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Understanding the social wellbeing and supports of Australian families with children in the early years

David Marshall

Australian Institute of Family Studies

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
COPD	Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease
DSS	Department of Social Services
LFSF	Labour Force Status of Families
HILDA	Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
NILF	Not in the Labour Force
NSW	New South Wales
NT	Northern Territory
Qld	Queensland
SA	South Australia
SAR	Special Administrative Regions
Tas	Tasmania
Vic	Victoria
WA	Western Australia

Overview

This report details research conducted to understand the demographic characteristics of contemporary Australian families with young children aged 0–5 years – children in the early years – the extent to which they are empowered, connected and supported¹ and the factors that enable this. It also identifies current data gaps and limitations, as well as broad policy implications and areas where more research is needed.

The research involves quantitative analysis of available and recent Australian data (i.e. Census 2021, Labour Force Status of Families (LFSF) 2024 and Wave 23 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA)) to address the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of Australian families with children aged 0–5 years?
2. How empowered, connected and supported are Australian families with children in the early years?
3. What are the enabling factors that support families to be empowered, connected and supported?

Key findings

- Families² with children in the early years (aged 0–5 years) are a significant but shrinking proportion of all families³ in Australia. Despite the total number of families with children increasing in recent years; as a percentage of all families with children, those with children in the early years has been declining. Nevertheless, families with children aged 0–5 years (over 1.37 million) are still a large component of the population, accounting for 18% of all families and almost 40% of families with children.
- The vast majority of families with children in the early years are based on mixed-sex couples (85%) in single family households (92%), with either one or both parents in employment (90%).
- Despite being low in percentage terms, there are large numbers of families with children aged 0–5 years with attributes that differ to the majority. This includes over 200,000 single parent families (14.2% of all families), 14,000 same-sex couple families (1.1% of all families) and 80,000 families living in multi-family households (6.2% of all families).
- The research in this paper indicates that most Australian parents of 0–5-year-old children had mixed experiences of parenthood when measured by their self-reported levels of empowerment. For example, while most did not ‘feel trapped’ in their role as parents, many had underestimated how difficult parenting would be.
- Analysis of data from the HILDA survey suggests that, in general terms, males appeared to feel more empowered than females based on the parental stress indicators used here. This appears, in part, to be influenced by their relative level of parenting involvement, with those who report doing more than their fair share of parenting (mostly females) tending to report lower levels of empowerment.
- There were no notable differences between males and females when examining levels of connection and support. There was, however, a significant difference between parents who were part of a couple and single parents, with those in couple relationships having higher rates of both perceived connection and support than single parents.
- Overall, most parents appeared to be generally satisfied with their levels of social contact and support in their communities. About 45% of parents indicated they socialised ‘about once a week’ or more but over half (55%) socialised less than weekly.
- Parents who reported low/moderate psychological distress also reported higher levels of empowerment, connection and support on every measure examined in this report (compared to parents with higher levels of psychological distress).
- There were a range of other factors that were consistently identified as having positive associations with many of the dependent variables used to measure connection, support and empowerment. This suggests they may be protective or enabling factors. These factors included:

¹ The definitions of ‘empowered, connected and supported’ used in this report are detailed in chapter 1.

² A family is defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) as 2 or more people, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household. A single household can contain more than one family. For more information related to the definition of families see ABS (2021a).

³ As at June 2024, there were 7.6 million families in Australia; 46% had dependent children in them (aged up to 24 years) (ABS, 2024).

- not having child(ren) with disability or a long-term health condition
- not having disability or a long-term health condition
- being in the labour force and employed (full-time was important for empowerment but less so for connection and support)
- being an active member of a club or association.
- Higher levels of education, particularly university education, produced conflicting results depending on the domain being examined. Higher levels of education were positively associated with most of the variables used to measure connection and support. However, the opposite was the case for empowerment. That is, those who had lower levels of education tended to report more positive experiences of parenting (related to the concept of ‘empowerment’ used in this report) than did those with higher levels of education.
- Limited evidence suggests that grandparental involvement in child care may be a protective or enabling factor for parents with children in the early years, most notably with respect to levels of connection and support.
- Further research is needed to better understand the various enabling factors noted in this report and the extent to which they might be viewed as protective factors that can inform policies and programs to improve the wellbeing of children and their families in the early years.

Policy implications

This report provides evidence that may inform thinking on the future design and delivery of policies, programs and services to support children and families in the early years. It also highlights particular groups of parents with children aged 0–5 years who reported lower levels of empowerment, connection and support, indicating that they may benefit from additional or more targeted support to assist them in their parenting role. This includes (but is not limited to):

- parents experiencing higher levels of psychological distress
- parents managing either their own or their children’s health challenges, including disability and/or chronic health conditions
- single parents.

The findings in this report highlight potential opportunities to improve outcomes for some groups of children and families in the early years, including through additional programs or more targeted investment that aims to better support:

- parents experiencing mental health challenges, to identify issues early and support referrals to more specialised supports and services
- parents of children with disability and/or development delay, to ensure timely access to early intervention services and wraparound family supports
- the wellbeing of families who are at risk of separating, or who have separated, ensuring single parents continue to receive adequate support in their parenting role
- fathers to take on a greater parenting role, which is likely to have positive outcomes for mothers’ perceived empowerment and parenting stresses
- grandparents in taking on a more active role in caring for young children, which may support parents to increase their workforce participation and strengthen their sense of community connection, empowerment and support.

Research limitations

- The research underpinning this report was undertaken as an exploratory analysis of issues that might be relevant to the levels of empowerment, connection and support among parents with children in the early years. As such, it was not designed to address specific hypotheses about the determinants of empowerment, connection or support but set out to identify areas of potential relevance and to flag issues that could be targeted for more detailed examination in future research.
- Due to time and resource limitations, it was necessary to limit the analysis in this report to 3 key national data sources. Although these data sources are of high quality, they have some limitations; namely, that they were not specifically designed to address the research questions examined in this report and only offer partial insight on the key concepts of empowerment, connection and support.

- Within the datasets used (particularly HILDA), only a selected number of variables could reasonably be included in the analysis from the outset. This limited the range and types of analyses that could be undertaken and meant that analysis of the experiences of 'Empowerment', 'Connection' and 'Support' was based on a relatively narrow range of variables chosen as proxy indicators.
- With the knowledge from this report, future research could be extended to examining other datasets or conducting longitudinal analysis of HILDA data to better understand how some of the relationships identified here emerged over time.
- Future research that seeks to untangle such relationships – perhaps using multivariate regression techniques – would also be useful to identify issues that might warrant more intensive and focused research and, ultimately, policy interest.

Introduction

The Australian Government has developed the *Early Years Strategy 2024–2034* (the Strategy) to set out the government's vision for how to best support Australia's young children and their families. Its vision is that all children in Australia thrive in their early years and have the opportunity to reach their full potential when nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities (Department of Social Services [DSS], 2024b).

Recognising that children grow and develop in the context of their families, kin, communities and society (DSS, 2024a), the Strategy takes a holistic, socio-ecological and strengths-based approach to the early years of childhood. However, much of the existing early years research is deficit-based and focuses on adverse child outcomes and negative caregiver experiences (e.g. parenting stress and mental ill-health) (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], unpublished 2022; Fang et al., 2021, 2022).

Additional strengths-based research is needed to better understand the protective and enabling factors that support children to thrive in the early years. These factors are vital for children, parents and families in helping to minimise adverse childhood experiences and associated impacts (Draper et al., 2024; Spearman et al., 2023).

The research shows that the single most important protective factor helping children develop and build resilience is having a stable and committed relationship with a parent, caregiver or other adult (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021). However, other family supports, networks and communities outside the home also matter to help shape child development in many ways, including through the child-carer relationship (DSS, 2024a).

