the issues impacting their young people. However, despite seeking help, more than 80 per cent of parents and carers reported that their needs weren't fully met in the last 12 months.

Parents and carers expressed a need for greater access to quality, trusted information and increased knowledge about how to get support for the young people they care for. They also identified improved access to professional advice and services as a key support need.

Ensuring the availability of a range of service options that meet differing needs and help-seeking preferences is a long-established foundational principle within the mental health sector. So, it's not surprising that those who are providing support to young help-seekers, or potential help-seekers, need a range of options that address their needs as well.

It's also clear that there is an awareness gap around the services that are currently available to meet parent and carer needs and help-seeking preferences, including services such as ReachOut Parents. This gap suggests the need not just for additional services, but also for better promotion of existing support options.

This report complements ReachOut's recent [‘What are you worried about?’](#) report, which explores the issues impacting young people's lives and their mental health and wellbeing.

We have explored the differences between young people's concerns about the use of social media and the internet and those of their parents and carers who reported it as a key area of concern. This topic was addressed in an earlier snapshot report based on the findings of ‘What are you worried about?’ and ‘What parents worry about’ studies, [‘Parenting in the digital age: Navigating concerns about the online world of young people.’](#)



Key findings

- **Mental health** of young people was among the most frequently reported issues that concerned parents and carers and was the issue most frequently rated as a top five concern.
- **Social media** use by young people was also of concern to many parents and carers, along with their **prospects for the future** and **study stress**.
- **Family issues**, such as domestic violence, changes to the family (e.g. divorce or a death in the family), and poor relationships between young people and their parents or carers, had the **greatest reported impact on youth wellbeing**.
- More than **8 in 10 parents and carers** reported that their **support needs weren't completely met** in the last 12 months.
- Parents and carers find most support outside of formal service providers such as from **friends or other parents** or from **the internet**.



Context

As of June 2022, Australia was home to an estimated 3.2 million young people aged 15–24, constituting 12 per cent of the total population (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2022a). Forty per cent of these young people are experiencing mental health challenges (ABS, 2022b), with suicide the leading cause of death in 15–24 year-olds in 2022 (ABS, 2022c). Young people in Australia are facing unique challenges that were unknown to their parents during their own youth. In addition to having lived through a global pandemic that caused significant disruption to their lives (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021), young people in Australia today are facing economic challenges and a cost-of-living crisis that means their standard of living will likely be lower than that of their parents (Wood & Griffiths, 2019). Furthermore, worldwide environmental challenges and the rapid development of technology mean that the social landscape today is very different from the one in which previous generations grew up (Benvenuti et al., 2023).

Parents and carers play a critical role in supporting the wellbeing of young people as they navigate these challenges. Despite this key role that parents play in supporting young people undergoing psychological distress, there is scant recent research that has examined the key concerns of parents in Australia about the young people they care for. ReachOut supports parents and carers with self-help content, community forums and one-on-one support. As a key provider of services to young people and their parents or carers, ReachOut aims to be informed by a deep understanding of the issues faced by the families of young people.

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the following questions:

1

What are the issues that parents and carers are concerned about regarding young people aged 12–18 in their care, and how do they feel these issues impact mental health and wellbeing?

2

To what extent do parents and carers feel prepared and equipped to deal with these concerns?

3

How do parents and carers want to be supported so that they can in turn support the young people in their lives?

Our findings suggest a complex interplay of factors that are impacting youth wellbeing and causing concern to those who care for young people, with important gaps between what parents need and the support that is available to them.



How the study was conducted

ReachOut conducted an online survey of parents and carers of young people in Australia from February to April 2023. Ethics approval for the project was obtained from an external ethics panel.¹ Participants were recruited via social media, paid promotions, sector contacts and other stakeholders, and the sample was supplemented by research panels. Parents and carers were presented with a comprehensive list of over 30 concerns that had been derived from the available literature on parents' worries as well as emerging concerns expressed by parents and carers using

ReachOut's online forum and 1:1 Coaching services. Participants were asked to indicate which issues were of concern and to identify their 'top five' concerns. They were also asked about support they had needed in the last 12 months and the degree to which those needs had been met. Open-ended questions allowed parents and carers to provide detailed descriptions of the issues that concerned them and of the things they thought would be helpful.

