

EMBERS THE DRAGON

Feeling Lost

UK parents' worries about their child's
emotional development aged 3-7



EMBERS THE DRAGON UK PARENTING INSIGHTS REPORT, 2024

Introduction

*from Nigel Clarke, the voice of Mr Koala,
CBeebies presenter and founder of Dadvengers*

As we often say to friends and family who are expecting their first child, nothing can truly prepare you for being a parent.



Children are complex and unpredictable, delightful and testing all at the same time. All these factors mean that parenting is arguably one of the most challenging tasks any of us is likely to take on - and one with no instruction manual! So when it comes to their emotional world, it can be particularly baffling.

Parenting is so much more than keeping children fed and clothed - it's about understanding and meeting their emotional as well as physical needs. I know from experience that parenting can be seriously stressful and when you couple that with the current cost of living crisis, and the societal change that is disrupting family structure, it's easy to see why record numbers of children are living in poverty and why we are seeing so many mental health problems in young people.

With as many as 14.4% of primary school age children believed to have a probable mental health condition and over 1.2 million children under the age of 18 referred to children's mental health services every year, it's more of a challenge than ever for parents to understand and support their children's growing emotional needs.

Embers the Dragon was set up as a clinically-led, digital platform to develop good mental health and emotional resilience in children in their early childhood and around the time they start school, and to try to help their families when tackling common parenting challenges. To do this properly we need to understand the experiences of parents from a wide range of areas, ages and personal circumstances, and what better way to do this than to ask them directly?



The result is this report - a snapshot in October 2023 of the views of 1028 parents surveyed in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, reflecting on their experiences parenting a child aged between 3 and 7.

These results matter. They tell us how much parents today are worrying about their young child's emotional development, the guilt they feel, how tricky they can find it to ask for help, and how they feel about the support available to them.

Parents clearly have a strong sense that children this age need their support with their emotional development but they aren't always sure how to provide this or whether what they are doing is helping. Many are hesitant to seek support, and when they do, they are often unsure they can trust the advice given. They understand the link between early emotional skills and their child's later mental

health, and they want to set their children up for a happy, healthy future.

Unfortunately, there are limited recommended treatments for younger children, and many are rejected from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) due to the increasingly high acceptance thresholds. Sometimes younger children may be turned away if older children with riskier behaviours such as self-harm are prioritised given the limited resources available. For those children who are accepted into CAMHS some areas have reported waiting lists of over 18 months for support.

For the team at Embers, this sense of worry and of an unmet need is our call to arms.

We invite you to read on to learn more.



About the survey



A national online survey was completed by 1028 parents using mobile or desktop devices over a six day period in October 2023. The survey was carried out on behalf of Embers the Dragon by Observant, a Market Research Society accredited partner.

The survey asked respondents about their children's emotional wellbeing, development and behaviour, and how they support their children in these areas. The parents were also asked whether they seek advice and help from others, where this advice would come from and how much they would trust it. Finally, the survey explored experiences of parenting guilt as well as parents' attitudes to screen time.

To participate in the survey, parents had to be aged 18-64 and have a child aged 3-7 years inclusive. They were recruited from nationally representative regions of the UK using a multi-source recruitment approach which included participants in parenting interest forums, parents registered with a range of survey organisations, and those responding to online advertisements for the survey. Care was taken to reach parents from the breadth of socioeconomic groups, and results of the survey were shared with representative members of the public for qualitative follow up and discussion.

These different recruitment methods minimised any potential single source bias.

Of the 1028 parents completing the survey:

66%

Two thirds were female

86%

were aged between 25 and 44 years old

23%

Nearly a quarter were of Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic origin

Parents of young children are worried about their child's mental health.

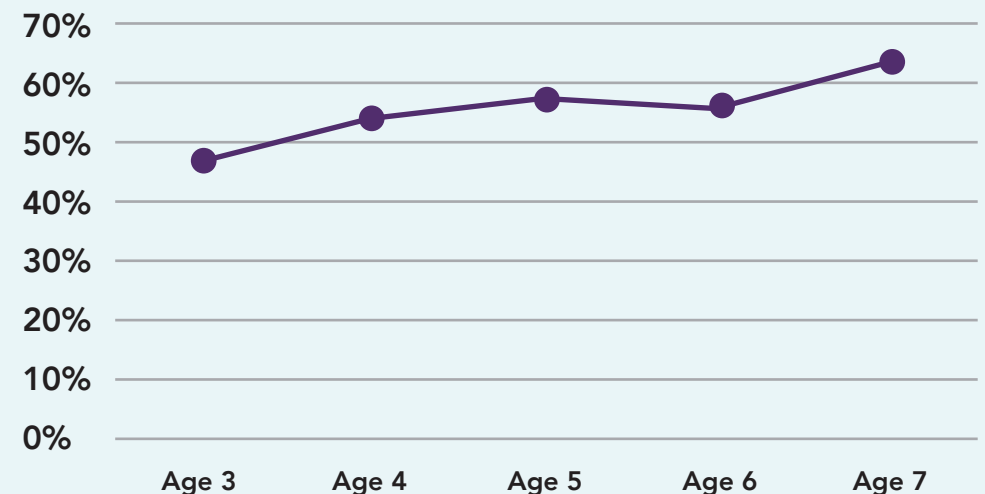
The first striking result is that parents start worrying about the mental health of their children even before they start school. In fact this is something affecting the majority of parents.