For example, protective factors already known to help minimise the chances of child abuse and neglect include 2-parent households, parental education, positive social connections and employment (Higgins & Hunt, 2024; Smart, 2017). Understanding more about the factors and enablers that potentially help children and families to thrive could be beneficial.

This research

This report outlines analyses undertaken by AIFS to:

- help understand the demographic characteristics of contemporary Australian families with children in the early years
- provide insights on how empowered, connected and supported early years families in Australia are
- explore the enabling factors that support families to be empowered, connected and supported.

Concepts of empowerment, connection and support

'Empowerment', 'Connection' and 'Support' are broad concepts that can have different meanings depending on the context within which they are used. There is also considerable overlap in how they are likely to be experienced by parents; hence, definitions for the 3 concepts may also overlap.

To operationalise the concepts of empowerment, connection and support, Smart and Strawa (unpublished, 2024) have drawn on extant literature and the Strategy documents to develop the following as possible guiding definitions.

Empowered: In a general sense, 'empowered' describes families who are informed and confident in their caregiving. Families are empowered when they have both the capability and freedom to:

- exercise their agency in the communities and environments in which they live, learn and work
- make independent, informed decisions about issues that impact their lives
- participate in community and government activities, and have opportunities for their voices to be heard and responded to
- feel confident in their ability to care for their children and have a positive sense of self-worth
- be involved and engaged with their child's learning
- have strong social networks and access to informal supports within their local community
- access information, resources and services that build parents' knowledge and capability that are affordable, culturally appropriate and available at different stages of/throughout their child's development
- access more intensive support and services when challenges arise, and know how to engage in appropriate help seeking.

Connected: Families are connected when they:

- feel connected to/cared for/loved by extended family and friends
- have positive relationships with family, friends and neighbours
- enjoy spending time with family and friends
- provide and receive friendship from extended family, friends and/or neighbours
- provide and receive informal support (from family, friends or others in the community) when needed
- participate in recreational and community activities and events
- have positive interactions with others using technology and social media.

Supported: Families are supported when:

- parents and caregivers have access to informal support (from family, friends or others in the community) when they need it
- parents and caregivers have access to resources and information to support them in their parenting role
- parents and caregivers have access to universal and targeted supports for themselves and their children that are evidence-informed, culturally safe, timely, comprehensive, easy to navigate, appropriate and effective.

For the purposes of this report, and the analysis contained within it, the definitions noted above have been broadly adopted. However, due to the nature of the work undertaken here and the limitations of the data sources (detailed in chapter 2), as well as time and resource constraints, it was not possible to attempt a full analysis of all aspects of empowerment, connection and support as they are defined above. Rather, using existing data sources that were not designed to measure these concepts in full, this report provides a small insight on the selected elements of empowerment, connection and support for which suitable proxy measures were available.

Methodology

This chapter provides a brief overview of the technical elements of this research including the guiding research questions, the data used, the variables of interest and the analysis approach. It also details the limitations of the research and the resources being used. The level of detail provided here is kept purposely brief. Further information is in Appendix A.

Research questions

Three overarching research questions (with sub-questions) were used to guide the research approach for this work. The questions were devised through a consultative process involving the DSS and AIFS. It was agreed that the research would focus on using data already in the public domain.

Therefore, the questions were developed as a broad guide from which new insights could be obtained on a relatively under-researched area. This included exploration of grandparent involvement in child care, following (in part) from recent research undertaken by AIFS (e.g. Baxter, 2022) and others (e.g. Craig et al., 2025).

The research questions are:

1. What are the characteristics of Australian families with children aged 0–5 years?
2. How empowered, connected and supported are Australian families with children in the early years?
3. What are the enabling factors that support families to be empowered, connected and supported?
 - a. What are the predictors of parents' level of empowerment, connectedness and supports (for families with children in the early years)?
 - b. Are there differences between families' level of empowerment, connectedness and supports? Are these differences explained by factors such as gender, parenting role, geographic location, employment status (e.g. unemployed, part-time, full-time), age of youngest child, number of children in the family, family type (e.g. single parent vs couple parent) and mental health?
 - c. What is the impact of grandparent involvement in providing informal child care on parents' level of empowerment, connectedness and supports (for families with children in the early years)?
 - d. Is grandparent involvement in informal child care a protective factor for parents' feelings of empowerment, connection and support? Are there differences relating to characteristics such as parent's gender, employment status (grandparent and parent), family type, age of youngest child, number of children in the family and parental mental health?

Datasets

Several key national datasets were considered to address the research questions outlined above, with 3 main datasets ultimately used. All datasets that were considered had strengths and limitations, meaning no single dataset could be used to address all topics of interest. Furthermore, due to time and resource limitations, the datasets needed to be readily available, have adequate coverage of the Australian population, include data from recent/current years and cover a broad range of relevant topics. This limited which datasets could potentially be considered for inclusion in this analysis.⁴ The 3 datasets ultimately used for the analysis were:

- Census 2021
- Labour Force Status of Families (LFSF) 2024
- Wave 23 of the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia survey (HILDA).

Each of these datasets is detailed below including how each was used and for what. Three other datasets examined for their potential value to this research but which were not ultimately used are noted in Appendix A.

Census 2021

Census data from 2021 were used to address research question 1. The data were extracted through the ABS's online TableBuilder product. This dataset has the largest range of variables for examining characteristics and circumstances of children aged 0–5 years and their families in Australia and thus was the most suitable for addressing this question.

However, a key limitation of this dataset in Tablebuilder is that it is not possible to extract relevant family-level data. While data are available at the family level, this includes all families that have dependent children aged under 15. Corresponding data for families with children aged 0–5 years are not available. However, it is possible to identify all children aged 0–5 years and to then report selected characteristics of those children, including some characteristics of their family circumstances.

Labour Force Status of Families (LFSF) 2024

This ABS product is also available in TableBuilder and has been derived from the monthly ABS Labour Force Surveys. The most recent available data are from June 2024.

Unlike the census dataset, which is based on responses covering almost all residents at the time it was conducted, the Labour Force Survey is a sample of about 52,000 persons across 26,000 households and is conducted monthly.⁵ As such, unlike data from the census (which is reported as exact numbers), results from the LFSF are estimates only. Hence, for reporting here the results have been rounded as necessary.

⁴ For example, the recent nationally focused Parenting Today survey has around 10,000 responses and covers many topics of direct relevance to the research being covered here. However, data collection from this study was conducted during 2025 with results not available in time for inclusion in this report. For more information on this study see the Parenting Research Centre (2025).

⁵ For more information see ABS (2023a).

This dataset is also used to provide descriptive information for research question 1. It was deemed a useful source of information given that (unlike the census product detailed above), it does provide the ability to demarcate for analysis only those families with dependent children aged 0–5 years.

The limitation of this dataset is that it contains a smaller range of data than the census data. As such, it has been used here to outline the numbers of families in Australia and some of their characteristics including family structures, household compositions and the labour force status of the parents.

Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia

HILDA Wave 23 data were used to address research questions 2 and 3.⁶ HILDA is a household-based panel survey that contains a wide range of relevant material related to Australian households and families. It has been running since 2001 and the most recent data (Wave 23) were collected in 2023. The Wave 23 dataset contains responses from nearly 16,000 individuals across almost 9,000 households.

More than half the households have children in them. The range of data in HILDA is vast and includes several domains of direct relevance to the objectives of the analysis being conducted here, including:⁷

- parenting and child care
- family relationships and social networks
- social supports.

Population of interest

This research is focused only on the postnatal period (i.e. families with children aged 0–5 years). As such, all data analysed for this report were initially filtered to ensure that only those parents/families with children aged 0–5 years were included in the results.