Who participated



631 parents or carers who were living in Australia and caring for **921** young people aged 12–18.



single-parent/sole-parent families (**25%**), two-parent families (**62%**), blended or step-families (**7%**), and others (**6%**).



people from all Australian states and territories. **63%** were from **major cities**, **23%** from **inner regional areas**, and **6%** from **outer regional areas**.



parents and carers who had heard of ReachOut before participating (**40%**). Only **1 in 5** had previously used ReachOut's services.



low, middle, and high-income households (**23%**, **37%**, and **35%** respectively).



9% who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and **12%** who reported at least one of the young people in their care to be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.



53% who identified as female, **47%** as male, and less than **1%** as non-binary.



people who were migrants or born in another country (**15%**). Most respondents (**88%**) reported speaking only English at home.

¹Belberry Human Research Ethics Committee: 2023-07-798

What issues are parents and carers concerned about?

Four issues emerged as being of particular concern to parents and carers. These were selected by more than half of all participants:

- social media
- young people's future
- school, study and exam stress
- mental health

Social media



59% of parents and carers said their young person's social media usage was of concern to them.



35% of parents and carers said it was a top issue of concern.



55% of parents and carers who were concerned about social media said it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on their young person's wellbeing.



70% of parents and carers who rated social media as a top issue lived in metropolitan areas.



60% of parents and carers who rated social media as a top issue were caring for children aged under 15.

The use of social media platforms such as TikTok grew at rapid rates during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Australia, TikTok is the leading social media platform used by Gen Z,² followed closely by YouTube and Instagram, with young people spending around 8 hours per week on average on social media (OOSGA, 2023).

Not surprisingly, given these facts, social media use was the most frequently selected issue of concern for parents and carers in this study. It was of particular concern to families with younger children, those from higher income brackets, and those living in metropolitan areas. Data from open-ended questions showed that parents and carers were particularly concerned about the *amount of time* their young people were spending on social media, with many commenting on the addictiveness of some platforms.

There was also a great deal of concern about *online* safety. Parents and carers cited concerns about cyberbullying and exposure to online predators as primary worries they had about social media use. Others were concerned about the content that young people were being exposed to, with negative influences, inappropriate content, and unrealistic views of the world being of key concern. Parents and carers were further worried that use of social media was reducing opportunities for young people to develop *social skills* in the real world, given their reliance on online social interactions.

²Young people born between the late 1990s and the early 2010s.



Young people's future



56% of parents and carers said they were concerned about the future of the young people they care for.



33% of parents and carers said this was a top issue of concern.

Nearly 1 in 2 parents and carers (49%) who indicated that the future of young people was a top issue for them, believed it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on the **wellbeing** of young people. In a related issue, 14 per cent of parents and carers selected **employment conditions** as an issue of concern, and 6 per cent rated it as a top issue for them. Qualitative data revealed that parents and carers were worried about whether the young person/s they care for would make the right career choices and reach their true potential, whether jobs would be available, and whether they would earn enough to live independently and have financial security. As one parent put it, *'It's difficult to find jobs nowadays, and with the advent of AI perhaps a lot of jobs won't be there when she graduates'* (M, major city).

The increasing cost of living and housing affordability were related concerns, with parents and carers worrying that in the future the young people they cared for would have difficulty supporting their families and living a good life. Others were concerned about world conditions, including the environment, violence in society, global conflicts, and whether the world would be a place where their young people could have a happy future. A key concern for some people caring for a young person with disability or a mental health condition was how that young person would manage as an adult.

'Everyone wants the best for their children. I just hope his future is all that he wants it to be'

F, major city



School, study and exam stress

Seven in 10 caregivers who selected 'school, study and exam stress' as a top issue said that it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on the **wellbeing** of the young person they care for. Some parents and carers expressed deep concern that young people were struggling to cope with the pressure and demands of schooling particularly when combined with other stressors, such as **neurodiversity**.

In some cases, the pressure to do well in school led to serious mental health concerns: *'One child is so stressed out about school homework exams pressure, she has self harmed'* (F, major city).