Overall, more than half of parents (55%) report their child aged 3-7 has or may have been recently struggling with their emotions, and the frequency rises steadily as the child gets older.



In the past 12 months do you feel your child has suffered from any problems with their mental wellbeing or experienced anxiety? (Responding 'yes- definitely; yes- I think so, or I'm not sure')

Percentage of parents who feel their child has struggled with their mental health or anxiety in the past 12 months (by age of child)



From further questioning, we learn that:

Almost half of parents (46%) worry about their child being or becoming anxious



A third (32%) worry their child may have a neurodevelopmental condition such as autism or ADHD



29% worry their child has or is developing a low mood



These are stark findings. Parents are noticing problems early: earlier than children are taught about their feelings and earlier than parenting support is typically widely available. We know from research that early intervention is the most effective way to prevent later problems with mental health and behaviour, but is this support prioritised and available?



And how does this match up with the parents' own priorities for their child's development?



What are parents' priorities when it comes to early child development?

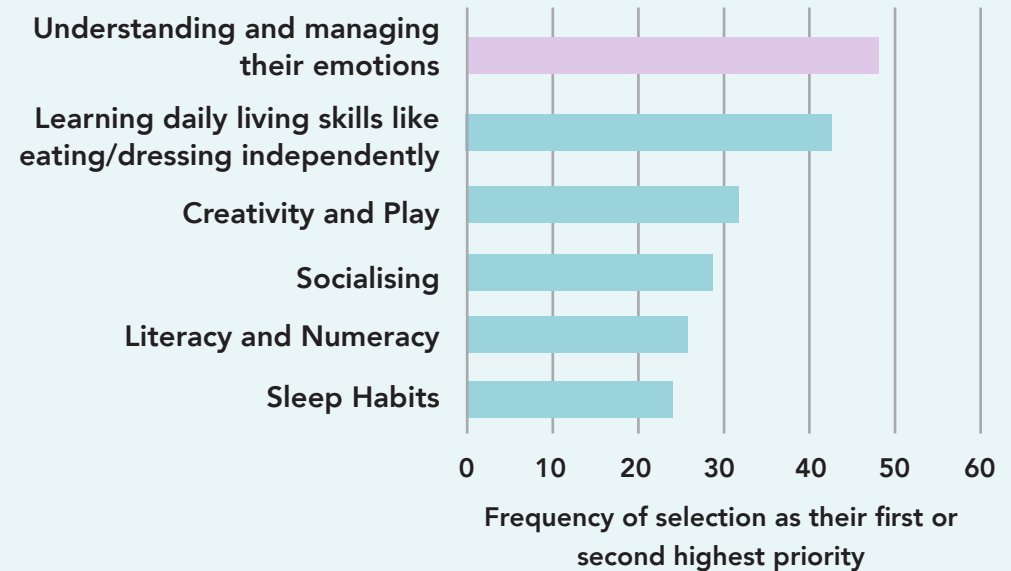
There is much more to development than just the emotional and behavioural aspects. It seemed important, therefore, to understand the parents' priorities overall.

We identified six areas of development frequently important for children in this age group:

- Literacy and Numeracy
- Creativity and Play
- Understanding and managing their emotions
- Socialisation
- Learning daily living skills like eating/dressing independently
- Developing good sleep habits

We then asked each parent to rank them in order of priority for their child, and reviewed the percentage of parents that ranked each of these as their top or second highest priority:

How would you rank these areas of development in priority order for your child?



- Parents' priority was that children should be able to understand and manage their emotions, with **47%** ranking it top or second priority.
- Learning daily living skills was valued almost as highly - **43%** ranking it top or second.
- Literacy and numeracy, in this young age group, was valued less, with only **25%** ranking it in the top two.

Daily living skills? We have those covered...

Most children in the UK will be starting nursery school by the time they are 3 years old, and all will start school during the year they are 4. Both transitions involve learning to manage themselves in an environment different to home, learning rules about dressing and toileting, and adapting to these rules being set by others than their parents. Nurseries and schools tend to be very adept at helping children with their independence skills: named pegs; clear timetables; meal time routines and rules. These are often communicated to parents and parents are encouraged to help reinforce the learning.

So far so good, therefore - a priority for parents and for education.

Educational support for early emotional development - much less so...

When we think about support for children's early emotional development and behaviour, things couldn't be more different. The classroom time dedicated to supporting emotional development is far less than for traditional skills such as literacy and numeracy, and the available teaching resources reflect this mismatch.