Depending on the particular dataset being used (i.e. family-based or individual-based), those fitting these criteria could include:⁸

- parents with children aged 0–5 years living in the same household
- parents with children aged 0–5 years not living in the same household
- step- or foster parents of children aged 0–5 years who are living in the same household
- families in which a child aged 0–5 years is present.

Variables of interest

Analysis for research question 1 (What are the characteristics of Australian families with children aged 0–5 years?) is based on the census and LFSF datasets and descriptive in nature, reporting numbers and percentages of children and families in Australia. Topics covered in this section include:

- demographics (gender, age, country of birth, language and Indigeneity)
- geography (jurisdictions and remoteness)
- family and household composition
- health and wellbeing of children
- labour force and employment status.

Reporting of results for question 2 (How empowered, connected and supported are Australian families with children in the early years?) is also descriptive. Results from Wave 23 of HILDA are used to address this question. Specific questions from HILDA were identified to function as proxy indicators of empowerment, connectedness and support of parents of children aged 0–5 years in Australia.

⁶ This paper uses unit record data from Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey [HILDA] conducted by the Melbourne Institute and funded by DSS. The findings and views reported in this paper, however, are those of the author[s] and should not be attributed to the Australian Government, DSS or any of DSS' contractors or partners: doi.org/10.26193/NBTNMV

⁷ See Appendix A for more details of the HILDA dataset used and the variables used in this report.

⁸ None of these groups were disaggregated for separate analysis in the report (due both to the small size of the cohorts and limited time for analysis).

Given that HILDA is not a study that has been designed to address these issues in detail, the results obtained from these indicators should not be viewed as comprehensive coverage of the concepts of empowerment, connection and support. Rather, these proxy indicators serve as relatively limited insights to some aspects of empowerment, connection and support amongst parents of children in the early years.

Further, there is considerable overlap between the 3 concepts and thus the proxy variables could potentially apply to more than one concept (although for the sake of clarity, in this report we have only reported on the variables in relation to one concept). The full list of variables, questions asked of respondents, the available response options and specific details of the variables in the HILDA dataset are available in Appendix A. In summary:

- For 'Empowered', 4 parenting stress questions were used, with parents asked to either disagree or agree with the following statements:
 - Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be.
 - I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children.
 - I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent.
 - I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure.
- Two measures for 'Connected' were identified in the HILDA dataset, being:
 - In general, about how often do you get together socially with friends or relatives not living with you? (Response options were on a scale of 'Every day' through to 'Less often than once every 3 months'.)
 - What is your level of satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community? (Response options were on a scale of '0 = Totally dissatisfied' to '10 = Totally satisfied'.)
- The HILDA measures identified to address the concept of 'Supported' are a set of 10 statements to which respondents were asked to either disagree or agree on a scale of 1 = Strongly disagree to 7 = Strongly agree. They are:
 - People don't come to visit me as often as I would like.
 - I often need help from other people but can't get it.
 - I don't have anyone that I can confide in.
 - I have no one to lean on in times of trouble.
 - I often feel very lonely.
 - I seem to have a lot of friends.
 - There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down.
 - I enjoy the time I spend with the people who are important to me.
 - When something's on my mind, just talking with the people I know can make me feel better.
 - When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone.

For research question 3 (What are the enabling factors that support families to be empowered, connected and supported?), the analysis is more analytical, with a view to identifying factors that appear related to, and that potentially influence, the empowerment, connection and support variables noted above. The approach is cross-sectional in nature and draws on HILDA Wave 23 data to identify:

- differences in the level of empowerment, connection and support felt by parents from different demographic groups – according to gender, age, couple status and remoteness of residence
- relationships between the empowerment, connectedness and support measures and other factors that might potentially influence those measures. A range of variables were examined in this section, covering the following themes:⁹
 - labour force
 - education
 - family characteristics
 - health and wellbeing
 - lifestyle
 - grandparents' involvement in child care.

All the variables identified for use in this analysis are binary in nature and were chosen in part due to their availability in the HILDA Wave 23 dataset (not all HILDA variables are available in all waves of the study) and having sufficient sample sizes for the analysis (for various reasons not all respondents are asked or provide responses to all items).

⁹ For the full list of variables and their characteristics see Appendix A.

Analysis approach and focus

This report was undertaken as an exploratory analysis of issues relevant to the level of empowerment, connection and support among parents of young children aged 0–5 years. The focus of this was the analysis of HILDA Wave 23 data but is supported by results from 2 national-level datasets – Census 2021 and LFSF 2024 – to provide the descriptive context from which the HILDA data can be better understood.

Due to time and resource limitations, it was not possible to undertake analysis of the full range of HILDA variables available that may have been of interest. Nor was there capacity to undertake longitudinal analysis of past HILDA data to better understand the pathways parents had taken to their present circumstances.

The analysis undertaken was thus focused on 14 variables across the above 5 domains identified to cover as broad a cross-section of issues as possible within the time and resources available for the project. Depending on the nature of the data being used for individual analyses, statistical testing such as chi-squared and *t*-tests were used to both identify and measure the strength of any such relationships.

Research limitations

This report was undertaken as an exploratory analysis of issues that might be relevant to the level of empowerment, connection and support among parents of young children aged 0–5 years. As such, it was not designed to address specific hypotheses about the determinants of empowerment, connection or support but set out to identify areas of potential relevance and to flag issues that could be targeted for more detailed examination in future research.

Furthermore, the scope of this work is relatively limited due to its focus on just a handful of important national-level datasets, most notably the HILDA dataset. Although the HILDA study produces high quality and extensive data, it was not specifically designed to measure the concepts of empowerment, connection and support. As a result, the proxy measures used from HILDA only touch on a limited and narrow range of factors related to these concepts.

Furthermore, despite HILDA being a nationally representative study, the sample size of 16,000 persons from 9,000 households remains too small to enable detailed analysis of smaller sub-populations that may be of interest to the issues covered here – such as First Nations peoples or people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Due to time and resource limitations, it was also necessary to limit the analysis conducted with the HILDA data, with only a selected number of variables able to be reasonably included in the analysis from the outset. This limited the range and types of analyses that could be undertaken and means that the understanding of the experiences of empowerment, connection and support is also relatively limited.

For example, gender, primary carer status and age of parent are some examples of factors that could reasonably be expected to influence many of the analyses covered in this report but which have received only cursory coverage here.

However, with the knowledge from this report, future research could be broadened to include other variables of relevance and other datasets with relevant information (particularly more focused datasets for smaller sub-populations). It could also be extended to include longitudinal analysis to better understand how some of the relationships identified here emerged over time.

Future research that seeks to untangle such relationships – perhaps using multivariate regression techniques – would also be useful to identify issues that might warrant more intensive and focused research and, ultimately, policy interest.

Children aged 0–5 years in Australia and their families

This chapter addresses research question 1 – *What are the characteristics of Australian families with children aged 0–5 years?* – and presents results from the 2021 Census and the 2024 Labour Force Status of Families (LFSF) datasets extracted from the ABS TableBuilder.

The chapter has 2 sections (one focused on children aged 0–5 and one focused on families with children aged 0–5) and includes coverage of the total numbers of children and parents, the number of families, their geographical distribution and related demographic points of interest, such as gender, labour force status and family types, along with some trend analysis.

Key findings

- Despite the number of families in Australia increasing in recent years, the percentage of families with children aged 0–5 years has been falling.
- However, families with children aged 0–5 years are still a large component of the population, accounting for 18% of all families and almost 40% of families with dependent children (aged 0–24 years).
- The vast majority of families with children aged 0–5 years are mixed-sex couples (85%), living in single-family households (92%), with either one or both parents in employment (90%).
- While low in percentage terms, there are large numbers of families with children aged 0–5 years who do not adhere to the majority characteristics noted above. There are, for example, over 200,000 single-parent families (14.2% of all families), 14,000 same-sex couple families (1.1% of all families) and 80,000 families living in multi-family households (6.2% of all families).

