



‘Frankly, it’s frightening’: our kids are far from all right

One in three of primary school children ‘feel bad for long periods of time,’ while 53 per cent of secondary school children ‘feel very stressed’. Something seismic is going on across the nation.

By STEPHEN LUNN



Newly published data reveals alarmingly high levels of stress and anxiety in young children and adolescents. Picture: istock

You may be a parent watching your child stare into space at dinner. Or a grandparent wondering why the teenager won't come out of their room when you come to visit. If so, you are a small part of something seismic going on across the nation, a generational deterioration in the social and emotional wellbeing of our kids.

Anecdotes abound. Primary school age girls cutting themselves. Appointments for adolescent psychologists impossible to find. Anxiety medication use on the rise. Disengagement at school, or full-on school refusal. If this isn't your experience, it's that of someone close by.

Now there is [comprehensive data that fleshes out the full extent of the problem](#). The Australian Council for Educational Research's Social-Emotional Wellbeing Survey has been running since 2003, taking the emotional temperature of kids across the nation. Academic Michael Bernard has worked in collaboration with ACER to set the survey and crunch the numbers, which include the most recent 2023 data. He has collated and analysed more than 500,000 responses from primary and secondary school-age children since 2018.

"The findings are, frankly, frightening," says Bernard, an emeritus professor at California State University and a former University of Melbourne professor.

"The most recent data up to 2023 shows no improvement in the social and emotional wellbeing of children and adolescents despite the considerable efforts of schools and parents. In many cases they are going backwards."

The newly published ACER data shows children and adolescents reporting an increase in stress and anxiety every year from 2018 to 2023, confirming patterns evident since the survey started in 2003. Levels of stress are much higher for girls than boys, along with significant deterioration from primary to secondary years and from year 7 to year 12.

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But, like children, it’s not that simple. The vast majority of these young people report that despite this increasing stress and anxiety they remain happy, like who they are and are optimistic for the future. So what’s going on?

Primary school

Even in their early school years, the latest data rings alarm bells.

Responses from more than 300,000 primary school children found one in three saying they “feel bad for long periods of time”. Almost half (45 per cent) say their feelings are easily hurt, and similar numbers worry a lot about both their schoolwork and what others think of them.

Almost 30 per cent say they lose their temper “a lot”. And more than six in 10 say they “could do a lot better” in their schoolwork.

One of the reasons uncovered for these emotional and learning challenges is that 45 per cent of primary students haven’t learned how to control how nervous they get and can’t calm down quickly when they feel bad.

Bernard found a range of areas where the wellbeing of primary school-age kids had significantly worsened since 2018.

“Children finding it hard to calm down quickly or struggling to describe their emotions have shown a rise,” he says. “So, too, the percentage experiencing hurtful feelings and those having prolonged periods of anger.”

A major contributor to these challenges is that “a growing number are refraining from talking to someone else when they feel bad”, he says.



Newly published ACER data shows children and adolescents reporting an increase in stress and anxiety every year from 2018 to 2023. Picture: iStock

Secondary school

Data from the more than 180,000 high schoolers surveyed reveals a potentially more complex but no less troubling story.

First, stress is through the roof, with 53 per cent of secondary-school students saying they “feel very stressed”. This rises through the year levels and is more pronounced in girls. By year 12, 77 per cent of girls say they feel “very stressed”, compared with 55 per cent of boys. Stress has increased significantly since 2018, when 46 per cent of secondary students said they felt very stressed.

Many can’t find a way to express it. Fifty-five per cent say they don’t find someone to talk to when they get stressed out and 31 per cent say they lose their temper a lot. More than 70 per cent say they “could do a lot better” in their schoolwork.

Bernard puts this down to a delay in the development of socio-emotional strengths they need to navigate an increasingly demanding curriculum, attributes such as tolerating frustration, and time management. He says a telling 2023 data point is the proportion of high school students, more than one in five, who say that at some point in the past six months they felt so hopeless and down almost every day for a week that they stopped doing their usual activities. For year 12 girls it is one in three.

“I really find this quite a disturbing statistic,” he says. “It points to really deep-seated issues requiring professional mental health support.”