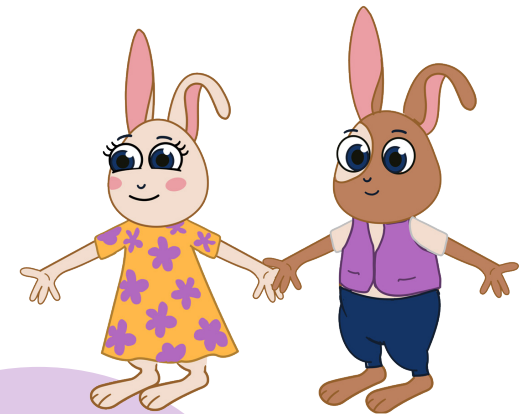


This mirrors our own experience of children starting in reception. Often parents have already done some preparation of basic english and maths skills but the difference in emotional and social skills between children is often stark and challenging. Much of our roles in those first few terms is helping children to learn those core skills so they can then engage in education.

There are so many resources out there for learning numbers and letters prior to starting school but very little support for parents to help children develop social and emotional skills. That's why programmes like Embers the Dragon are so important, we need to normalise it as part of childrens core education"

- Peter Hertige, Specialist headteacher for primary school Recovery.

With relatively little support for early emotional development routinely included in early education, what problems are parents experiencing?



Are they confident to access the information and support they need themselves?



Are their needs and ambitions matched by the support on offer?



Are they confident to support their child to arrive at school emotionally settled and ready to learn?

We looked at the remaining results from the survey for answers.

Sometimes the feelings get 'lost in translation'...

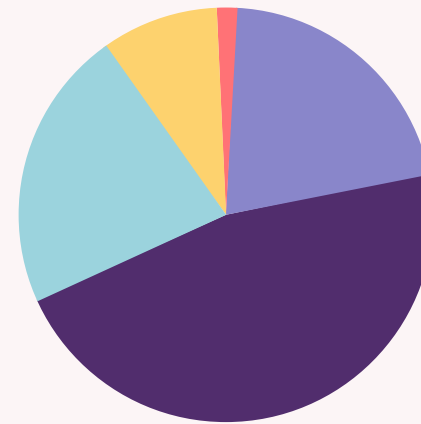
Parents participating in the survey were asked to reflect on their child's ability to recognise and manage their emotions. They were also asked to rate their own ability to understand how their children are feeling.

For each question, only around a quarter of parents were fully confident that emotions were communicated and managed well.

The child as communicator

The parents were asked:

How does your child manage their emotions?



- They are good at managing how they are feeling and communicating it with me
- They know how they are feeling most of the time but struggle in unfamiliar situations
- They know how they are feeling most of the time but struggle to communicate that
- They struggle to know how they are feeling
- I don't know

- Only **22%** of parents felt their children managed their emotions well.
- **68%** felt their child had some form of difficulty, either in terms of identifying their feelings, communicating them, or managing them in unfamiliar situations.
- **9%** of parents overall felt their children generally struggle to identify and communicate how they are feeling.

The parent as interpreter

Anyone who has spent time with a young child will know how challenging it can be to understand how they think and why they do some of the things they do. So much of the world is still new to them, and the boundary between imagination and reality can be quite blurry (as any parent offered 'cake' and faced with a piece of lego on a plate will have experienced!)

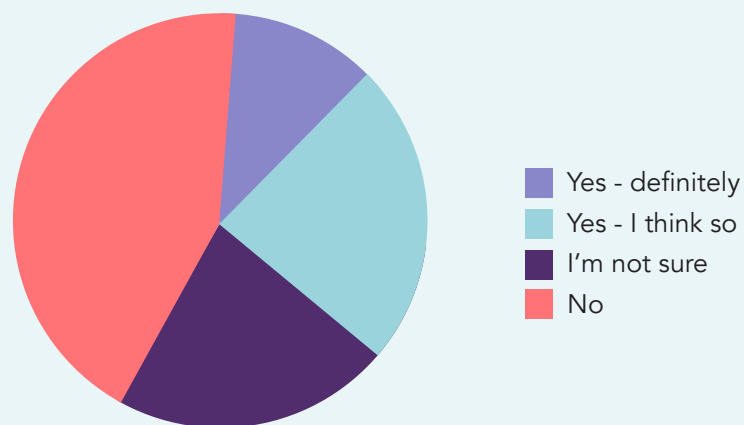
Understanding a young child's emotional state can be just as hard, or even harder. Feelings aren't things you can see or touch, they vary between people, over time and in different situations. We don't have a tradition with our little ones of practising naming feelings in the same way as we might practise naming colours or animals. So parents are often having to work out what their child is feeling from other clues. The problem is that this sort of decoding isn't a skill we are necessarily born with, and sometimes - for a whole range of reasons related to our own history, personality types and life circumstances - it can be surprisingly difficult to learn.