Loneliness compounded the stress of school and existing mental health challenges for some: *'[They] used to love school, but the move into high school has been very overwhelming ... This affects their mental health. They are lonely and depressed and in turn their anxiety at returning to school is increased'* (F, major city).

Related to school stress was the issue of **school refusal**. Refusing to go to school was reported as an issue of concern by 23 per cent of parents and carers, and as a top issue by 14 per cent. This was particularly of concern in **regional or remote areas**, with **one-third** of parents and carers from those areas reporting school refusal as an issue, compared to only 19 per cent in major cities. **Seven in 10** parents and carers who selected school refusal as a top issue said it was having 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on their young person's wellbeing.

For some families, stress associated with school was primary reason for school refusal: *'[She] has disengaged with school and constantly worries about going. She says she doesn't fit in and it gives her stress'* (M, inner regional).

52%

of parents and carers said that school, study and exam stress experienced by the young person they care for was of concern to them

29%

of parents and carers said this was a top issue of concern.³

69%

of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers selected this as an issue, making it the most common concern in this group

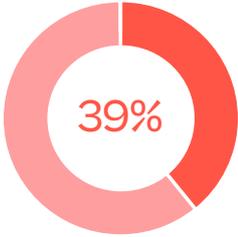


³ Young people also cited study stress as a key area of concern. See our Study Stress Report [here](#)

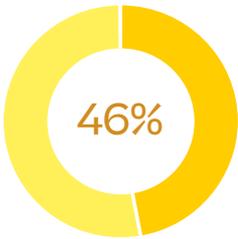
Mental Health



of parents and carers said that their young person's mental health was a concern for them.



of parents and carers said this was a top issue of concern.



of parents and carers who live in regional and remote areas said young people's mental health was a top concern, compared to only 37% of those in metropolitan areas.

Mental health was the issue most frequently selected as a top concern for the families in this study. Along with regional participants, families who speak only English at home (42%) and female caregivers (51%) were also particularly concerned about the mental health of their young people. Parents and carers who speak another language in addition to English (18%) and male carers (26%) were significantly less likely to rate mental health as a top issue of concern to them.

Of those who selected mental health as a top concern in relation to their young person, **82 per cent** said that it was having 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on the young person's **wellbeing**.

When asked, 'What is it about this issue [mental health] that concerns you?', the most frequent response was **'depression and anxiety'**.





Other issues

Other issues that were of concern to parents and carers included internet use and gaming, lifestyle habits, social concerns (loneliness, friendships and bullying), family concerns, identity concerns, health concerns, societal concerns and behavioural concerns. These issues affected the wellbeing of young people and impacted some segments of the parent/carer cohort more than others.

Internet use and gaming

Nearly **1 in 2** parents and carers (47%) said that **internet use** was an issue of concern, with 24 per cent rating it as an issue of top concern. Similarly, **1 in 3** parents and carers (30%) said that **gaming** was an issue that concerned them, and 15 per cent reported it as being a top issue for them.

Following a similar pattern to social media use, these issues were particularly of concern to families living in metropolitan areas and those caring for younger children.

Parents and carers concerned about gaming also perceived it as impacting youth wellbeing, with **76 per cent** of parents and carers who selected it as a top issue saying that they thought it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of **impact on the wellbeing** of the young person they care for. Parents and carers told us they were particularly concerned that time spent gaming or on the internet reduced opportunities for experiencing face-to-face socialising and had a negative impact on close peer relationships, further illustrating the interconnectedness of the issues that face young people today.

67%

of families who speak a language other than English at home selected gaming as a top issue, compared to just 14% of those who speak English only.

