

# Anxiety in Victorian children: What do parents know?



## Poll report

Special Poll Report, October 2022



### Report highlights

- Parents report 50% of children aged three years and over are experiencing problems with anxiety.
- One in five children (19%) are anxious about attending school or kindergarten.
- On average, parents recognise only half of the common signs and symptoms of mental health problems in children.
- Only one in three parents are confident they could distinguish between 'normal' worries in children and anxiety that may need professional help.

Parents report **50% of children** aged three years and over are experiencing problems with anxiety



## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is the feeling of fear that occurs when faced with threatening or stressful situations. It is normal for children to worry sometimes, but children with an anxiety condition have excessive, frequent, ongoing fears and worries that stop them taking part in typical activities, such as school, social events or playing. These signs appear frequently, in an ongoing pattern and may cause children to struggle with or avoid everyday activities.

There was an association between anxiety and socio-economic background, with parents in the lowest quintile<sup>1</sup> (63%) substantially more likely to report that their child had problems with anxiety than those in the highest quintile<sup>1</sup> (48%). Children were more likely to have anxiety if parents were: single (62%), compared to partnered (50%); had not attended university (58%), compared to university educated (48%); were unemployed (57%), or working part time (59%), compared to engaged in full-time work (49%); or lived in regional or remote areas (59%), compared to urban areas (51%).

## Are children anxious about attending school?

Since the start of 2022, schools in Victoria have remained open for on-site learning. We asked parents about their child's anxiety about attending school or kindergarten. Parents report that one in five (19%) Victorian children aged between three and 17 years were somewhat, very or extremely anxious about attending school or kindergarten in the two weeks prior to being surveyed in July and August this year. On average, children anxious about attending school were 10.3 years of age. There was no meaningful difference by gender of child or rural or urban location. The proportion of children experiencing school-related anxiety was similar for primary school aged children (18%) and high school aged children (22%).

There was an association between socio-economic background and school-related anxiety, with families from the lowest quintile<sup>2</sup> more likely to report that their child was anxious about attending school (24%) than those in the highest quintile<sup>2</sup> (14%). Children with single parents were more likely to be anxious about school attendance than those with partnered parents (36% versus 14%), as were those with parents born in Australia compared to those with parents born overseas (21% versus 12%).

## What is the level of anxiety among Victorian children?

Anxiety among children in Victoria, nationally and internationally has reportedly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>1</sup> Our study aimed to investigate the current levels of anxiety among children in Victoria and found, according to parents, 50% of Victorian children aged three years and over had a problem with anxiety, with 36% experiencing a moderate problem ('somewhat of a problem') and 14% experiencing a 'big problem'.

Girls aged three years and over were reportedly more likely to be experiencing a problem with anxiety (54%) than boys (46%). Overall, 49% of primary school aged children (5–12 years) and 57% of high school aged children (13–17 years) had a problem with anxiety (See *Figure 1*). Children experiencing a moderate or big problem with anxiety were on average 10.7 years old.