Children aged 0–5 years in Australia

At the time of the 2021 Australian Census, there were over 1.78 million children aged 0–5 years in Australia (Table 1). The largest group was those aged 5 years with over 314,000 (17.7%), while newborns were the smallest group at 284,000 (15.9%). A steady decline in numbers from 5 year olds down to newborns is evident – which, in the absence of hard evidence, could be due to a range of factors including birth and death rates and in- and out-migration of families. In terms of their assigned sex at birth, males outnumber females in all ages, accounting for about 51% of the total children.

Table 1: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by sex and age, 2021

Age	Male		Female		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
0	145,654	15.9	138,154	16.0	283,805	15.9
1	149,137	16.3	141,225	16.3	290,362	16.3
2	150,575	16.5	142,002	16.4	292,577	16.4
3	152,159	16.6	143,233	16.6	295,394	16.6
4	155,802	17.0	147,354	17.0	303,154	17.0
5	161,661	17.7	153,112	17.7	314,775	17.7
Total	914,982	100.0	865,087	100.0	1,780,069	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Children aged 0–5 years in 2021 by location

In 2021, New South Wales (NSW) accounted for almost one-third of children aged 0–5 years with nearly 32%, followed by Victoria (Vic) with 26% and Queensland (Qld) with 20% (Table 2). The vast majority of children were living in major cities (73.5%), with inner regional areas accounting for the next largest group at 16.5% and progressively smaller numbers in more remote areas (Table 3).

Table 2: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by state of residence, 2021

	Number	Percentage
New South Wales	567,199	31.9
Victoria	456,040	25.6
Queensland	357,701	20.1
South Australia	114,687	6.4
Western Australia	196,955	11.1
Tasmania	34,432	1.9
Northern Territory	20,312	1.1
Australian Capital Territory	32,458	1.8
Other territories	293	0.0
Total	1,780,069	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Table 3: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by remoteness, 2021

	Number	Percentage
Major cities of Australia	1,308,437	73.5
Inner regional Australia	294,504	16.5
Outer regional Australia	136,950	7.7
Remote Australia	23,780	1.3
Very remote Australia	16,408	0.9
Total	1,780,069	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Children aged 0–5 years in 2021 by family composition

Over 81% of children aged 0–5 years, in 2021, lived within couple family¹⁰ arrangements (Table 4). A further 13% of children lived in single-parent households and 6% lived in 'not applicable' situations.¹¹

Nearly half of all children aged 0–5 who lived in couple families (47.7%) had one other dependent child aged under 15 years living in the family with them (Table 5). A further 26% were the only dependent child under 15 in their family and 26% had 3 or more dependent children aged under 15 in their family.

The percentage of children in single-parent families living with other dependent siblings was 37% living with one other dependent child aged under 15, 33% being the only dependent child living with their single parent, and 30% living with 3 or more dependent children aged under 15 in their family.

¹⁰ The ABS defines a couple family as: 'two people usually residing in the same household who share a social, economic and emotional bond usually associated with marriage and who consider their relationship to be a marriage or marriage-like union. A couple family can be with or without children. For a more detailed definition see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021c.

¹¹ As the ABS notes, a wide variety of living arrangements exist and therefore family structures can be complex and dynamic in nature. The quality of family data in the Census is dependent on people's ability to describe these relationships with the usual residence in the household. The definition of not applicable can include non-families or unclassifiable households. For more information see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021d.

Table 4: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by family composition, 2021

	Number	Percentage
Couple family	1,443,441	81.1
One-parent family	228,174	12.8
Not applicable	108,456	6.1
Total	1,780,069	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Table 5: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by family composition and number of dependent children aged under 15, 2021

	Number	Percentage
Couple family with: One dependent child under 15 years	380,994	26.4
Couple family with: Two dependent children under 15 years	689,049	47.7
Couple family with: Three dependent children under 15 years	273,891	19.0
Couple family with: Four or more dependent children under 15 years	99,508	6.9
Total	1,443,442	100.0
One parent family with: One dependent child under 15 years	75,595	33.1
One parent family with: Two dependent children under 15 years	84,467	37.0
One parent family with: Three dependent children under 15 years	42,540	18.6
One parent family with: Four or more dependent children under 15 years	25,576	11.2
Total	228,178	100.0

Notes: Due to the complexity of family living arrangements and associated reasons, not all children could be assigned by the ABS to a family composition group. This applies to over 108,000 children who are not included in Table 5.

Source: ABS (2021b)

Health and wellbeing of children aged 0–5 years

The vast majority of children aged 0–5 years in 2021 were not reported as having any long-term health conditions (86%) (Table 6). The most commonly reported condition was asthma (over 3% of all children in this age group). All other conditions for which data are reported had fewer than 5,000 children impacted.

Table 6: Children in Australia aged 0–5 by long-term health conditions, 2021

	Number	Percentage
No long-term health condition(s)	1,534,281	85.8
Asthma	60,782	3.4
Mental health condition (including depression or anxiety)	4,724	0.3
Heart disease (including heart attack or angina)	2,949	0.2
Lung condition (including COPD or emphysema)	2,722	0.2
Kidney disease	1,577	0.1
Cancer (including remission)	994	0.1
Other	45,494	2.5
Not stated	134,048	7.5
Total	1,787,571	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

In 2021 approximately 17,000 children aged 0–5 years were estimated by the ABS to be homeless or living in a variety of insecure housing arrangements, as detailed in Table 7. This includes over 12,000 children living in overcrowded dwellings and about 3,000 living in shelters for the homeless.¹²

Table 7: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by insecure housing arrangements, 2021

	Number	Percentage
Persons living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out	91	0.01
Persons in supported accommodation for the homeless	2,987	0.17
Persons staying temporarily with other households	910	0.05
Persons living in boarding houses	111	0.01
Persons in other temporary lodgings	187	0.01
Persons living in 'severely' crowded dwellings	4,702	0.26
Persons living in other crowded dwellings	7,788	0.44
Persons in other improvised dwellings	139	0.01
Persons who are marginally housed in caravan parks	204	0.01
Not applicable	1,761,251	99.04
Total	1,778,353	100.00

Notes: 'Not applicable' includes all children aged 0–5 who were not estimated to be homeless on census night.
Source: ABS (2021b)

Cultural background and language of children aged 0–5 years

Of the nearly 1.8 million children living in Australia in 2021, almost 6%, or over 100,000, were identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, while almost 90% were identified as non-Indigenous (Table 8). Over 77,000 children (4%) did not have their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status reported.

Table 8: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status, 2021

Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander status	Number	Percentage
Non-Indigenous	1,597,419	89.7
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander peoples	103,633	5.8
Not stated	77,302	4.0
Total	1,778,354	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Over 92% of children were born in Australia (Table 9). Those not born in Australia came from almost 200 other countries, with the largest share being from India (0.6%), New Zealand (0.3%) and England (0.3%).

Table 9: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by top 10 countries of birth, 2021

Birthplace of child	Number	Percentage
Australia	1,643,088	92.4
India	10,251	0.6
New Zealand	5,440	0.3
England	4,454	0.3
United States of America	3,667	0.2
China (excludes SARs and Taiwan)	2,944	0.2
Philippines	2,359	0.1
Pakistan	2,008	0.1

¹² For more information about how these estimates were arrived at, the definitions for each category and caveats related to data quality see: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021e.

Birthplace of child	Number	Percentage
South Africa	1,717	0.1
Vietnam	1,384	0.1
Other (includes 'not stated')	100,984	5.7
Total	1,778,296	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Just over half (51%) of children aged 0–5 had parents who were both born in Australia (Table 10). Both parents born overseas was the next most common situation with 26.6%, followed by one overseas-born parent at 17%. The most common birth countries of parents were India, China, England, New Zealand, Vietnam and Pakistan.