67%

of those who selected internet use as a top issue were living in metropolitan areas

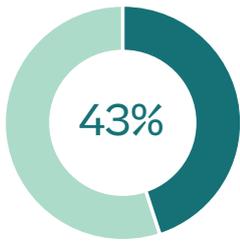
66%

of parents whose oldest child was under 15 years of age selected internet use as a top issue

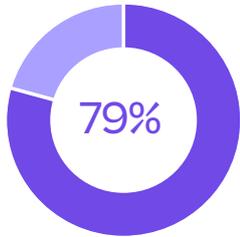
56%

of parents whose oldest child was under 15 years of age selected gaming as a top issue

Lifestyle habits



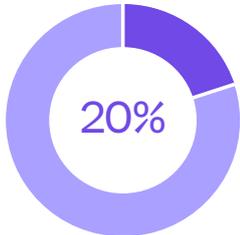
of parents and carers said they had concerns about their young person's sleep, diet and exercise.



of parents and carers who selected sleep, diet and exercise as an issue said it was having 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of impact on youth wellbeing.



said smoking or vaping by young people was an issue of concern.



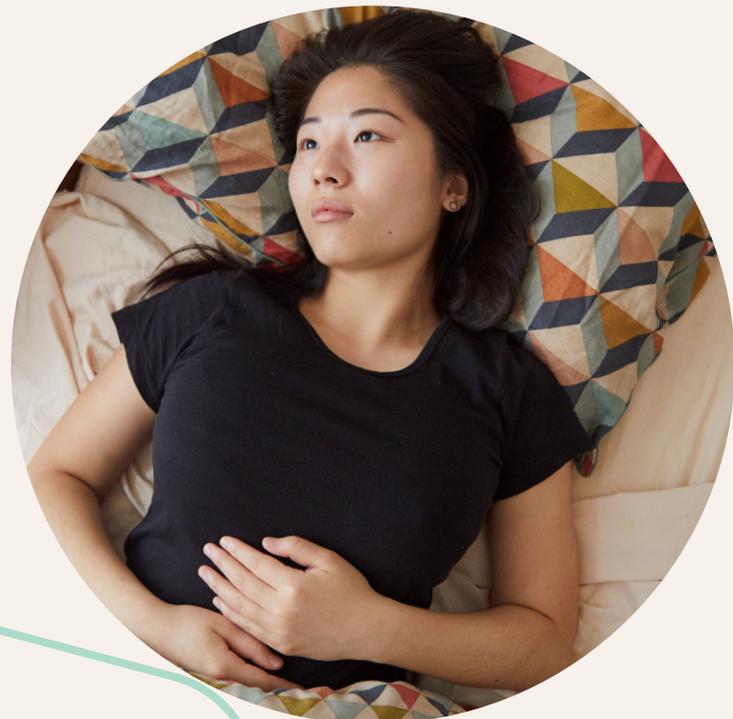
said drug or alcohol use by their young people was concerning.

Lifestyle habits such as sleep, diet and exercise were more frequently selected as an issue of concern by parents and carers whose children were somewhat older (47%), compared to those whose oldest child was under 15 years of age (38%). Lifestyle habits were also a key concern among carers of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people, being selected as a top issue of concern by 28 per cent of parents and carers in that group.

Open-ended questions demonstrated that sleep patterns were particularly concerning to parents and carers, with some young people staying up late gaming or studying and then finding it difficult to wake up in the morning. As one parent said: 'They have terrible sleep hygiene, (in my opinion) don't nourish themselves enough and don't do ANYTHING apart from screen time' (F, major city). Other parents and carers were concerned about poor diet choices and a lack of interest in physical activity.

'During school term she is asleep by 10–11 and gets up at 8, but in the weekend and school holidays she stays up late and sleeps all day. She doesn't exercise except for what she does in school. I worry that she is forming bad habits that will be with her always and I can't seem to break her out of it.'

F, major city



Social concerns: loneliness, friendships and bullying

Parents and carers were also concerned about how the young people they care for were doing socially across a range of measures, such as loneliness (30%), relationships with others (24%), being around people who could have a 'negative influence' (20%), and being treated by others in a nasty or harmful way (18%). Parents and carers in regional and remote areas and single-parent families were particularly concerned about loneliness. Loneliness was one of the leading negative influences on the wellbeing of young people, with **81 per cent** of parents and carers who selected this as a top issue saying they believed it had 'quite a bit' or 'a lot' of **impact on the wellbeing** of the young person they care for.



41%

of single-parent families selected loneliness as a concern, compared to 25% of two-parent families.