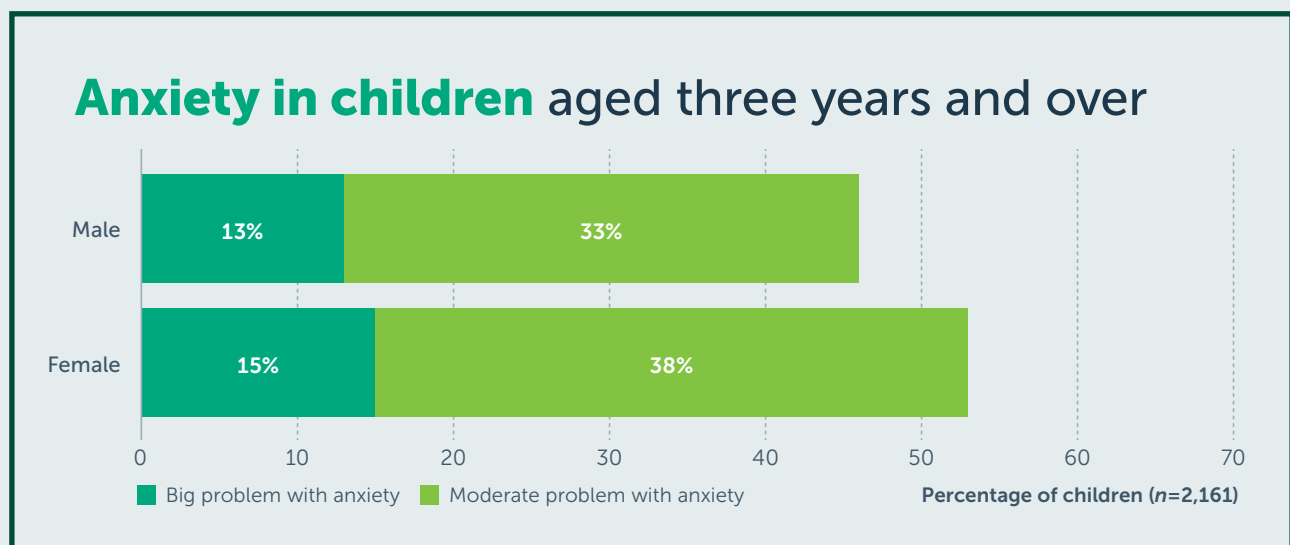


Figure 1.

## Proportion of parents who recognise common signs of mental health problems in children

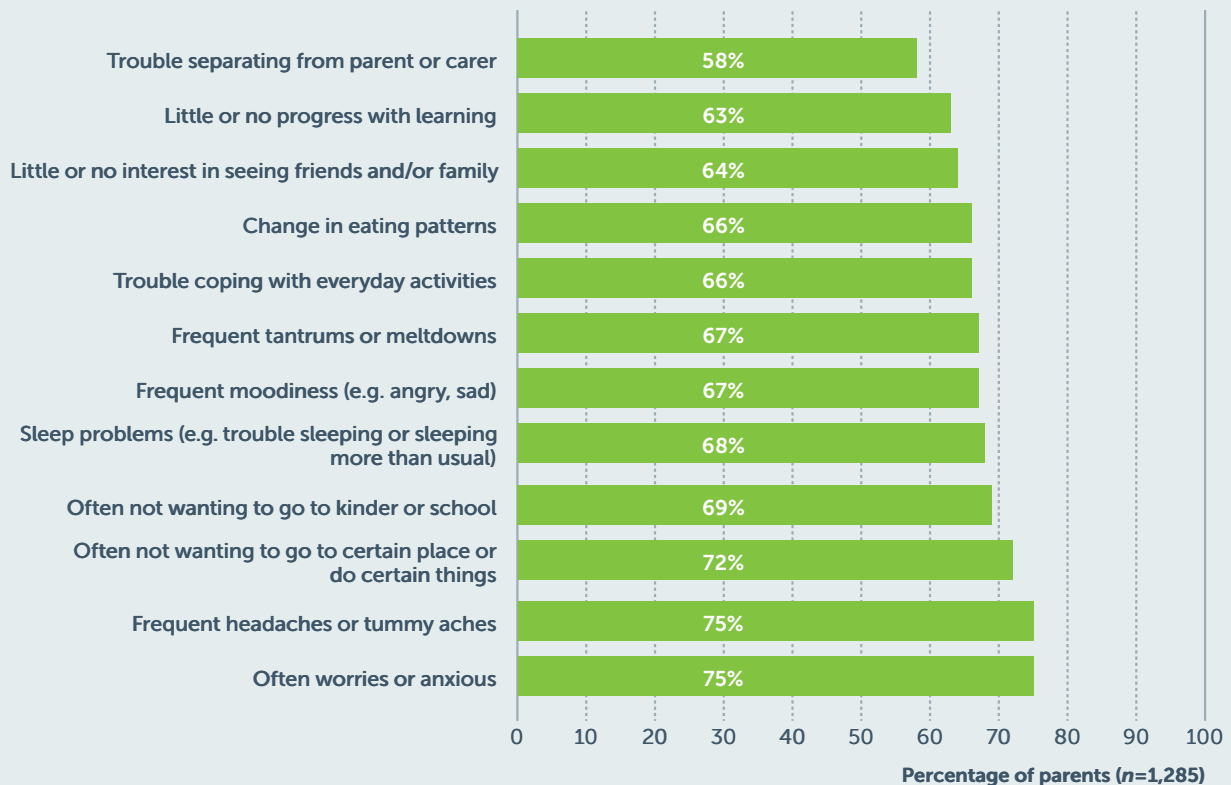


Figure 2.

