

Top 10 child health problems: What Australian parents think



Poll report

Poll 20, March 2021

Dr Margie Danchin

Report highlights

- The number one health concern for parents in 2021 is excessive screen time with over 90% of parents reporting it as a big problem or somewhat of a problem in the community.
- Cyberbullying and bullying (53%) was the second top health concern parents have for all children, followed by internet safety (50%).
- Lifestyle issues such as unhealthy diets (41%) and lack of physical activity (38%) are listed in the top health problems identified by parents.
- Mental health was a notable concern, with approximately 40% identifying depression and suicide as big problems for children in the community, with anxiety also listed as a common problem.
- One in 10 parents report stress and sleep problems are big problems for their own children.

In a survey conducted in February 2021, Australian parents were presented with a list of 27 child health issues and asked if they thought these were a problem for all children across Australia or for their own child. The list of 27 child health issues was generated following a review of concerns revealed by parents in previous RCH National Child Health Polls as well as in scientific literature.⁽¹⁻⁴⁾

A nationally representative sample of 1,980 parents yielded data on a total of 3,439 children aged between one month and less than 18 years.

Parents' health concerns

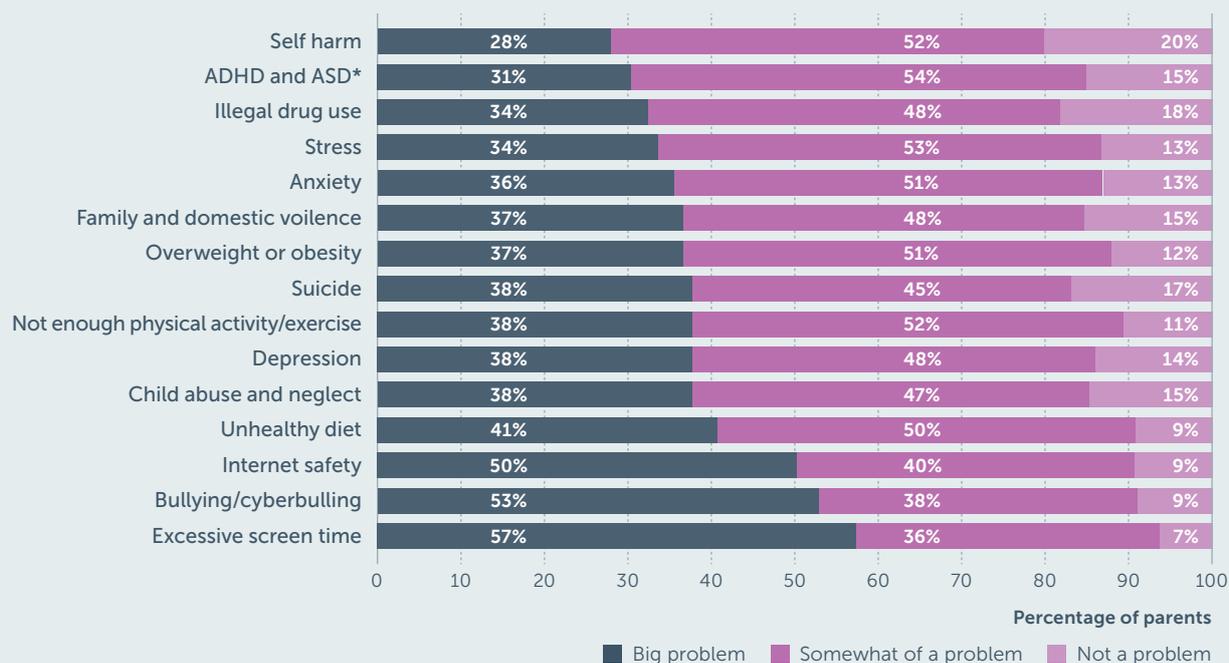
The most frequent health problem identified by parents for all Australian children is excessive screen time, with 57 per cent of parents reporting this is a big problem and a further 36 per cent reporting it is somewhat of a problem. This finding is almost identical to the proportion of adults concerned about screen time in the child health poll five years ago (58%) and reflects that excessive screen time is a pervasive and significant ongoing concern in Australia.¹

Bullying and cyberbullying is the second most commonly reported concern for all Australian children with just over half of parents (53%) believing it's a big problem. Internet safety (50%) is a top problem and reflects parents' concern about children's safety online, which was not expressed so highly five years ago.¹ Unhealthy diet (41%) and not enough physical activity or exercise (38%) are also persistent concerns for parents.

Children's mental health and wellbeing remain pressing concerns for parents, particularly depression (38%), suicide (38%) and anxiety (36%), as well as child abuse and neglect (38%) and family and domestic violence (37%). Similarly, overweight and obesity (37%) continue to be big child health problems in the community.

Excessive screen time and bullying/cyberbullying are the two most common big health problems reported by parents, regardless of their income. However, there were some substantial differences in other big health problems depending on family income. Almost half (49%) of lower income households (< \$1,000 per week) reported family and domestic violence as a big problem for all children compared to one third of parents (33%) from higher income households. Depression is also more frequently reported as a big health problem in lower income households (45%) compared to higher income households (34%).

