

**Submission
No 106**

INQUIRY INTO PREVALENCE, CAUSES AND IMPACTS OF LONELINESS IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Organisation: Parenting Research Centre

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Parent loneliness

A submission to the 2024 NSW Parliament inquiry into the prevalence, causes, and impacts of loneliness in New South Wales

Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

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The Parenting Research Centre

The [Parenting Research Centre](#) is an independent, non-profit organisation that helps children thrive by advising on new and better ways to support families in their parenting. We help governments and community organisations in the fields of early childhood, health, education, disability, and welfare put the best evidence on parenting and family support into action.

We have an outstanding record of accomplishment in the design, implementation, analysis, and reporting of experimental and quasi-experimental research and in evaluation. We focus on achieving real world outcomes by helping service providers, families and policy makers to develop and implement parenting and family support solutions that are informed by evidence and sensitive to culture and context.

The Parenting Research Centre is a trusted leader in knowledge and practice expertise related to parenting – and we are engaged by government and non-government agencies to utilise our 25 years of experience in parenting and parenting support to create new knowledge and support development of services, resources and policy. We are part of the consortium (with the Murdoch Children’s Research Institute) delivering the Raising Children Network (RCN), an initiative delivering online resources and information to Australian parents, carers, and professionals. The RCN website has been funded by successive Australian governments since 2006 to bring up-to-date, evidence-based, plain language information about raising children to more than 83,000 parents and professionals every day (with 55 million pageviews in 2022).

About this submission

Since its inception 1995 the Parenting Research Centre (PRC) has worked with NSW Government Departments and with the Federal Government to support families and the agencies that support families.

We appreciate this opportunity to contribute to the evidence base and practice knowledge relating to the prevalence, causes and impacts of loneliness, particularly as it affects parents (and, through parents, children). We advocate the importance of a family-centred approach and effective parenting for improving the wellbeing of Australians, immediately and through developmental pathways.

In summary, our advice is that:

- We know that loneliness is seen as an increasing problem, affecting many groups of Australians, including parents
- It can impact parents’ abilities to be fully present in the family and parent in the way they would prefer to
- This can negatively affect the wellbeing of families (parents and children) in the same way that other challenges to parents’ mental health can.
- We need to know more about loneliness in parents and how it relates to social isolation
- Both loneliness and social isolation are modifiable risk factors which we believe can be ameliorated by through a range of policy and practice initiatives.

What we know about loneliness in parents

Loneliness is increasingly acknowledged as a growing problem impacting health and wellbeing in developed countries (Hall et al., 2020). People of any age and gender, living anywhere from urban to remote Australia, can experience loneliness (Friends for Good Inc., 2019).

The prevalence of loneliness varies across the population according to a range of factors—any parent’s likelihood of experiencing loneliness will depend on the number and kinds of risk factors they experience. Recent studies suggest that loneliness may be an increasing problem for many

Australian families; if loneliness is increasing generally in Australia, then we should know more about how that affects parents and families.

People who experience marginalisation are at greater risk of loneliness. People living alone, those with disability, those with poor physical or mental health, financial insecurity, and older and younger people, may all be at greater risk of loneliness (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Other at-risk groups include people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups, LGBTQ+ individuals, rural residents, victims of domestic and family violence, and people who experience discrimination and marginalisation. Further, single parents have been recognised to be a group at higher risk of loneliness. While based primarily on US data, these findings give us reason to reflect on the potential for Australian parents to be a group in need of attention. Parents are represented in all these groups, and it is worth considering when and how loneliness may be uniquely affecting people in their parenting role.

It has been assumed that loneliness is less of a risk in middle adulthood, as social support is assumed to be readily available from spouses/partners, from connections arising from raising children, and from participating in the workforce (Hall et al., 2020). However, these same authors point out that the nature of parenting (along with other roles and responsibilities) has changed significantly over the last few decades—more dual-income families, more single-income households, and more participation in the workforce by women—and that these assumptions may no longer hold.

A recent review (Nowland et al., 2021) looked at research relating specifically to loneliness in parents. They found some evidence that some groups of parents are at higher risk of loneliness (for example, parents of children with a chronic health condition or disability and immigrant or ethnic minority parents) but caution that most studies did not include a comparison group, limiting the reliability of the findings. However, the authors suggest that:

1. Parental loneliness may have different causes and give rise to different coping strategies compared to other groups, and
2. Parental loneliness has direct and intergenerational impacts on parent and child wellbeing.

Parental loneliness as a determinant of poor outcomes for families

Loneliness has been linked with a range of poor outcomes in adulthood, many of which are also associated with reduced wellbeing in children when experienced by their parents (Hall et al., 2020). For example, loneliness is associated with reduced quality of sleep, poor executive control, more symptoms of depression and higher awareness of pain; when experienced for a long time it is linked with a significantly higher risk for thoughts of suicide and suicide attempts. Poor psychosocial health in parents is well understood to predict impaired parenting, poorer child functioning, higher levels of family conflict, and more child behaviour problems (Hall et al. 2020; Mensah & Keirnan 2010).