### Can parents spot the signs of mental health problems in their children?

Parents and carers are regularly tasked with identifying health issues in their children and taking action to address them. Mental health problems are wide ranging and can manifest in various ways in children, with the signs sometimes differing to those in adults. Our study asked parents if they would be concerned about a possible mental health problem in their child if they developed various common signs and symptoms known to be associated with mental health problems in children. On average, parents recognised only half of 12 common signs and symptoms, with 10% of parents not recognising any signs and symptoms, and 29% recognising all 12 signs and symptoms that can be indicative of mental health problems. The most commonly recognised signs were: often being worried or anxious (75%), and frequent headaches or tummy aches (75%). The least frequently recognised signs were: trouble separating from parent or carer (58%), and little or no progress with learning (63%) (See *Figure 2*).

On average, parents of younger children (at least one child aged less than five years) recognised four of 12 common signs and symptoms, compared to parents of older children (at least one child aged five years or more), who recognised eight of 12 signs.

### Can parents tell the difference between normal worries and anxiety which might need professional help?

For parents, it can be hard to spot the signs of anxiety as it can show up in a variety of ways. It can be difficult to know what a 'normal' amount of worry is, and when to seek further help. We asked parents about their level of confidence in knowing the difference between 'normal' worries for children and anxiety that might need professional help. One third of parents (33%) report being 'confident' they know the difference, with a further 57% 'somewhat confident' and one in 10 parents (10%) 'not confident' at all.

Fewer parents who were born overseas report being 'confident' (20%) in knowing the difference between 'normal' worries and anxiety that might need professional help than those born in Australia (37%). Male parents were less likely to report being confident (29%) than female parents (35%). Parents with at least one preschool aged child (27%) were slightly less confident than parents with at least one primary school aged child (32%) or at least one high school aged child (35%).

## Implications

This study shows that anxiety is a very common problem in Victorian children, with half of all children at least moderately affected during July and August 2022. Despite the common occurrence of anxiety, many parents lack confidence knowing when to seek professional help, which may delay intervention and assistance. If parents can recognise signs of anxiety early and put measures in place to address problems, including self-help and professional care, children will have a better chance of recovery. Delayed help and intervention can lead to more entrenched problems that are harder to treat.

One in five children experienced anxiety about attending school with both primary and secondary school aged children similarly affected. Participation in school is critical to a child's development and wellbeing. It's important to encourage children to continue to attend school while supporting them to manage related anxiety. Parents should be encouraged to reach out to their school for assistance. Schools have support for children who feel anxious or don't want to attend school, including trained staff members such as psychologists or counsellors.

The first step to seeking help is recognising a problem. This study shows that Victorian parents have low levels of mental health literacy and may not recognise the signs of a problem, or know when to seek help for their child's mental health. Parents and carers need to be supported and educated about signs and symptoms of anxiety and other mental health concerns, as well as actions they can take to help their child at home, and when and where to access professional help.

**One in five** children are anxious about attending school or kindergarten



## Data source and methods



In a survey conducted in July and August 2022, Victorian parents were asked a series of questions about their views and experiences in relation to their child's mental health and wellbeing, including how much of a problem anxiety was for their child at the time of data collection. They were also asked about identifying mental health problems in children and anxiety that needed professional help.

This report presents findings from a household survey representative of Victorian families conducted exclusively by the Online Research Unit for The Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. The online survey was administered from 27 July to 3 August 2022, to a randomly selected, stratified sample of adults aged 18 and older ( $n=1,513$ ) resident in Victoria. All respondents were parents or caregivers to children aged less than 18 years. This report presents findings from the data provided by 1,285 Victorian parents of 2,161 children aged between three and 17 years. There were 305 preschool aged children aged three to less than five years, 1,198 primary school aged children between five and 12 years, and 658 secondary school aged children between 13 and 17 years. The data were subsequently weighted to reflect the distribution of the Victorian population using figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Among Online Research Unit panel members contacted to participate the completion rate was 84%.

## References



1. The Royal Children's Hospital National Child Health Poll (May 2022). *Mental health of Victorian children and parents during the COVID-19 pandemic*, The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria
2. Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Viewed online 28 September 2022. Available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/websitedbs/censushome.nsf/home/seifa>

## Suggested citation



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