37%

of parents and carers in regional and remote areas selected loneliness as an issue of concern, compared to 27% of those living in major cities.

25%

of parent and carers in regional and remote areas were concerned about harmful and nasty treatment of young people, compared to 15% in major cities.

Family concerns

While comparatively few people selected family issues as a top concern, they were the most likely across all issues to have an **impact on youth wellbeing**. The top-selected family concerns of parents and carers were their young person's **relationship** with them as a carer (20%) and the **communication** between them (17%). Several parents and carers felt they were losing connection with the young people they care for as they get older. As one parent said, *'I feel we are drifting apart'* (M, inner regional area). Another said, *'I feel like my son is slowly going away from me'* (M, major city).

Although coping with **change in the family** (such as death or divorce) affected only 12 per cent of participants, 95 per cent of parents and carers who

selected this as a top issue reported that it had ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’ of impact on the wellbeing of the young people they care for. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this issue was primarily of concern to single parents (26%), compared to two-parent families (5%). Similarly, while **domestic violence** was a concern for only 7 per cent of participants, 91 per cent of those who rated it as a top issue reported it was having ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’ of impact on youth wellbeing. Parents and carers were particularly concerned about the long-term effects of trauma in the family, whether that be experiences of domestic violence, deaths in the family or parental separation. One grandparent commented, *‘All of my grandchildren have been exposed to family violence when they were a bit younger and before coming to us. We are still dealing with this now and we will be for a long time to come’* (M, major city).

Identity concerns

Parents and carers selected several issues related to identity that concerned them, such as **sexual and gender identity** (8%) as well as **connection with Country** (5%) or with culture and community (13%). Gender and sexual identity was the issue most likely to have a negative impact on wellbeing in this category, with **80 per cent** of parents and carers who selected this as a top issue reporting that it had ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’ of impact on the wellbeing of the young person they care for. Losing **connection with culture and community** was more likely to be a top concern for families that spoke another language at home (33%), compared to families who spoke only English (3%).

Health concerns

Body image was the issue of most concern to parents and carers who were worried about health issues, with 27 per cent selecting it as a concern, and 10 per cent saying it was one of their top concerns. However, **neurodiversity** was the issue in this category that was most likely to have a reported impact on **youth wellbeing**, with 90 per cent of caregivers who selected this as a top issue saying that it had ‘quite a bit’ or ‘a lot’ of impact on the wellbeing of the young person they care for. In relation to her neurodiverse son, one parent described experiencing *‘constant stress about his behaviour, academic ability, engagement in school, social stigma about diagnosis, and future opportunities’* (F, major city).

Other health issues that parents and carers selected included:

- physical health (18%)
- sex or sexual health (15%)
- living with disability (10%)



Societal concerns

Racism (9%), exposure to **sexual violence** or unwanted sexual behaviour (9%), and exposure to **radicalism or extremism** (6%) were also of concern to some parents and carers. For example, some were concerned about the prevalence of racist sentiments or extremist viewpoints being expressed online, and about the possibility that their child would be exposed to that or be bullied because of their race. One parent explained, *‘Polarised politics leading to more brazen racism concerns me and I’m not sure if my child will be able to respond properly to it’* (M, major city).

Others were concerned about a young person who had been a victim of sexual assault, and about the potential long-term damage this could have on them, or about young people feeling pressured to engage in unwanted sexual behaviour. As one parent said, *‘I don’t want them to have to grow up too fast and be forced or pressured into doing things before they are ready’* (F, major city).

Behavioural concerns

A small number of parents and carers selected issues relating to behaviour, including concerns about:

- how young people treat other people (8%)
- risky or dangerous behaviour (8%)
- getting into trouble with the police (6%)
- being a perpetrator of sexual violence or unwanted sexual behaviour (2%)