Loneliness can exacerbate the effects of stress and personal or work-related burnout, with some parents experiencing parental burnout, which is characterised by physical and emotional exhaustion, emotional distancing from children, and (unwarranted) self-perceptions of being an inept parent (Mikolajczak et al., 2018 & Roskam et. al., 2017, cited in Hall et al., 2020).

Loneliness in parents is associated with increased risk of depression, anxiety, and stress (Nowland et al. 2021), although the authors caution that the direction of causation is unclear. Does loneliness lead to depression, or are people living with depression more likely to report being lonely? Parental loneliness may also be transmitted to children in the same way that intergenerational transmission of depression can occur—the evidence for this is emerging (Nowland et al. 2021) but presents a potential way of understanding how loneliness affects families.

Loneliness versus social isolation

Social connectedness is important, but the number of social connections is not necessarily related to feelings of loneliness. Parents who are relatively socially isolated may not suffer from feelings of loneliness (though they may do, just as parents who are more connected may). For example, while the highest rates of social isolation are found among older adults (in the US), young adults are much more likely to report feeling lonely than those aged over 65 (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023).

It is important to consider both objective social isolation and subjective feelings of loneliness when assessing the wellbeing of parents.

Call to action

Loneliness is an emerging issue worldwide. Parents, especially parents in otherwise marginalised and vulnerable groups, may be at increased risk of experiencing loneliness. Loneliness is linked to but not perfectly correlated with social isolation—a parent may have good connections but still experience loneliness. However, both are important determinants of parental health and wellbeing.

At the Parenting Research Centre, our current priorities are to:

- learn more about loneliness in parents, especially how it relates to social isolation
- explore the effects of parental loneliness on children and families
- identify and/or develop effective approaches to addressing parental loneliness
- identify policy and practice pathways to decreasing parental loneliness.
- identify and support agencies on the front line who are working to ameliorate some of the causes and effects of loneliness
- provide primary prevention support via Raising Children Network through accessible and engaging information
- provide peer support for parents of children with disability or complex needs via the MyTime national peer support program.

Our starting point is to consider what is already known and build the evidence base. What we know so far includes:

- Community-based organisations can provide education, resources, and support programs for key populations such as parents (Office of the Surgeon General, 2023). Examples of recommended supports include community social events and providing community service or volunteering opportunities. Schools and parent-teacher groups can also play a role in supporting the connections of students.
- Interventions that improve psychosocial health of parents have secondary benefits including increased relational satisfaction; additionally, interventions that target maladaptive social cognitions are most effective at reducing loneliness (Hall et al., 2020).
- Peer support interventions are generally acceptable to parents and can both combat loneliness and reduce isolation (PRC, 2024).
- We need to design and deliver new parent wellbeing interventions and resources for parents, using both online and face-to-face delivery modes. These interventions could be targeted (for use, for example, by agencies supporting parents) or be general and offered via RCN and social media.

Parents' thoughts and perceptions about their relationships, their experiences of loneliness, and their psychosocial wellbeing are all intertwined. Any of these factors provide a potential "way in" to addressing the link between loneliness and poor family outcomes. We need more discovery work to hear parents' voices and inform the development of new supports. This work should build on existing investigations of the parent experience and encompass reliable surveys (such as Parenting Today (<https://www.parentingrc.org.au/tools/parenting-today-in-victoria/>)) and consultations that hear from parents directly.

Recommendations

To address the prevalence and impacts of loneliness and social isolation in New South Wales the Parenting Research Centre recommends the following:

- Fund further research to explore loneliness in parents and the effects on children and families, particularly in vulnerable or at-risk communities. This could include a literature review to extend on existing work such as the Inquiry into Social Isolation and Loneliness in Queensland (Tabled 6th December 2021) [Report No. 14, 57th Parliament - Inquiry into social isolation and loneliness in Queensland](#)
- Fund research to explore how peer-based interventions could be strengthened to combat loneliness
- Promote the development of peer-led support programs to reduce isolation and empower parents, such as MyTime and Virtual MyTime - www.mytime.net.au
- Provide additional resources to platforms like the Raising Children Network and the Raising Healthy Minds app, to promote the benefits of peer support and social connection. www.raisingchildren.net.au
- Ensure that telehealth and virtual support options are widely available, particularly for families in regional and remote areas.
- Host a key stakeholder roundtable including those with expertise in loneliness to explore policy and program development to target loneliness and build on existing evidence-based interventions both in Australia and Internationally.
- Identify outcomes that can be tracked longitudinally to measure impact and target funding.
- Expand approaches such as the Parenting Today in Victoria survey to ensure parents' voices are considered and build on existing data sets at a NSW and National level.

The Parenting Research Centre welcomes the opportunity to meet with members of the Inquiry if this would be of assistance and we are happy to support ongoing work or activity to address this important public health issue.

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