How successful did the parents surveyed feel they are at understanding their child's emotions? The answer is that only a small proportion are fully confident.



For example, let's look again at whether parents felt their children were having problems with mental wellbeing or anxiety, and this time focus on how certain they were about the answer:

In the past 12 months do you feel your child has suffered from any problems with their mental wellbeing or experienced anxiety?



- **45%** answering 'no'; so the remaining **55%** are classed as affirmative answered.
- But only **11%** of these parents feel sure there was a problem.

It is clear from the results that being sure is difficult. **44%** of parents are not certain whether their young child has emotional problems - it's just hard to read the signs, especially when the children are young.

The same topic was tackled by the following question:

How well do you think you understand your child's emotional wellbeing?

Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) understood their child's emotional wellbeing half of the time or less and again, a significant minority - only around **1 in 4 parents** - felt completely tuned in ('in sync with') their child's emotions.

Once again the pattern of results does not change over time - even by the time their child is 7, only **23%** of parents report feeling 'perfectly in sync' with understanding how they were feeling.





So problems are reported on both sides of the communication gap - both with how well young children can signal how they are feeling and with how well parents can interpret the signals some or all of the time. These problems are not resolving as the child gets older and, as we saw earlier, by the time their child is 7, almost half of parents are now also worrying about their child's mental health.

But these are not their only concerns...

Parents worry how to help and what to do

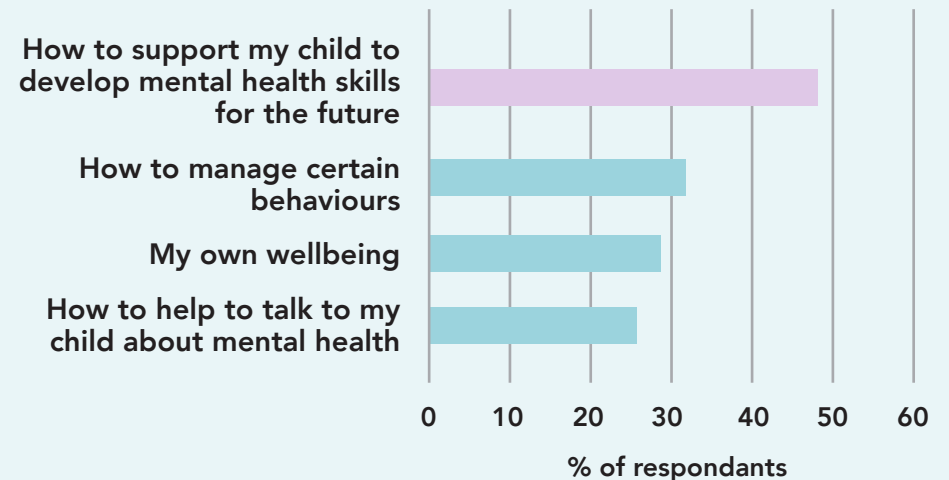
Not only do parents struggle to always stay tuned to their child's emotional state, but they also feel they don't have the tools to deal with it.

Parents reported significant worries about supporting their children's emotional wellbeing even as early as the time their children enter education.

Many were also concerned about how to help to talk to their child on this subject, and for some their own mental health was a source of worry in addition:



Do you feel you worry about the following?

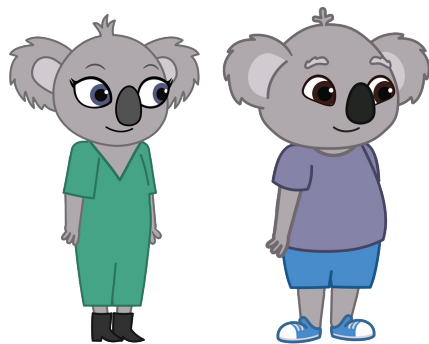


- Worries about mental health and wellbeing, both their child's and their own, are reported by around a third to a half of parents.



When the data is broken down by the age of the child, it is clear that these worries start very early:

- **Around half of parents of 3 year olds (48%) are already worrying about how to support their child's mental health skills for the future.**
- **Behaviour is also a cause of parental worry, with 51% of parents of 3 year olds and 46% of parents of 4 year olds worried about how to manage certain behaviours**



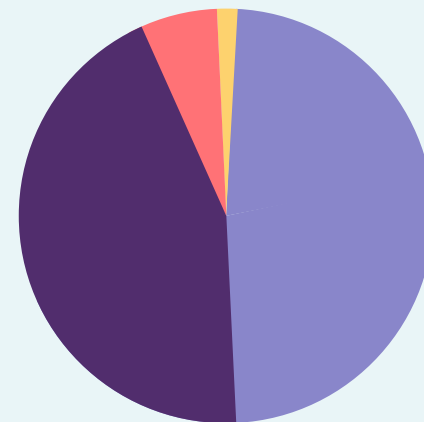
We have considered the age of the child as a factor, but what about the age of the parents?