What's behind the numbers?

The sheer volume of responses in the ACER survey, which includes responses from children in all states and territories, and from both public and private primary and secondary schools, provides rich data to better understand how children are faring.

It doesn't isolate all of the current-day factors contributing to the dramatic levels of stress and anxiety, but some of the nation's leading child and adolescent experts have spent their careers exploring this subject. No one is surprised that things are, at best, not improving and in many cases getting worse.

"In my 30 years in the field I've never seen anything like the level of stress and anxiety that today's children and adolescents are going through," adolescent mental health expert and psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg says. He says children are having to deal with more, and earlier in their lives: "Adolescence itself has changed, with kids reaching the age of puberty sooner than in previous generations, and having to grow up quicker. Some girls are dealing with the onset of puberty at age 10, and this can be emotionally complex."

The other big change from earlier generations is the impact of constant social connection through phones and social media. It's an obvious but no less impactful point.

"Social media has been part of it, no doubt," says Harriet Hiscock, a professorial fellow within the department of pediatrics at the University of Melbourne's Murdoch Children's Research Institute.

“It’s a two-edged sword where kids can connect through it, but there is the other side where they feel like others’ lives are better. And access is 24/7, with home no longer a safe haven.”

Kids are also very aware of uncertainties and tensions that exist both for their families and on a global scale.



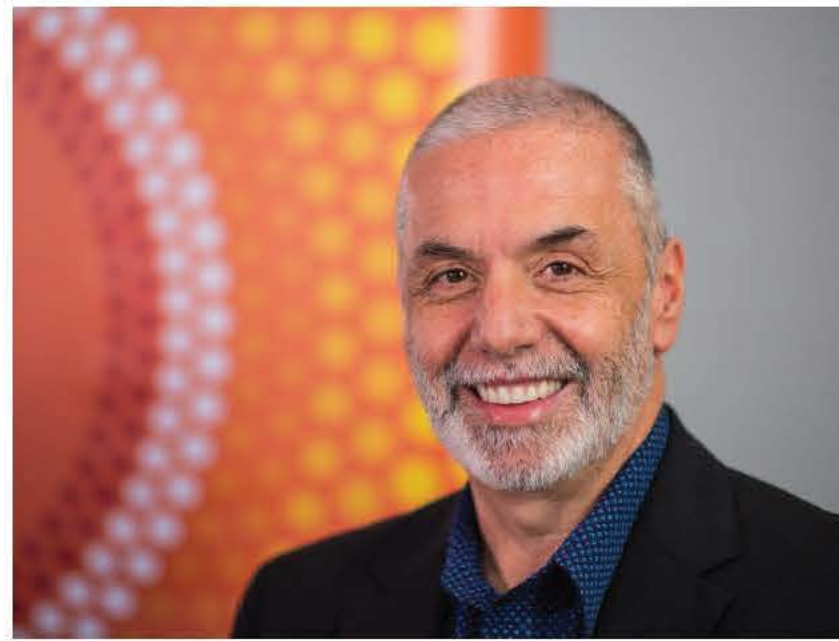
Harriet Hiscock. Picture: Supplied

“The uncertainty and stress for this generation is that the relationships around them are more unpredictable,” Australian Childhood Foundation chief executive Joe Tucci says. “Families are more mobile, economic circumstances change more. You’ve got an increase in children being exposed to violence and other forms of harm from within their own families, and what they’re seeing in the media. It leaves many of them feeling insecure, that the world they inhabit is unsafe or less safe.”

Hiscock agrees. “There’s uncertainty about the future, which is starting younger,” she says.

“Those thoughts around cost of living are there. How will I get a job? How will I have a house? They are real factors making kids more anxious. And they really do worry about climate change and the future of the planet.”

Bernard says it's important for parents not to shield children from disturbing world events or other life events that may be discomfiting. "There is evidence to suggest that overprotective parenting can contribute to lower resilience and higher stress levels in children," he says. "Excessive efforts to shield children from potential harm, failure or discomfort can lead to underdeveloped problem-solving and social skills, reduced independence and delays in the development of self-confidence and persistence."