Table 10: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by country of birth of parents, 2021

Birthplace of parents	Number	Percentage
Both parents born in Australia	918,137	51.6
Both parents born overseas	472,856	26.6
One parent born overseas	302,481	17.0
Other	84,878	4.8
Total	1,778,352	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Over 71% of children were living in a family in which English was the main language spoken at home (Table 11). The remaining 29% of children were living in households spread across over 300 different languages, with the most common ones being Mandarin (2.9%), Punjabi (1.6%), Arabic (1.5%) and Vietnamese (1%).

Table 11: Children in Australia aged 0–5 years by language spoken at home, 2021

Language spoken at home	Number	Percentage
English	1,272,725	71.2
Mandarin	51,036	2.9
Punjabi	29,279	1.6
Arabic	27,203	1.5
Vietnamese	18,561	1.0
Urdu	13,187	0.7
Hindi	12,772	0.7
Cantonese	12,532	0.7
Spanish	11,364	0.6
Nepali	9,506	0.5
Other (incl. not stated (5.7%) and non-verbal (1.2%))	329,601	18.4
Total	1,787,766	100.0

Source: ABS (2021b)

Families with children aged 0–5 years

As at June 2024 there were 7.6 million families in Australia with almost half (46%) having dependent children in them (aged up to 24 years). When considering only those families that do have dependent children, families with a youngest child in the 0–5 years age range accounted for the largest proportion, with almost 40% (Table 12).

Over the 5-year period from June 2020 to June 2024, although the total number of Australian families with dependent children increased from 3.3 million to 3.5 million, the percentage of families with children aged 0–5

years fell from 41.6% in 2020 to 39.7% in 2024. Reasons for this finding could include shifts in birth and death rates during the period and the characteristics of families with children migrating into and out of Australia.

Table 12: Families in Australia with dependent children by age of youngest child, June 2020 to June 2024

	Aged 0–5 (%)	Aged 6–14 (%)	Aged 15–24 (%)	Total (n)
Jun-20	41.6	39.1	19.3	3.3 million
Jun-21	40.5	40.3	19.3	3.3 million
Jun-22	40.8	40.2	19.1	3.3 million
Jun-23	40.1	40.5	19.3	3.4 million
Jun-24	39.7	39.8	20.5	3.5 million

Source: ABS (2024)

Location of families with children aged 0–5 years

In terms of the distribution of these families across Australia, there has been minimal change over the past 5 years, with 31%–33% of families with a child aged 0–5 residing in NSW, 25%–26% in Vic and 20%–21% in Qld) (Table 13).

Table 13: Families in Australia with children aged 0–5 years by state or territory of residence, June 2020 to June 2024

	NSW (%)	Vic (%)	Qld (%)	SA (%)	WA (%)	Tas (%)	NT (%)	ACT (%)	Total (n)
Jun-20	32.9	25.3	19.6	6.4	10.9	2.0	0.8	1.9	1.4 million
Jun-21	32.0	26.3	19.7	6.4	11.0	2.0	0.8	1.9	1.3 million
Jun-22	31.9	26.5	20.2	6.4	10.4	2.0	1.0	1.7	1.4 million
Jun-23	31.5	25.5	20.5	6.9	11.2	1.9	0.8	1.9	1.4 million
Jun-24	31.6	26.0	20.7	6.3	11.0	1.9	0.8	1.8	1.4 million

Source: ABS (2024)

In 2024, almost 69% of Australian families lived in the capital city of their respective state or territory (Table 14). There had been little change in this ratio over the preceding 5 years. Excluding the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (which does not have regional populations) and the Northern Territory (NT) (data are less reliable), this capital city bias is most pronounced in South Australia (SA) and Western Australia (WA), both of which have 82% of families living in the capital.

Table 14: Families in Australia with children aged 0–5 years by capital city or balance of state, June 2020 to June 2024

	Capital city (%)	Balance of state (%)	Total (n)
Jun-20	69.4	30.6	1.4 million
Jun-21	69.3	30.7	1.3 million
Jun-22	68.8	31.2	1.4 million
Jun-23	69.3	30.7	1.4 million
Jun-24	68.9	31.1	1.4 million

Source: ABS (2024)

Parental structure and household type of families with children aged 0–5 years

In 2024, 85% of families with a child aged 0–5 were mixed-sex couples (Table 15). A further 12% were single females and 2% were single males. Same-sex couples accounted for the remaining 1%, with female couples accounting for nearly three-quarters of this group.

Table 15: Families in Australia with children aged 0–5 years by parental structure, June 2024

	Number of families	Percentage
Mixed sex couple	1.2 million	84.7
Single female	0.2 million	12.1
Single male	0.03 million	2.1
Female couple	0.01 million	0.8
Male couple	0.004 million	0.3
Total	1.4 million	100.0

Source: ABS (2024)

Over 92% of families lived in households containing just members of their own family (Table 16). A further 5% lived in households containing members of another family.¹³ Fewer than 3% of families lived in other household types.

Table 16: Families in Australia with children aged 0–5 years by household type, June 2024

	Number of families	Percentage
One-family household	1.3 million	92.2
Two-family household	0.07 million	5.4
Three or more family household	0.01 million	0.8
Other	0.02 million	1.6
Total	1.4 million	100.0

Source: ABS (2024)

Over half (55%) of all parents of children aged 0–5 years are themselves aged between 35 and 44 years, with a further 33% aged 25–34 years and 10% aged over 44 years (Table 17).

Table 17: Age of parents in Australia with children aged 0–5 years, June 2024

	Number of parents	Percentage
15–24 years	0.04 million	1.7
25–34 years	0.8 million	33.3
35–44 years	1.4 million	54.7
45–54 years	0.2 million	8.8
55–64 years	0.03 million	1.1
65+ years	0.009 million	0.3
Total	2.5 million	100.0

Source: ABS (2024)

Labour force status of families with children aged 0–5 years

Almost 90% of families (couples and single parents) with children aged 0–5 years reported having at least one of the partners in employment in 2024 (Table 18). Almost 9% did not have anyone in the labour force and almost 1% were unemployed families.¹⁴

¹³ The ABS defines a 2 (or more) family household as a household containing distinct, separate family units, where each unit is defined by 2 or more related individuals (by blood, marriage, adoption, step or fostering) living together in the same private dwelling. These families are identified and counted as separate entities within the same household, with each having its own family reference person. For further information see ABS (2014).

¹⁴ Those in the labour force includes both employed and unemployed persons (who are seeking work) while those not in the labour force refers to persons who for any reason do not have and are not seeking employment (e.g. retirees, some students or those with serious disabilities). For further information see ABS (2023b).

When demarcated by single-parent and couple families (Table 19), there is a clear difference, with only 53.6% of single-parent families reporting the parent as being employed whereas amongst couple families almost 95% reported at least one parent being employed, with most having both parents employed (68%).

Table 18: Families in Australia with children aged 0-5 years by family type and labour force status, June 2024

	Number of families	Percentage
Both employed	0.8 million	58.3
Single parent employed	0.1 million	7.6
Both unemployed	0.004 million	0.3
Both not in the labour force (NILF)	0.04 million	2.7
One employed	0.3 million	23.0
Single parent unemployed	0.006 million	0.4
Single parent NILF	0.08 million	6.1
Other	0.02 million	1.6
Total	1.4 million	100.0

Source: ABS (2024)

Table 19: Families in Australia with children aged 0-5 years by family type and employment status, June 2024

	Single parents		Couple parents		All families	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Both employed	n/a	n/a	0.8 million	68.0	0.8 million	58.3
One employed	0.1 million	53.6	0.3 million	26.9	0.4 million	30.7
Other	0.09 million	46.4	0.1 million	5.1	0.2 million	11.0
Total	0.2 million	100.0	1.2 million	100.0	1.4 million	100.0

Source: ABS (2024)

Empowerment

Parental empowerment is a broad concept and can cover feelings of personal control, critical awareness of parenting issues, interactions with the broader environment and parental control over the child (Damen et al., 2017). It encompasses, amongst other things, parents, caregivers and families having the skills, capabilities and opportunities to access the resources and information they need to enable their children to develop and learn during the early years (DSS, 2024b).