Here the survey indicated that the younger parents aged 18-24 were more likely to have concerns about their child, had less confidence in their parenting and were less likely to seek support from health professionals for parenting advice:

- **75% of younger parents, aged 18-24 worry that their child has experienced difficulties with their mental wellbeing and anxiety in the past 12 months compared with the whole group average of 55%.**
- **44% would go to health professionals for parenting advice compared with the whole group average of 50%.**



So where would these worried parents turn to for support and what sort of advice would they trust?



- Try and solve it yourself
- Seek external support (from either friends, family, experts, or support groups)
- Hope it works itself out over time
- Fret and not tackle it head on

Surprisingly, **less than half (45%) of parents** questioned said they **would seek external support** from friends and family, experts or support groups if they were worried about their child's emotional wellbeing.

And this is especially true for fathers, where the proportion who would seek help is even lower **(39%)**.





Feeling guilty is the new normal...

There is often a strong link between worrying about problems we identify in relation to our children, and feeling guilty that we should be better at solving them. So in the survey we also asked specifically about parenting guilt.

The definition provided in the question was:

Parenting guilt occurs when parents are conflicted over responsibilities, question their parenting methods, or experience feelings of failure due to their shortcomings.

We live in a hyper-connected and complex world, children are busy, parents are busy, women have increasingly returned to the workforce and parents of both sexes may be juggling their own work, and social commitments with the demands from their children and wider family. In addition, inequity in society is increasing and deprivation will also impact on many parents' experiences.

The result, as our survey shows, is that parenting guilt is now almost universally felt:

92%

of parents reported experiencing parenting guilt - and for 42% this happens regularly or frequently.

97%

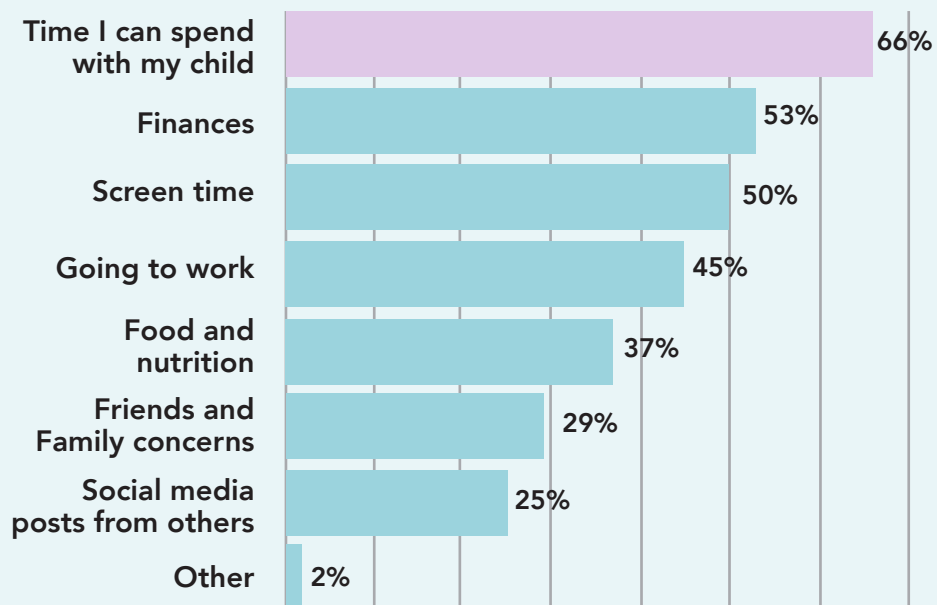
of mothers experienced parenting guilt compared to 82% of fathers.

70%

of those who reported feeling this guilt frequently, over twice as many were mothers.

The 945 parents reporting parenting guilt identified a range of reasons, and indicated that often more than one reason applied:

What contributes to your parenting guilt?



Time that can be spent with their child was the most frequently cited contributor to parenting guilt. 61% of all parents surveyed cited this as a reason.

Finances (53%), screen time (50%) and going to work (45%) were all common contributors.



But again, the responses from the parents aged 18-24 experiencing parenting guilt were notable. This was the only group for which time with their child did not come top of the list - in fact it came fourth at **35%**. Instead, for them, screen time (**46%**) was the greatest worry. Interestingly 18-24 year olds are 'digital native' young adults who are the first parent cohort who themselves grew up with personal screens and apps.

The big screen time debate

In just a single generation, children have gone from virtually no exposure to screens other than the TV, to screens being, for many families, a daily battle of wills to keep them from taking over. And it's not just a battle for children of course - with many activities of a parent's daily life, from working, paying bills, checking the weather, chatting to friends or going shopping, all increasingly now happening online.