Top child health concerns



*ADHD and ASD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Autism spectrum disorder

Figure 1.

Although male and female respondents reported the same top three health concerns (excessive screen time, bullying/cyberbullying and internet safety) female respondents were more likely to report that the majority of health issues were big problems. For example, 61 per cent of females reported excessive screen time as a big problem compared with 53 per cent of males. Likewise, family and domestic violence was reported as a big problem by 43 per cent of female respondents compared to only 28 per cent of males. There were no substantial differences in the types of health problems parent reported by education or location of parents (urban or rural and remote areas) or by age or gender of children in their families.

Many of the top 10 health problems parents identified for all Australian children are related to lifestyle factors including sedentary behaviours which contribute to ill health in childhood, adolescence and beyond.⁵⁻⁸ Parents recognise associations between many of these behaviours and problems among children: those who reported that lack of physical activity was a big problem were more than six times more likely to identify unhealthy diets as a big problem. Similarly, parents who were concerned about excessive screen time for all children were five times more likely to recognise online safety as a big problem. The COVID-19 pandemic is likely to have exacerbated all of these common health problems as children have spent more time at home and away from face-to-face learning and their usual activities.^{2,3}

Parents' health concerns for their own children

Parents were less likely to report that each of the 27 health issues was either a big problem or somewhat of a problem for their own children compared to all Australian children.

Excessive screen time was the most commonly reported health concern parents held for children in the broader community as well as their own children. However, only 25 per cent thought it a big problem in their own families with well over twice as many believing it was a big problem in the community (57%). Similarly, only about half of parents indicated that anxiety was either a big problem (15%) or somewhat of a problem (37%) for their own children while almost nine in 10 parents thought anxiety was either a big problem (36%) or somewhat of a problem (51%) among other children.

Parents considered attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder (14%) to be big problems for their own children as well as internet safety (13%). Of note, although lack of physical activity and exercise was among the more common health concerns of parents as being a big problem for their own children (reported by one in eight or 12%), over one in three parents (38%) indicated it was a big problem for all children, suggesting that parents perceive their children as more active than other children. Likewise, only nine per cent of parents indicated that unhealthy diets were a big problem for their children whereas 41 per cent believed that unhealthy diets were a big problem in the broader child population.

Top 10 health issues of concern for all children and own children

All children

1. Excessive screen time	57%
2. Bullying/cyberbullying	53%
3. Internet safety	50%
4. Unhealthy diet	41%
5. Child abuse and neglect	38%
6. Depression	38%
7. Not enough physical activity/exercise	38%
8. Suicide	38%
9. Overweight or obesity	37%
10. Family and domestic violence	37%

Own children

1. Excessive screen time	25%
2. Anxiety	15%
3. ADHD and ASD*	14%
4. Internet safety	13%
5. COVID-19	12%
6. Not enough physical activity/exercise	12%
7. Food and other allergies	11%
8. Bullying/cyberbullying	11%
9. Stress	11%
10. Sleep problems	10%

Note: Health issues reported as big problems by parents

*ADHD and ASD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Autism spectrum disorder

Figure 2.

Are health problems the same for children of all ages and across households?

Overall, parents reported similar health concerns for younger (< 13 years) and older children (>= 13 years) with excessive screen time as the biggest problem followed by associated issues such as internet safety, bullying/cyberbullying and a lack of physical activity or exercise among children of all ages. There were, however, some differences reported with parents of younger children more concerned than parents of teenagers about infectious diseases (11% vs 5%), asthma (12% vs 7%) and food and other allergies (12% vs 9%). Parents of teenagers (13%) reported a slightly higher prevalence of stress among their children than parents of younger children (9%).

Although parents in all locations identified excessive screen time as their main health concern, parents in regional or remote areas were more likely to report it as a big problem for their own children compared to urban parents (26% vs 19%). A lack of physical activity or exercise was also more commonly reported by regional or remote parents than by urban parents (13% vs 6%).

The top 10 health concerns of parents did not vary substantially when considering the education or socio-economic background of parents, although parents who did not complete tertiary studies and/or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were more likely to be concerned by dental problems for their children.

Implications

Parents have identified a number of big child health issues in Australian children. Many of these issues are lifestyle related: excessive screen time and the associated problems of internet safety and bullying/cyberbullying; unhealthy lifestyle habits (a lack of

physical activity and unhealthy diets) as well as problems related to mental health (anxiety, stress, depression and sleep problems). Parents appear less concerned by more medical health problems such as asthma and allergies. Despite only causing mild illness in children⁹, parents reported concern about COVID-19. This may reflect the impact of lockdowns, school closures and home learning on children's education, social and mental health rather than the direct effects of the virus.