This section, based on analysis of HILDA data from 2023, provides some insights on how empowered Australian families and parents with children in the early years feel – whether certain groups feel more or less empowered – and identifies some of the factors that are related to empowerment. As noted earlier, the available data only addresses some aspects of parental empowerment as measured through a series of questions focused on experiences of parenting. Further research would be needed to address all aspects of ‘empowerment’ as defined by Smart and Strawa (2024).

Key messages

- In this report 4 questions related to perceptions of experiences of parenthood in the HILDA survey are used as proxy measures for empowerment. A fifth variable that aggregates responses to these 4 questions is also used.
- Parents of 0–5-year-old children participating in the HILDA survey ($n = 2,350$) had mixed perceptions about their experiences of parenthood.
- The majority of respondents indicated that parenting was ‘harder than they thought it would be’ (56%) and they ‘often felt tired, worn out or exhausted’ (59%) in their parenting roles.
- Most parents did not report ‘feeling trapped by their responsibilities as parents’ (75%) and only 20% thought that ‘parenting was more work than pleasure’.
- A relatively small percentage of parents (8%) answered all 4 questions in such a way as to indicate very low levels of empowerment. At the other end of the spectrum, the percentage of parents indicating they felt very empowered was also quite low (6%).
- Gender differences emerged as the most likely source of variation when comparing demographic groups. On the 5 empowerment measures used here (4 individual questions plus 1 composite measure), males tended to report more positive experiences of parenting than their female counterparts for 3 of the 5 measures.
- Parents living in regional/remote areas are generally more likely to agree that they ‘often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children’ than those living in major cities.
- Other factors that appeared to have stronger positive relationships with higher levels of perceived empowerment were:
 - being in full-time employment (compared to part-time)
 - having low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high)
 - not having a child aged 0–5 with disability or a long-term health condition (compared to having a child aged 0–5 with disability or a long-term health condition).
 - One negative relationship was detected across 4 of the 5 dependent variables. Those who had a university education were more likely to indicate negative experiences of parenting than those who had not been to university.
- Further research is required to better understand the relationships identified and the extent to which the variables identified as having associations with empowerment might be interpreted as protective or enabling factors.

Measures

Four questions form the basis for assessing the concept of ‘Empowerment’ as it is used in this report.¹⁵ The 4 questions are all similar in that they are inherently subjective and seek insights to experiences of parenting by asking respondents to agree or disagree to a series of negatively worded statements.¹⁶ All have response options on a 7-point Likert Scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ through to ‘strongly agree’.

As all statements are negative in nature, a response of ‘strongly disagree’ equates to higher levels of perceived empowerment and ‘strongly agree’ is akin to lower levels of perceived empowerment.

Figure 1 indicates that the distribution of responses varies depending on the specific variable in question. That is, the results indicated that people generally found parenting harder than they thought it would be and often felt tired as a result but did not feel trapped by it or think it was more work than pleasure. More specifically:

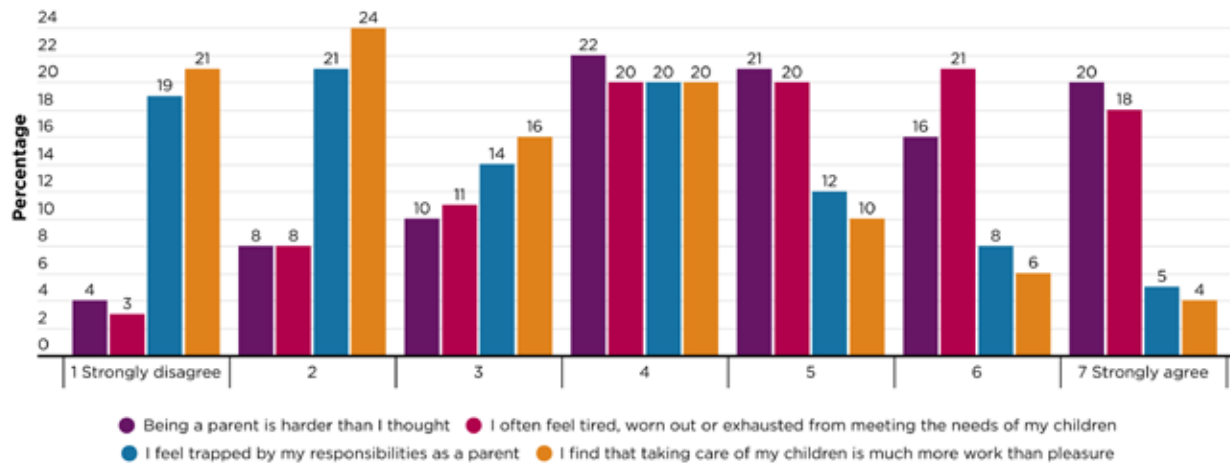
- ‘Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be’:
 - Over half (56%) of all parents agreed with this statement indicating that they underestimated how difficult parenting would be.
 - Only 22% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

¹⁵ See the HILDA Data Dictionary (hildaodd.app.unimelb.edu.au) for further information about all HILDA measures used in this report including the specific wording of the questions.

¹⁶ See chapter 2 and Appendix A: Methodology A for more information regarding the limitations of these measures.

- 'I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children':
 - Nearly 60% of parents selected 5 or higher in response to this statement indicating that most parents regularly feel exhausted due to their parenting role.
 - Only 22% of parents disagreed or strongly disagreed with this.
- 'I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent':
 - The 2 highest response rates to this statement were on the positive side with 61% indicating that they disagreed with this statement to some extent.
 - Only 25% of parents agreed that they felt trapped in their role as a parent (by selecting either 5, 6 or 7 as their response).
- 'I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure':
 - 54% of parents disagreed to some extent that parenting is more work than pleasure
 - 20% of parents agreed with this statement to a degree, indicating there is a sizeable minority who consider parenting to be more work than pleasure.

Figure 1: Distribution of responses to individual 'Empowerment' variables



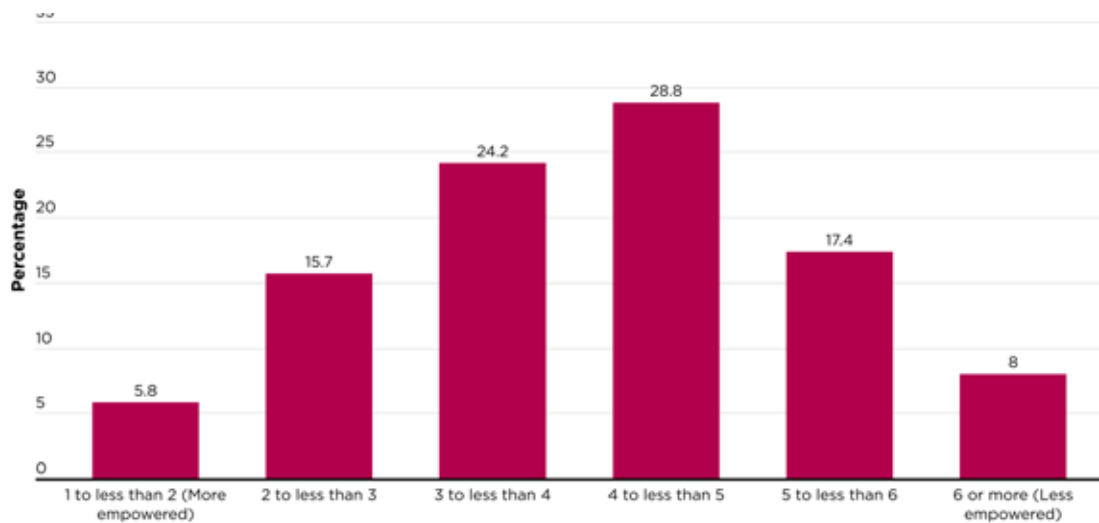
Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Aggregate empowerment measure

In addition to the 4 individual measures, a fifth measure was compiled by adding the scores of the 4 empowerment measures and dividing by 4 to generate a total 'Aggregate Empowerment' score (Figure 2). This combined score gives an overall sense of the level of empowerment among parents and a more holistic overview, given that the same group of parents answered all 4 questions but may have disagreed or agreed to different items.