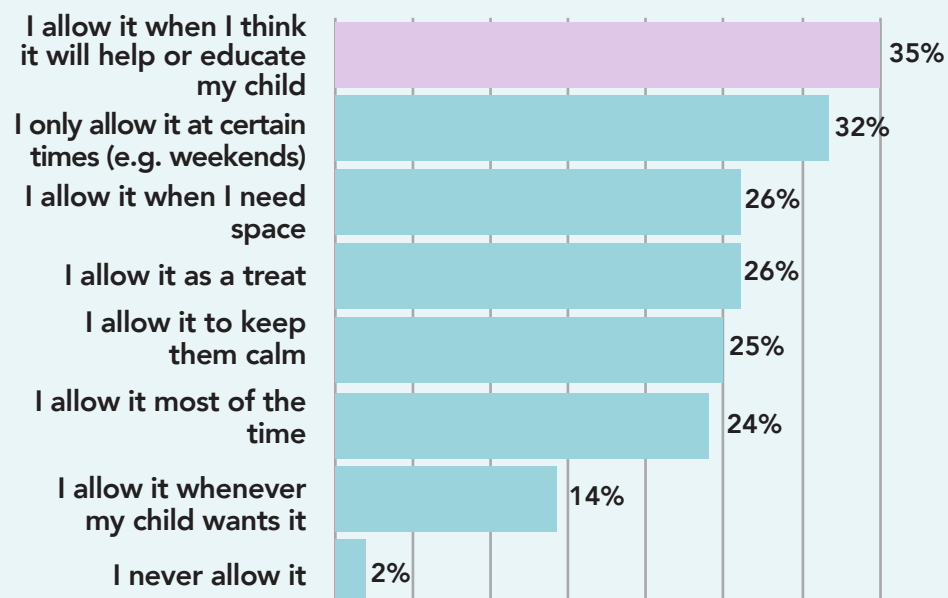
In the classroom, smart whiteboards with internet connectivity and tablets for the children are now commonplace, and homework more often than not, makes use of online resources both in primary and secondary schools.

Add to that the effect on children of social contact via screens, including social media, and, on the flip side, the growing number of health and wellbeing apps in use, and the picture is quite a complex one.

So screens now find themselves in quite a busy intersection between worry, guilt, pleasure, education and support. It seemed important, therefore, to understand their use by this group of parents.



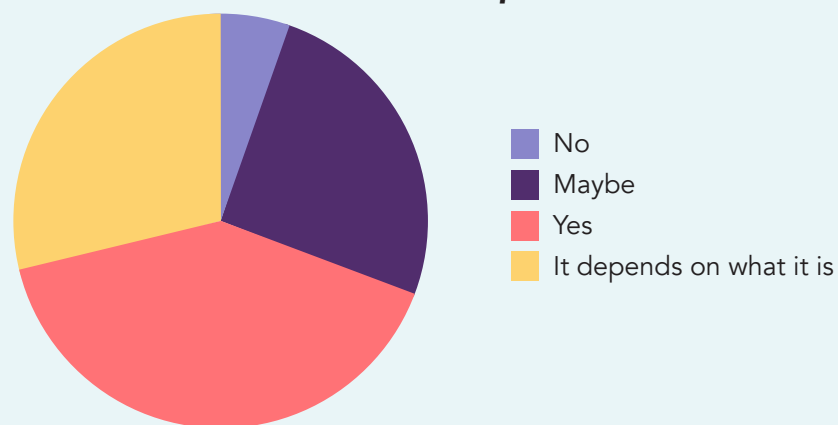
Which of the following reflect how you feel about screen time for your child? (parents were invited to select all responses relevant to them)



Over three-quarters of parents would change their perspective about screen time if they knew it supported their child's development.



Do you think screen time can have a benefit to your child's development?



- **95%** of parents think screen time can be beneficial.
- But more than half of those choose to qualify their answer as 'maybe' or 'it depends what it is'.

And when asked specifically:

- **78% of parents reported they would change their perspective about screen time if they knew it was proven to support their child's development.**

- **98%** of parents of 3-7 year olds allow them to have screen time, despite the fact that **50%** of parents experience parenting guilt identify screen time as a factor
- The most commonly cited reason for allowing screen time is if it will help or educate the child (**35%** of parents)
- **86%** of parents place some form of restriction around screen time
- The wide variety of reasons selected for allowing screen time indicate that quite a range of strategies are being used to set limits.

Parents generally recognise that at least some forms of screen time benefit their child.

The results illustrate clearly that parents recognise that not all screen use is the same, and that their use to help or educate their child is particularly desirable, as is screen use that can support their child's development.

It takes a village: Where do we seek support?