Joe Tucci. Picture: Supplied.

He adds another factor that is leading to increased stress on kids of all ages.

"The pressure to excel academically continues to increase both at home and at school," Bernard says. "My sense is that schools are not spending enough time each week focused on working with children on ways to build their resilience and manage their stress."

But what of the suggestion that the numbers are rising because children these days are more willing to own up to their mental state?

Hiscock says there is "more openness among schoolchildren to acknowledge their anxieties and to be more open about it than previous generations, and that's a good thing, but there's more to this recent spike than that".

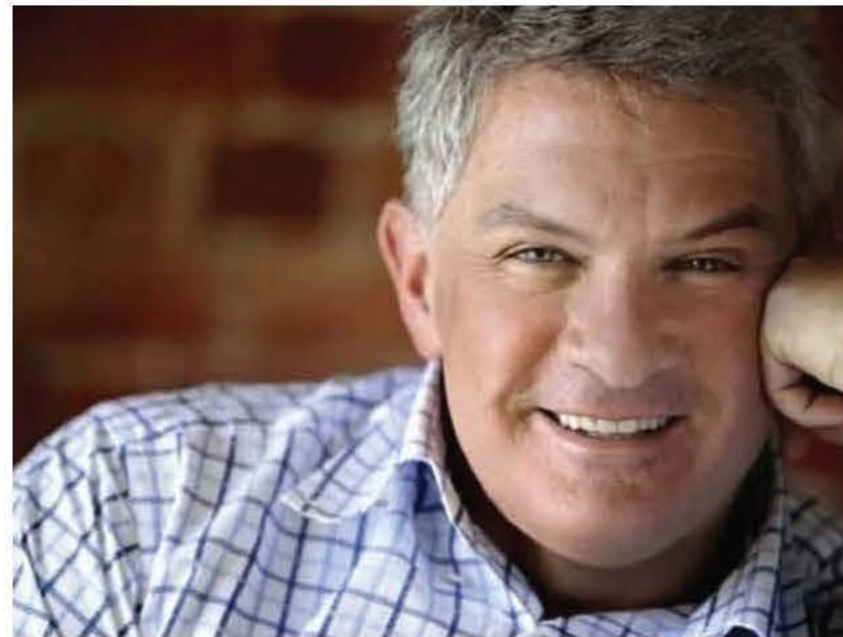
How big a factor was Covid?

There's little argument things were going awry for children before the pandemic, for the reasons mentioned above.

“There was definitely a trend pre-Covid of increasing mental health problems in children,” Hiscock says. “Hospital emergency department presentations for self-harm, anxiety and depression were all rising. But Covid did have consequences. Anxiety, school refusal and eating disorders were all more common.”

Carr-Gregg says Covid and the resulting lockdowns “turbocharged” the “compare and despair” phenomenon kids were navigating through social media.

“For some the levels of anxiety increased to the point where even leaving their room was problematic,” he says. During that time children lost some of the tools they needed to navigate the journey from childhood to adulthood, he says, including being physically surrounded by a strong social cohort. “They also need to be able to figure out who they are away from the gravitational pull of their parents, and that was stopped during Covid,” Carr-Gregg says.



Michael Carr-Gregg.

“I continue to see a lot of extremely anxious, extremely depressed kids who are still dealing with this.”

Girls v boys

The ACER survey data shows girls consistently show higher vulnerability to emotional challenges than boys, especially around self-esteem and academic worries. At primary school, 54 per cent of girls report worrying a lot about their schoolwork and what others think of them, compared with 42 per cent of boys.

At secondary school, 43 per cent of girls think that when they do badly in their schoolwork they are failures, compared with 32 per cent of boys. And 48 per cent of girls say they can't control how nervous they get and can't calm down quickly when they're feeling bad, compared with 39 per cent of boys.

In secondary school the differences widen. Overall 64 per cent of girls say they feel “very stressed”, including 77 per cent of year 12 girls, while for boys it is 41 per cent.

And 68 per cent of girls say they have a hard time controlling how worried they get, compared with 44 per cent of high school boys.