Applying this aggregate measure, the majority of parents scored in the middle of the range, with 53% recording a score between 3 and less than 5. Almost 6% of parents recorded an average score of less than 2, meaning they strongly disagreed or disagreed with all of the statements and indicating high levels of empowerment. At the other end of the scale, 8% of parents scored at least 6, indicating they were less empowered, having either agreed or strongly agreed with all statements.

Figure 2: Distribution of 'Aggregate Empowerment' scores

Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Group differences

In this section, the 5 empowerment variables are assessed for differences when the sample population is demarcated into 4 key demographic groups – gender, age, couple status and remoteness of residence. For this analysis, only statistically significant results are presented. The full results, including all the non-statistically significant data, are available in Appendix B, Table 49 to Table 53.

Gender

Examination of results for the 4 individual empowerment variables detailed above but demarcated by gender reveals statistically significant differences for 2 of the 4 variables (Table 20). The variables with notable differences are 'Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be' and 'I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children.' In both cases, the differences are very highly significant with males tending to report more positive experiences of parenting than females. Interpreting these results is difficult given that no contextual information relating to original expectations of parenting is available.

Significant differences were not evident for the variables 'I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent' and 'I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure.'

Table 20: Statistically significant gender differences for individual 'Empowerment' variables

	1 Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree	Obs.	p value
Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be									
Male	4.8	11.0	14.1	23.0	20.6	13.2	13.3	893	0.000***
Female	4.0	4.9	6.1	20.2	21.4	18.2	25.3	1,107	
I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children									
Male	3.2	11.4	14.4	22.7	19.5	18.7	10.1	893	0.000***
Female	2.8	4.2	8.6	16.9	21.1	22.5	23.9	1,106	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). p values: * indicate a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

For the aggregate empowerment score variable, again, there is a statistically significant difference between males and females (Table 21); males are more likely than females to have scores indicating positive experiences of parenting with over half recording an aggregate score of less than 4 compared to less than 40% of females.

At the other end of the scale, almost double the percentage of females than males recorded an aggregate empowerment score of 6 or more, indicating less empowerment.

Given that mothers generally assume responsibility for the majority of child care duties and commonly carry the majority of the 'mental load' of parenting through planning and coordinating children's activities (Baxter, 2024), this analysis has been extended to encompass the level of parenting role as measured by perceived share of parenting¹⁷ (Table 22).

Indicated is a highly statistically significant result with those who report that they do more than their fair share of their children's parenting also tending to have lower scores on the aggregate empowerment variable than those who do less than their fair share. This trend is evident for both males and females but with the most notable difference evident between the 2 largest groups - females who do more than their share of parenting and males who do their fair share or less.

Table 21: Gender differences for 'Aggregate Empowerment' variable

	1 to less than 2 (More empowered)	2 to less than 3	3 to less than 4	4 to less than 5	5 to less than 6	6 or more (Less empowered)	Obs.	p value
Male	8.2	19.0	25.4	26.7	15.4	5.2	893	0.004**
Female	3.9	12.7	23.2	30.6	19.3	10.3	1,106	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). p values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Table 22: Gender and parenting differences for 'Aggregate Empowerment' variable

	1 to less than 2 (More empowered)	2 to less than 3	3 to less than 4	4 to less than 5	5 to less than 6	6 or more (Less empowered)	Obs.	p value
Males who do fair share/less parenting	8.6	20.1	23.9	27.9	14.8	4.7	788	0.001***
Males who do more parenting	5.1	10.2	38.2	17.5	19.6	9.3	101	
Females who do fair share/less parenting	4.5	14.8	27.2	32.1	13.7	7.6	331	
Females who do more parenting	3.6	11.8	21.1	30.0	21.9	11.6	773	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). p values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Age

The only variable for which a statistically significant difference is evident for age is on the aggregate empowerment measure (Table 23). This result should, however, be treated with some caution, given the lack

¹⁷ For this analysis the perceived share of parenting has been converted to a binary variable with those who reported doing a 'fair share' or 'less' of their children's parenting being 1 group and the other being those who perceive that they do 'more' than their fair share. Grouping 'fair share' with 'less' was necessary due to the numbers of females who reported doing 'less' than their fair share being too small for meaningful analysis.

of a clear trend in the results. All 4 age groups have scores in the middle of the range, tailing off with smaller percentages towards each end of the range.

Consideration of the mean aggregate empowerment scores for each group reveals a result of 3.7 for those aged 15–29, 4.0 for those aged 30–34 and 35–39, and 3.8 for those aged 40+. This suggests that those aged in their 30s are less empowered than those in the youngest and oldest age ranges. Further research is required to better understand this result.

Table 23: Age differences for ‘Aggregate Empowerment’ variable

	1 to less than 2 (More empowered)	2 to less than 3	3 to less than 4	4 to less than 5	5 to less than 6	6 or more (Less empowered)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
15–29	10.9	13.8	31.6	25.8	11.9	6.0	383	0.017*
30–34	4.3	14.9	25.7	27.1	18.8	9.1	605	
35–39	3.3	14.9	20.3	34.4	20.5	6.6	638	
40+	8.8	19.7	23.6	23.2	14.6	10.2	373	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Couple status

No statistically significant differences were detected when comparing the results of the empowerment variables by whether the sample parents were identified as single parents or part of a couple. This finding is somewhat unexpected given the statistically significant differences found in relation to levels of perceived connection and support between single parents and parents who are part of a couple (see below). It may be related to differences in the wording of the questions for empowerment compared with connection and support; that is, the empowerment variables ask respondents about their own parenting experiences whereas the connection and support variables focus on their relationships with other people and the community. Further research is required to understand this result.

Remoteness

Comparison of parents who live in major cities with their counterparts residing in regional and remote areas reveals a highly significant difference for the variable ‘I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children’ only (Table 24).

Parents living in regional/remote areas are generally more likely to agree with this statement than those living in major cities. This is despite a slightly higher percentage of parents in major cities selecting ‘strongly agree’ (18%) compared to regional/remote areas (15%). Reasons for why this difference has emerged are not clear and would require further research.

Table 24: Remoteness differences for ‘I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children’

	1 Strongly disagree	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Major cities	2.3	8.3	12.2	21.0	18.4	19.7	18.0	1,341	0.001***
Regional/remote	4.9	5.6	8.5	15.4	26.5	23.8	15.3	656	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

What other factors influence perceived empowerment?

The final section of this chapter considers the 14 independent variables previously detailed in the methods section and that cover elements of labour force status (4 variables),¹⁸ education (2), family characteristics (3), health and wellbeing (2) and lifestyle (2). For this analysis, mean scores have been derived for each of the above groups of interest and for each of the 5 empowerment variables (4 individual variables plus 1 aggregate variable), with *t*-tests used to identify differences that are statistically significant.