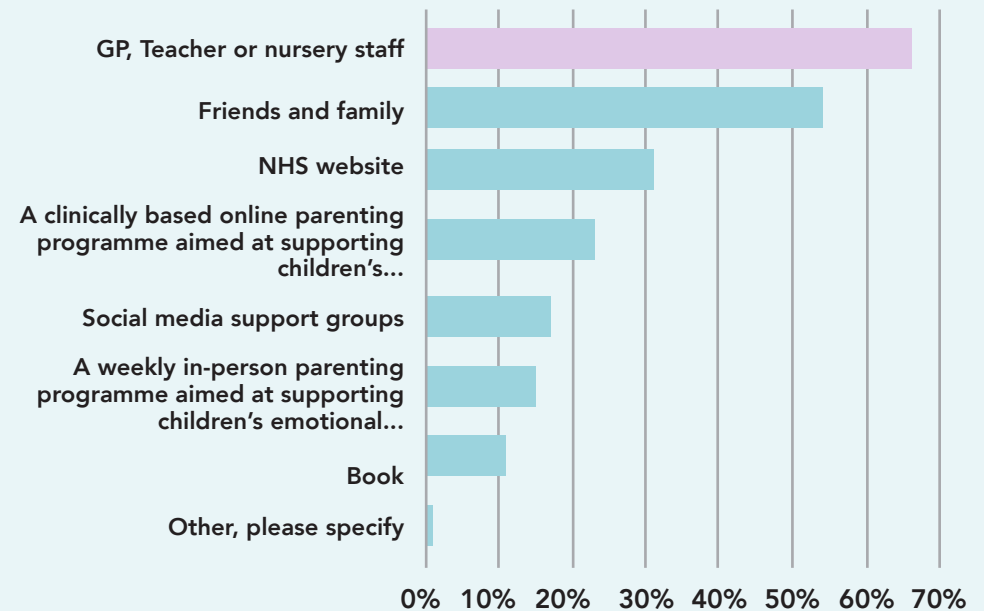
Given that parents feel that support for their child's emotional development should be prioritised, and most are already worried about their child's emotional state, where do they go to for help?

The first thing to remember is, as noted earlier, less than half of parents would seek support if they were worried about their child's emotional wellbeing.

However, they were then asked what sort of sources of support they would use if they did decide to seek help:



*If you did seek help externally about how your child was feeling, where would you rather go?
(Parents could select more than one option)*



- Two thirds of parents would go to a relevant professional such as a GP or teacher.
- Friends and family were also a popular choice (**54%** of parents said they would use them).
- Despite having more than 50 million visits each month, only **30%** of parents concerned about their child's emotional state would make use of parenting information from the NHS website.



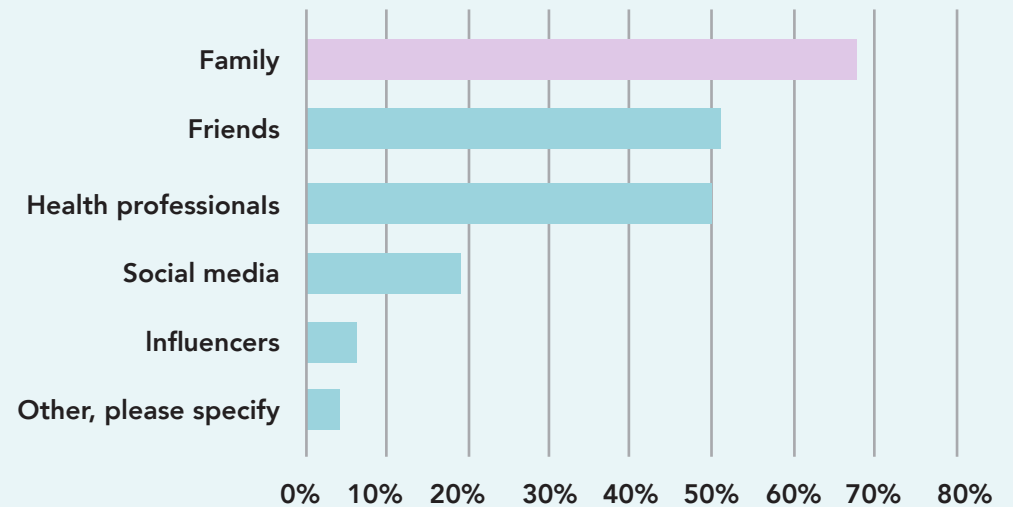
Parents are clearly indicating that where their child's emotional development is concerned, professional advice is preferred.

We know that nursery and school staff are a valued resource, but must be shared across the school population. We also know that access to clinical professionals such as GPs or children's mental health professionals can be limited, with referral rates rising much faster than the numbers of families able to access support, and long waits if referrals are accepted.

So the most trusted advice can be the hardest to access.