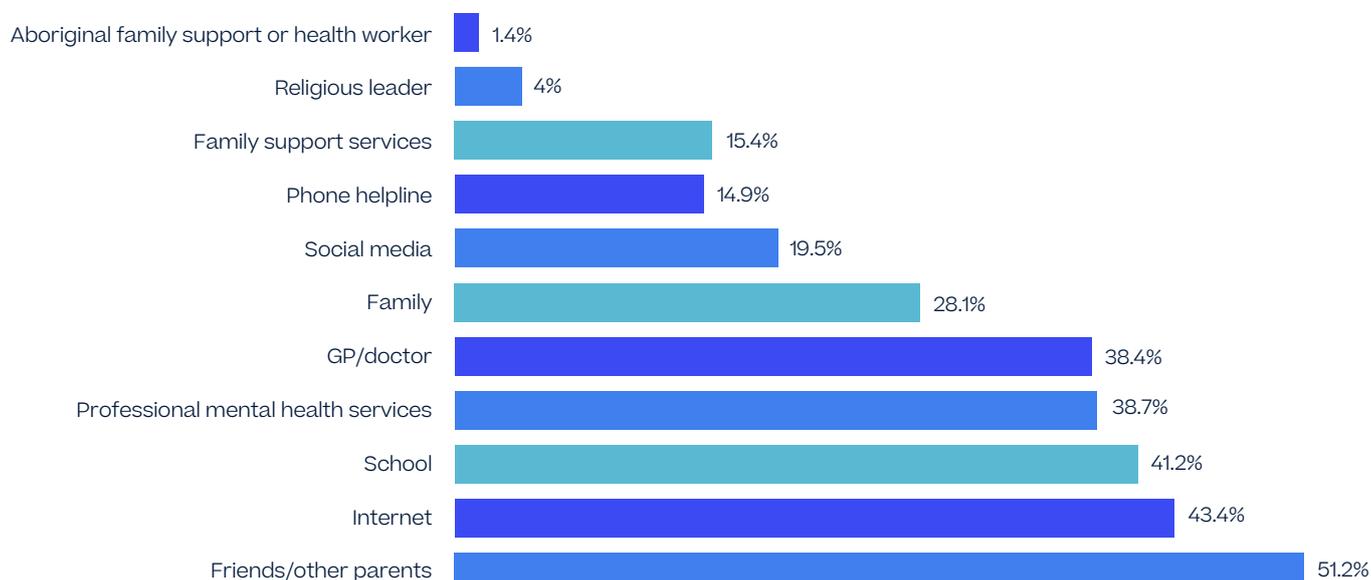
How are parents and carers dealing with their issues of concern?

Where do parents and carers go for help?

Non-formal supports, such as friends, families and the internet were the most used supports identified by participants (Figure 1). Just over half of parents and carers (51%) called on friends or another parent for support in caring for their young person. Online resources were also a frequently used source of support among parents and carers, as 43 per cent of caregivers reported seeking help from the internet and 20 per cent reported using social media for support in the last 12 months. Around **2 out of 5** parents and carers reported seeking support through more formal channels. Schools or school wellbeing staff (41%), and GPs or doctors (38%) were among the most commonly selected avenues of support for parents and carers.



Figure 1—Percentage of parents and carers who have sought help from these sources for the issues that concern them

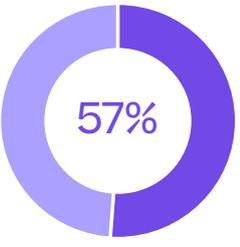




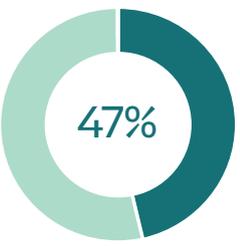
When asked to select from a list of possible supports they had needed over the past 12 months:



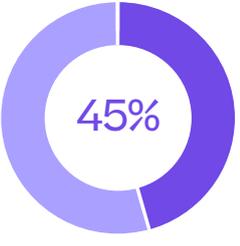
Almost 3 in 5 parents and carers who participated in the study reported needing access to quality, trusted information.



57% of parents and carers reported having needed information about where to get support for the young people they care for in the last 12 months.



47% reported having needed access to a mental health professional.



45% reported they had needed to connect with other parents or carers for support.

