

What the public thinks

Top ten child health problems



Poll 1, December 2015

Detailed report

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Report highlights

- Almost 60% of Australian adults say excessive screen time is a big health problem for children and teenagers
- The top ten perceived child health problems relate to modern lifestyle, mental health concerns and child safety
- Illegal drug use is the most frequently rated big child health problem by adults from lower income households
- One in ten parents rate dental issues as a big problem for their own children
- Parents are less likely to perceive obesity as a big problem in their own children compared to all Australian children

In a survey fielded in October 2015, Australian adults were asked to rate how much of a problem they considered 29 child and adolescent health issues to be for Australian children. The comprehensive list of health issues reflected current child health concerns and was formulated using existing local and international child health research, along with input from the Australian public via a test survey. Participants rated issues as 'not a problem', 'somewhat of a problem' or a 'big problem'. In addition, parents of children aged 17 years or younger were asked to rate the same 29 health issues for their own children. *Figure 1* presents the top ten child health issues rated as a "big problem" for all children by Australian adults.

Excessive screen time was the most frequently identified big problem (58%), followed by obesity (55%), not enough physical activity (54%) and unhealthy diet (54%). Other issues ranking in the top ten included mental health concerns: bullying (53%) and suicide (41%); and issues relating to child safety – family violence (49%), internet safety (45%), child abuse (45%), and illegal drug use (50%).

Other issues commonly identified as a big problem for Australian children included alcohol abuse (40%), smoking (38%), depression (38%) and stress and/or anxiety (34%).

Top ten Child Health Problems

All respondents

1. Excessive screen time	58%
2. Obesity	55%
3. Not enough physical activity	54%
4. Unhealthy diet	54%
5. Bullying	53%
6. Illegal drug use	50%
7. Family and domestic violence	49%
8. Internet safety	45%
9. Child abuse and neglect	45%
10. Suicide	41%

Figure 1.

Top five Child Health Problems

Rated by income

All respondents

<\$1,000/week

1. Illegal drug use	58%
2. Excessive screen time	57%
3. Bullying	57%
4. Obesity	57%
5. Not enough physical activity	54%

>\$1,000/week

1. Excessive screen time	58%
2. Obesity	53%
3. Unhealthy diet	52%
4. Not enough physical activity	51%
5. Bullying	50%

Figure 2.

Health issues less frequently rated as a big problem for all children included ADHD (18%), Autism (15%), sleep problems (15%) and sports and play related injuries (9%).

Of note, ratings for the top ten list did not differ significantly for those who have children in their household and those who do not.

Ratings by household income

58% of adults from lower-income households (<\$1,000 per week) identified illegal drug use as a big problem for Australian children and teenagers, putting it at the top of the list of concerns alongside excessive screen time for this group (see figure 2). In comparison, adults from households with income >\$1,000 per week identified illegal drug use as a big problem in 43% of cases. Across the board, adults from low-income households displayed higher ratings for 'big problems' including family violence (54%), child abuse and neglect (50%) and suicide (44%).

Parents' health concerns for their own children

Parents of children aged 17 years or younger were asked to rate how much of a problem the same 29 health issues were for their own children. Issues identified as big problems by parents for children in the community differed to those rated as big problems in their own children (see figure 3). Overall, parents were less likely to perceive specific issues as a big problem when

considering their own children. Excessive screen time was the top rated concern for parents when considering both their own children and the children of the greater Australian community. Nearly 60% of parents identified excessive screen time as a big problem for children in the community and one in five parents rated it as a big problem in their own household.

Most notably, there was a six-fold decrease in the frequency with which parents identified obesity as a big problem for their own children (8%) compared with all children (48%).

Issues rated among the top ten big problems by parents for their own children included stress and/or anxiety (11%), sun safety (11%), sleep problems (10%) and dental problems (9%). The top rating issues for children in the greater community included illegal drug use (44%), family violence (43%), child abuse (42%) and depression (37%). Bullying, internet safety, unhealthy diet and not enough physical activity were rated highly by parents for both children in the community and their own children.

Health concerns by age of child

Parents' health concerns for their own children varied by age group (see figure 4).

Across primary school and teenage children, excessive screen time was the most frequently rated big problem. Parents of preschool age children rated excessive screen time (11%) and sun safety (11%) as a big problem

Top five Child Health Problems

All children vs my children

By parents

All children

1. Excessive screen time	56%
2. Bullying	51%
3. Unhealthy diet	49%
4. Obesity	48%
5. Not enough physical activity	46%

My children

1. Excessive screen time	21%
2. Not enough physical activity	13%
3. Internet safety	11%
4. Stress and/or anxiety	11%
5. Unhealthy diet	11%

Figure 3.

Top five Child Health Problems

Age of first born

By parents

5 years and under

1. Sun safety	11%
2. Excessive screen time	11%
3. Not enough physical activity	10%
4. Poisoning	9%
5. Infectious diseases	9%

6 to 12 years

1. Excessive screen time	22%
2. Not enough physical activity	14%
3. Internet safety	14%
4. Bullying	13%
5. Stress and/or anxiety	12%

13 years and older

1. Excessive screen time	28%
2. Stress and/or anxiety	16%
3. Not enough physical activity	14%
4. Internet safety	13%
5. Unhealthy diet	12%

Figure 4.

with equal frequency. More than one in ten parents of preschool and school age children and over a quarter of parents of teenagers indicated excessive screen time was a big problem for their children. Across all age groups parents were also concerned about issues relating to modern day lifestyle such as unhealthy diet and not enough physical activity.

Concerns about mental health increased with the child's age. Some parents of children less than five years of age rated depression as a big problem (7%) whilst parents of six to 12 year olds were concerned about bullying (13%) and parents of teenagers identified stress and/or anxiety as a big issue (16%). The frequency of parental concern about inadequate exercise, unhealthy diet and sleep problems increased across the age groups, whereas more parents of young children rated accident and safety issues such as poisoning (9%) and drowning (8%) as big problems. Parents of teenagers were less concerned about acute infectious diseases, such as colds and flus (6%) than those of primary and preschool aged children (10%).

Dental problems were rated as a big problem by approximately one in ten parents across all age groups.

Implications

The Australian public identifies a number of child and adolescent health issues as 'big problems'. Most problems relate to modern lifestyle behaviours, with excessive screen time being the notable number one concern for both parents and non-parents. These health issues constitute a large focus of concern and initiatives aimed at improving understanding would likely be well received by the public. As such, researchers, policymakers and healthcare providers should focus on these concerns. In addition, health concerns relating to rapidly evolving lifestyle behaviours, such as screen time, may not be well addressed through traditional healthcare models, highlighting the importance of innovation in public programs and communication initiatives around care provision.

Patterns of perceived problems varied between women and men and by education and income. Illegal drug use, family violence and child abuse were rated more frequently as big problems by adults from lower-income households. This highlights that certain communities are likely to have specific needs that should be considered in the development of policy and healthcare initiatives.

Findings from this poll suggest that parents may underrate significant health issues for their own children. Some of the items commonly identified by parents as big problems for children in the Australian community were not reported as concerns for their own children. These included obesity and illegal drug use. Most notably, parents were six times less likely to report obesity as a big problem for their own children compared to being a concern for children in the community. Parents who do not recognise obesity as a problem in their children may be less inclined to modify their children's diet and physical activity patterns. A focus on improved parent recognition of this health issue in their own children may help to reduce the burden of childhood obesity in Australia.

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 October 2 to November 1, 2015, to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults aged 18 and older (n=1993), with and without children. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Over half of the sample were parents of children aged less than 18 years (n=1,000). The completion rate was 51% among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate.

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