Many of the lifestyle health problems concerning parents reflect daily habits that contribute to the obesity epidemic.¹⁰ The habits children develop in the early years, although modifiable, can stay with them for life, impacting their physical and mental health.^{10, 11} With appropriate support, parents can help their children make healthy choices and adopt new habits which will have immediate and ongoing benefits for overall health.¹² There is a pressing need for governments and policy makers to further invest in 'supportive environments' and health promoting programs which encourage physical activity, healthy eating and other healthy behaviours among children of all ages and across all settings, including schools.

By focusing on getting kids moving and engaged in sport, we can reduce their screen time. While limits and guidance around screen time are helpful for parents, the addictive nature of screens means that their use is an ongoing source of conflict in many households. Of note, parents in all areas and from all backgrounds indicated that the top 10 health issues were more of a problem in other children than in their own children. For example, although over half of parents report that excessive screen time was a big problem for all children, only 25 per cent recognised it as a big problem in their own children. Likewise, parents were four times more likely to report that depression and stress were big problems for all children than their own children.

Top five big health problems concerning parents under 13 years vs 13 years and over

Under 13 years

- | | |
|--------------------------|------------|
| 1. Excessive screen time | 24% |
| 2. ADHD/ASD* | 15% |
| 3. Anxiety | 14% |
| 4. Internet safety | 13% |
| 5. Coronavirus | 13% |

13 years and over

- | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Excessive screen time | 26% |
| 2. Anxiety | 15% |
| 3. Stress | 13% |
| 4. Not enough physical activity | 13% |
| 5. Internet safety | 12% |

*ADHD and ASD: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Autism spectrum disorder

Figure 3.

Lifestyle issues such as **unhealthy diets (41%)** and **lack of physical activity (38%)** are listed in the top health problems identified by parents.



More than ever, in the midst of a pandemic, we need to act to provide policies and programs to support parents to ensure that their children are engaging in activities away from screens, are safe from bullying at school and online, are engaged in physical activity and eating more healthily and that their mental health is prioritised and optimised, because their future depends on it.

Data source

This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The survey was administered from 2–16 February 2021, to a randomly selected, stratified group of 1,980 adults aged 18 and older. All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged between one month and less than 18 years. Collectively respondents provided data on 3,439 children and the average number of children per family was 1.7. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect Australian population figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The completion rate among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate was 60 per cent.

Of note, for part of the time this survey went to field in February 2021, Victoria experienced a third lockdown with stay at home orders and schools returned to online learning while all other Australian jurisdictions continued face-to-face learning with substantially lower levels of restrictions.

References

1. The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll. Top Ten Child Health Problems: What the public thinks. Poll number 1. Parkville, Victoria; 2015.
2. The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll. COVID-19 pandemic: Effects on the lives of Australian children and families. Poll number 18. Parkville, Victoria; 2020.
3. Xiang M, Zhang ZR, Kuwahara K. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on children and adolescents' lifestyle behavior larger than expected. *Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases*. 2020;63(4):531-2.
4. Dendale P, Scherrenberg M, Sivakova O, Frederix I. Prevention: From the cradle to the grave and beyond. *European Journal of Preventive Cardiology*. 2019;26(5):507-11.
5. Hobbs M, Pearson N, Foster PJ, Biddle SJH. Sedentary behaviour and diet across the lifespan: an updated systematic review. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*. 2015;49(18):1179-+.
6. Leech RM, McNaughton SA, Timperio A. The clustering of diet, physical activity and sedentary behavior in children and adolescents: a review. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*. 2014;11.
7. Anderssen SA, Cooper AR, Riddoch C, Sardinha LB, Harro M, Brage S, et al. Low cardiorespiratory fitness is a strong predictor for clustering of cardiovascular disease risk factors in children independent of country, age and sex. *European Journal of Cardiovascular Prevention & Rehabilitation*. 2007;14(4):526-31.
8. Driskell M-M, Dymont S, Mauriello L, Castle P, Shennan K. Relationships among multiple behaviors for childhood and adolescent obesity prevention. *Preventive Medicine*. 2008;46(3):209-15.
9. Zimmermann P, Curtis N. Coronavirus Infections in Children Including COVID-19: An Overview of the Epidemiology, Clinical Features, Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention Options in Children. *Pediatr Infect Dis J*. 2020;39:355-68.
10. Ludwig DS. Childhood obesity – The shape of things to come. *New England Journal of Medicine*. 2007;357(23):2325-7.
11. Biro FM, Wien M. Childhood obesity and adult morbidities. *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. 2010;91(5):1499S-505S.
12. Campbell KJ, Hesketh KD. Strategies which aim to positively impact on weight, physical activity, diet and sedentary behaviours in children from zero to five years. A systematic review of the literature. *Obesity Reviews*. 2007;8(4):327-38.

Suggested citation

The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (2021). Top 10 child health problems: What Australian parents think, Poll Number 20. The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria.

Acknowledgements

This report was written by Dr Margie Danchin (Acting Poll Director), Dr Mary-Anne Measey (Research Associate) and Mr Monsurul Hoq (Biostatistician) with the support of the [RCH Poll Project Team](#).