We then looked at the picture when it comes to parenting advice:

Where do you currently go for parenting advice?
(Parents could select more than one option)

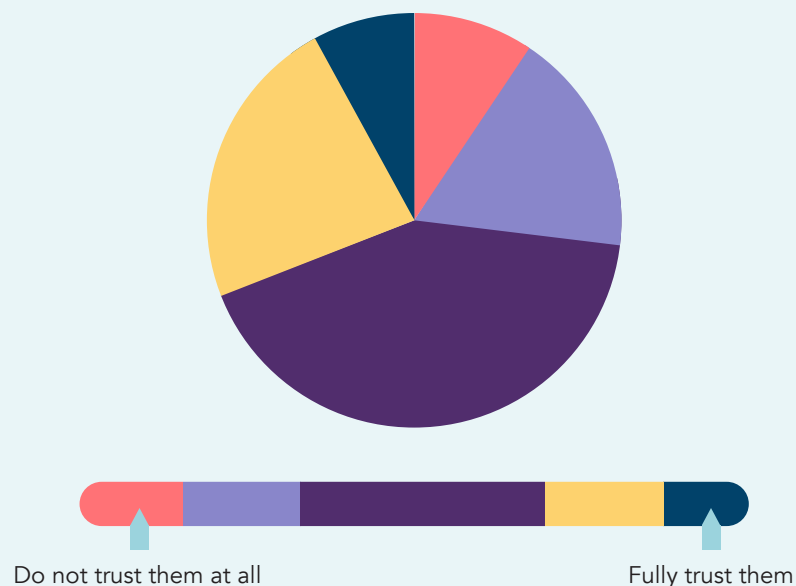


- Now families become even more important (**68%**), closely followed by friends (**51%**).
- Almost **one in 5 parents** also turn to social media for help with parenting.

When it comes to both parenting advice and supporting their child's emotional wellbeing, parents are indeed 'using the village' to help raise the child.

But what is interesting is that some parts of the village are not as trusted as others:

Do you trust the advice you get from non-clinical sources such as parenting influencers, TikTok, Family and Friends?



Only about a third of parents (31%) are confident to trust the parenting advice they get from non-clinical sources (even though more than twice this number still seek this sort of advice).

Compared with advice on emotional development, advice on parenting is more likely to be sought from family, friends and other non-clinical sources, but parents are not reporting high levels of trust in the advice they receive. **This pattern would be expected if more trustworthy support is not available, or the advice is not provided in an acceptable or accessible way.**

Taking the village online would be one way to provide safe, clinically-endorsed, accessible support. Embers the Dragon is one such approach.

- Men were more likely to seek advice from family (**75%**) than women were (**65%**)



Men appear to be less likely to make use of a peer support network than women, a point reflected on by Tommy, 28.



“

I think being a Dad you often feel overlooked and in some ways are more alone. I never really spoke to my friends about Dad life, many don't have children and even with the ones that do, I don't know, it's just not something we did. I hate the way people ask if I'm 'babysitting' when my partner is out but I think it's a term Dads hear a lot. Having a space I could go to whenever I wanted where I can learn ways to improve my relationship with my son, or tips for dealing with whatever current mischief he's fixated on was so important as often working Dads get forgotten about and we matter to. It helped me to feel important in my Son's life and that I had the skills to help him grow.”

Conclusion

Parents of children as young as 3 years old have substantial worries about both their child's emotional development and wellbeing.



Parents are telling us they need help to understand the emotions of their children around the time they start school so that they can support and parent them well. They rate emotional development as the top priority in this age.

Research and support has traditionally focussed on older children, generally above the age of 7. But parents are also telling us that help is needed earlier than that, and that advice from non-professionals is poorly trusted although access to professional advice for this age group is often limited due to access barriers in children's mental health services. Problems and concerns are already reported by age 3 and sustained through to at least age 7.

Screen time is almost universal, even in this young age group. Parents are understandably cautious about the amount of time their young children spend on screens, but they also value and support the use of screens if there is proven benefit to their child's development.

It does indeed take a village to raise a child, and we will need to come together

to build that village better and stronger. Parents are telling us of their high unmet need and their worries for the emotional health of their young children now and as they develop. If we are to safeguard their children's future emotional health and wellbeing, we need to bring the support to where the families and children can access it easily.

More than 50% of parents surveyed who said they would use a parenting programme would rather use a clinically based online parenting programme than attend a parenting group.



It needs to be underpinned by clinical expertise and be accessible particularly to those who may be hesitant to approach professionals for help or who need the flexibility to fit the support around their jobs and other real world commitments. Schools and nurseries also need the support and resources to prioritise the teaching of emotional literacy and resilience.

Currently, in-person parenting groups are offered by many NHS trusts and local authority services as the recommended intervention for typical emotional wellbeing and behavioural concerns

in young children. However, with less than half of parents reaching out to professionals for help, and concerns around stigma and time available, more than 50% of parents surveyed who said they would use a parenting programme would rather use a clinically based online parenting programme than attend a parenting group.

Embers the Dragon¹ could be a solution to the problems these parents are illustrating. We hope these numbers inspire others to construct that village of support for young children and their families.

If we think creatively, and harness the digital world where it is beneficial to do so, we can start to reach families at scale so that learning about feelings and behaviours becomes as normal as learning the alphabet.



¹ Embers the Dragon uses clinically-backed animated stories, ready-to-use classroom educational materials and a parenting support app to bring whole schools and communities up to a level playing field of confidence on early emotional development. Through the app, families are able to continue that support at home, with a consistent approach allowing fun to be had and good habits formed.



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