The need for further support

Parents and carers felt equipped to handle some, but not all, of the issues that concerned them about their young people. In addition, most who expressed a need for help did not have this need met. On average, 57 per cent of caregivers indicated they felt moderately equipped to cope with the issues that concerned them most (social media use, young people's future, study stress and mental health). Less than 25 per cent reported feeling 'not at all equipped' to cope with those issues. In particular, parents and carers felt that their capacity to cope was markedly reduced when confronted with less common but profoundly troubling issues, such as their young person being the perpetrator of sexual violence, or exposure to domestic violence. For example, although the number of participants who selected family violence as an issue was relatively small (n = 23), almost half (48%) of those parents and carers reported feeling 'not at all equipped' to deal with this issue.

Participants who indicated they had needed support in the last 12 months, such as access to trusted information or to professional help, were asked if their needs for those supports had been met. **Less than 15 per cent of parents and carers reported having their support needs completely met.** The biggest gap between reported needs and having those needs completely met occurred in relation to 'access to quality and trusted information' and 'knowing where to get support for my young person' (Figure 2).

Figure 2—Percentage of parents and carers who needed support in the last 12 months compared with percentage whose needs were completely met



What else would help?

Parents and carers described how additional support from government, schools and the health sector might help them feel more equipped to deal with the issues that concerned them. In relation to young people’s use of the internet, social media and gaming, parents and carers believed that **improved government regulation**, as well as **support and education within schools**, would help. Further education for parents, as well as better technology for monitoring, controlling and filtering content and time spent online, were also reported as being needed. Social media was mentioned by parents and carers concerned about body image issues, with some noting that positive role models and having more body diversity portrayed in social media would be helpful. Similarly, parents and carers felt that education and support from schools was crucial for coping with issues such as school refusal. However, many reported not really knowing what they needed in order to feel more equipped to manage broader concerns such as employment conditions.

The need for greater **access to professional advice and services** was a common thread. For example, in relation to mental health, parents and carers reported a need for greater access to professional mental health services, citing inadequate funding and long wait lists as key reasons they currently felt unsupported in this area. The ongoing need for **parental and youth education and training**, along with alternative ways to access help such as via apps, telehealth and online resources, was also noted. For example, one parent noted the need

for, ‘A wider range of ways for boys to be able to access support as they are less likely to seek out one-to-one support’ (F, major city).

Similarly, parents and carers with concerns about specific health issues in the young people they care for sought improved service accessibility, particularly for those living with disability or neurodiversity. Access to expert advice and professional help, as well as more education, was also noted as important by parents and carers with concerns about their young person’s gender and sexual identity. Professional support in the form of family counselling was sought by parents and carers with family concerns, who also noted that more support in building better communication with their teen, and education about parenting strategies, would be helpful.



Conclusions

This study found that **mental health, schooling, social media use** and the **future** of young people are among some of the most concerning issues for parents and carers. The research suggests that parents and carers have also observed a connection between these issues and the wellbeing of the young people they care for.

Often these issues were interconnected. For example, parents and carers described the use of digital devices leading to both poor sleep habits and contributing to social isolation and loneliness. Similarly, parents and carers described a cyclical process in which stress over school exacerbated depression and anxiety, resulting in school refusal, which further compounded isolation and loneliness. These findings align with other research in which social isolation has been found to be a problem for 62 per cent of young people, particularly those in regional areas of Australia (Headspace, 2022).

While, overall, parents and carers reported feeling moderately equipped to deal with the issues that most concern them, when it came to more severe issues such as domestic or sexual violence, they felt less equipped to cope. Parents and carers also reported that their needs for support were rarely completely met. The primary sources of support were found outside of formal mental health services, with parents and carers turning most frequently to friends and online resources.

Among parents' unmet support needs, particularly prominent were access to quality, trusted information, as well as knowledge about how to get support for the young people they care for. The needs described by carers are confirmed by other Australian studies, such as research about online safety by the University of Sydney, in which parents felt that stronger regulations and education about safety are needed to protect young people online (Humphry et al. 2023).

Parents and carers also described the need for further education for both young people and themselves in relation to many of the issues that concern them the most. ReachOut aims to minimise the informational needs gap reported by over 80 per cent of participants in our study, through the provision of quality, trusted information about mental health and young people, as well as guidance on where to get professional help.



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