Michael Bernard.

“Girls are generally encouraged to express their emotions openly, which can sometimes lead to heightened self-awareness and self-consciousness, potentially contributing to anxiety, especially if they feel overwhelmed by their emotions,” Bernard says.

“Research also suggests that girls are more likely to be targets of bullying, online harassment and sexual harassment. Experiencing these forms of victimisation can lead to anxiety, fear and a sense of vulnerability.”

What about the positives?

Despite the worrying findings, more than nine in 10 primary school children and 88 per cent of high school students consider themselves a “happy person.” Similar proportions say they like the person they are and a large majority are hopeful about the future.

“While we have large percentages of girls and boys of all ages who feel anxious and very stressed, many of these young people are also happy and like who they are,” Bernard says.

“The reason for this is that twin aspects of their psychological make-up – positivity and negativity – greatly impact mental health and wellbeing, in different ways. Mental health is greatly influenced by the negative elements of their psychological make-up as well as the stressful things going on in their lives.

“On the other hand, the wellbeing of young people is under the influence of positive elements of their mindset as well as the positive things going on in their school, home and community. Young people who report high levels of stress and worry may also grow up in loving homes, supportive communities, have good friendships, hobbies and achievement that result in feelings of happiness and a sense of fulfilment.”

What to do?

Bernard says community, educational and mental health officials must make young people’s social and emotional development a top priority.

“Many of the educational challenges we are witnessing in young people such as school refusal, vulnerability to bullying, high stress, anxiety, depression and educational underachievement relate to their social-emotional capacity,” Bernard says. “It would be great to have a national action plan. This would be a game-changing investment.”

Bernard, who has his own social-emotional learning program for children and adolescents, youcandoiteducation.com.au, believes the focus on academic achievement is crowding out the school day, when more time should be devoted during school hours to helping students, especially in high school, find ways to overcome their emotional frailty and build resilience.

“To be a well-functioning young person today you need a social and emotional skill set far more demanding than 20 or 30 years ago. A lot of kids aren’t being helped in this regard and it’s coming home to roost.”

But Hiscock says schools can’t shoulder all the burden, and any additional work they do on resilience-building should be available to all children.

“It’s tricky for schools,” she says. “ They are asked to do everything, it’s already a crowded curriculum and teachers are already really struggling to navigate the mental health issues of students in their classrooms.

“There needs to be ‘whole of school’ approaches that give children some tools to problem-solve for themselves. If they can, they come to school in better shape to learn, and it means teachers have less burnout.”

Tucci also says the response must go beyond simply an education one.

He says: “We have to stop and reflect as a community about what our children really need to do better, and we need to organise community resources to achieve it.”

MICHAEL CARR-GREGG

CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHOLOGIST

MEASURING EMOTIONAL WELLBEING
PRIMARY SCHOOLS
44% cannot calm down quickly when they feel bad
44% cannot control how nervous they get
32% feel bad for long periods of time
BOY V GIRL DIFFERENCES
Girls: 53% Boys: 36% say they have their feelings easily hurt
Girls: 48% Boys: 39% cannot calm down quickly when they feel bad
Girls: 39% Boys: 29% think they're stupid when someone teases them
POSITIVE ELEMENTS
I am a happy person. 92%
When I grow up. I will have a good life. 91%
I like the kind of person I am. 88%
SECONDARY SCHOOLS
I have a hard time controlling how worried I get: 56%
I feel very stressed: 53%
I lose my temper a lot: 32%
During the past six months, I have felt so hopeless and down almost every day for one week that I have stopped doing my usual activities: 21%
BOY V GIRL DIFFERENCES
I feel very stressed: Girls: 64% Boys: 41%
I have a hard time controlling how worried I get. Girls: 68% Boys: 44%
During the past six months, I have felt so hopeless and down almost every day for one week that I have stopped doing my usual activities. Girls: 26% Boys: 16%
I feel lonely: Girls: 29% Boys: 20%
POSITIVE ELEMENTS
I am a happy person. 88%
I am very hopeful about my future. 82%
I like the kind of person I am. 79%

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