Analysis for the aggregate empowerment variable is presented first (Table 25) with results indicating that 7 of the 14 independent variables have a statistically significant relationship with this variable, of which 4 are very highly significant (***) and 2 are highly significant (**). The groups that have more positive attitudes towards parenting are:

- full-time employees (compared to part-time employees) ***
- non-university educated (compared to university educated) ***
- school education only (compared to post-school education) **
- small families (compared to large families) *
- parents reporting low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high distress) ***
- parents who do not have a child with disability or a long-term health condition (compared to those who do have such children) ***
- active members of clubs/associations (compared to those who are not active club members). **

Table 25: Mean 'Aggregate Empowerment' scores by selected variables

	Obs.	Mean	<i>p</i> value
In the labour force	1,646	3.96	0.107
Not in the labour force (NILF)	353	4.08	
Employed	1,588	3.95	0.083
Unemployed/NILF	411	4.08	
Employed	1,588	3.95	0.513
Unemployed	58	4.07	
Full-time employed	1,057	3.82	0.000***
Part-time employed	530	4.23	
University education	803	4.16	0.000***
No university education	1,196	3.86	
Post-school education	1,509	4.03	0.006**
School education only	490	3.83	
Does not have children older than 5	1,184	3.95	0.318
Has children older than 5	815	4.02	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	1,481	3.96	0.015*
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	458	4.13	
Parent(s) living with children <15 only	1,852	3.99	0.803
Parent(s) living with children <15 and other family members	76	4.03	
Low/moderate psychological distress	1,501	3.80	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	495	4.54	
Yes, has disability or a long-term health condition	243	4.14	0.053
No, does not have disability or a long-term health condition	1,755	3.96	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	1,891	3.95	0.000***
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	108	4.49	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	542	3.85	0.007**

¹⁸ As education level and employment status are predictors of income (Sila & Dugain, 2019; Wilkins et al., 2024), income itself has not been included as a variable.

	Obs.	Mean	<i>p</i> value
No, not currently an active member of a club	1,450	4.03	
Physical activity less than once a week	581	4.08	0.031
Physical activity once a week or more often	1,417	3.94	

Notes: Weighted means. A lower mean equates to higher empowerment. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Looking finally at the 4 individual empowerment variables, Table 26 provides an overview of the mean scores and the *p* values indicating a level of statistical significance for each of the 4 dependent variables. For brevity, only variables that recorded at least 1 statistically significant difference are presented here, with the full tables for each variable, including observation sizes, available in Appendix C, Table 67 to Table 70.

As is evident in Table 26, 12 of the 14 independent variables had a statistically significant difference for at least 1 of the 4 dependent variables. Of these, 3 stand out by having statistically significant differences evident for all 4 of the dependent variables. The most notable of these is the parental mental health indicator, which suggests a very highly significant difference for all 4 dependent variables, with those having low/moderate psychological distress being more empowered than those with higher levels of distress.

With 3 very highly significant differences and 1 significant difference, those in full-time employment stand out over their part-time counterparts as appearing to be more empowered. While the differences are not so notable, those who are in the labour force tend to report higher empowerment than those who are not in the labour force (NILF), and those who are employed are more likely to report higher empowerment than those who are not employed (unemployed/NILF). Collectively these results highlight the positive effect that employment has for the empowerment levels of parents of children in the early years.

Finally, parents who do not have children aged 0–5 years with disability or a long-term health condition emerged as being more empowered than parents who do have children with such conditions. While further research is required to fully understand the drivers behind this finding, it is likely that the health care challenges associated with treatment of children with such conditions would be difficult and tiring.

Table 26: Mean scores for individual ‘Empowerment’ variables by selected variables

	Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be		I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children		I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent		I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure	
	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value
In the labour force	4.70	0.026*	4.90	0.045*	3.22	0.694	3.01	0.404
Not in the labour force (NILF)	4.92		5.09		3.26		3.09	
Employed	4.69	0.014*	4.91	0.095	3.22	0.623	3.00	0.233
Unemployed/NILF	4.93		5.06		3.26		3.11	
Full-time employed	4.52	0.000***	4.70	0.000***	3.11	0.001***	2.94	0.036*
Part-time employed	5.04		5.32		3.43		3.12	
University education	4.93	0.000***	5.28	0.000***	3.35	0.015*	3.07	0.255
No university education	4.61		4.71		3.15		2.99	
Post-school education	4.77	0.175	5.02	0.000***	3.27	0.063	3.05	0.222
School education only	4.65		4.67		3.09		2.94	
Does not have children older than 5	4.71	0.344	4.95	0.766	3.23	0.924	2.94	0.010**
Has children older than 5	4.78		4.92		3.22		3.13	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	4.71	0.026*	4.94	0.041*	3.23	0.536	2.96	0.004**
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	4.92		5.11		3.29		3.22	

	Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be		I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children		I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent		I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure	
	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value
Low/moderate psychological distress	4.61	0.000***	4.79	0.000***	2.97	0.000***	2.82	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	5.15		5.40		4.00		3.61	
Yes, has disability or a long-term health condition	4.85	0.280	5.10	0.104	3.37	0.195	3.23	0.034*
No, does not have disability or a long-term health condition	4.73		4.92		3.21		2.99	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with a disability or long-term health condition	4.71	0.002**	4.90	0.000***	3.20	0.005**	2.99	0.003**
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with a disability or long-term health condition	5.25		5.52		3.70		3.48	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	4.52	0.001***	4.88	0.372	3.10	0.056	2.89	0.034*
No, not currently an active member of a club	4.82		4.96		3.27		3.06	
Physical activity less than once a week	4.79	0.476	5.02	0.160	3.35	0.052	3.17	0.007**
Physical activity once a week or more often	4.73		4.90		3.18		2.96	

Notes: Weighted means. A lower mean equates to higher empowerment. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Connection

Connected families are those that have links with extended family, kin, friends, other families, their community and the support or services they need, when they need them (DSS, 2024b). All families need such networks of trusted people and friends (Innis, 2014).

During the early years of parenting, social networks are known to be very important for good physical and mental health, as this is a life stage where many parents report an increased need for informal support (Andrews et al., 2015; Moore, 2019). With strong social networks, families can learn from the experiences of others, get help navigating challenges and feel a sense of solidarity (DSS, 2024d).

Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that parental social connectedness is linked to children's long-term wellbeing outcomes, in part because they have access to new enriching environments and social experiences but also due to their parents being better supported and therefore better able to parent (see authors cited in Andrews et al., 2015; DSS, 2024d).

However, as noted by Andrews and colleagues (2015), many parents, particularly women, may experience reduced social networks and even loneliness when their priorities change or they move to more 'family friendly' suburbs in the early years of their parenting journey.

Based on analysis of HILDA data from 2023, this chapter provides insights on the level of connectedness amongst Australian families and parents with children in the early years.

Key messages

- In response to the question of 'How often do you socialise with friends or family not living with you', the majority of respondents reported socialising less often than weekly (55%), while the most common single response was 'About once a week' (30%).
- On the other indicator of (perceived) connection – 'Satisfaction with feeling part of the local community' – the vast majority of respondents (76%) indicated some level of satisfaction, with only 10% indicating dissatisfaction (scoring below 5 on a scale of 0–10).
- Comparing demographic groups, there were no statistically significant differences for the frequency of socialising variable. However, differences were detected for 3 of the 4 groups examined on the 'Satisfaction with feeling part of the local community' measure:
 - Older parents were more satisfied than younger parents.
 - Parents who were part of a couple were more satisfied than single parents.
 - Those living in major cities were more satisfied than parents living in regional and remote areas.
- Other factors that emerged as related to both connectedness variables were:
 - education (higher levels of education were linked to more connectedness)
 - lifestyle (persons who were more physically active and/or more engaged in a local club or association were identified as more connected)
 - parents living only with children under 15 felt more connected than those living with other family members
 - mental health (those with lower levels of psychological distress felt more connected).

Measures

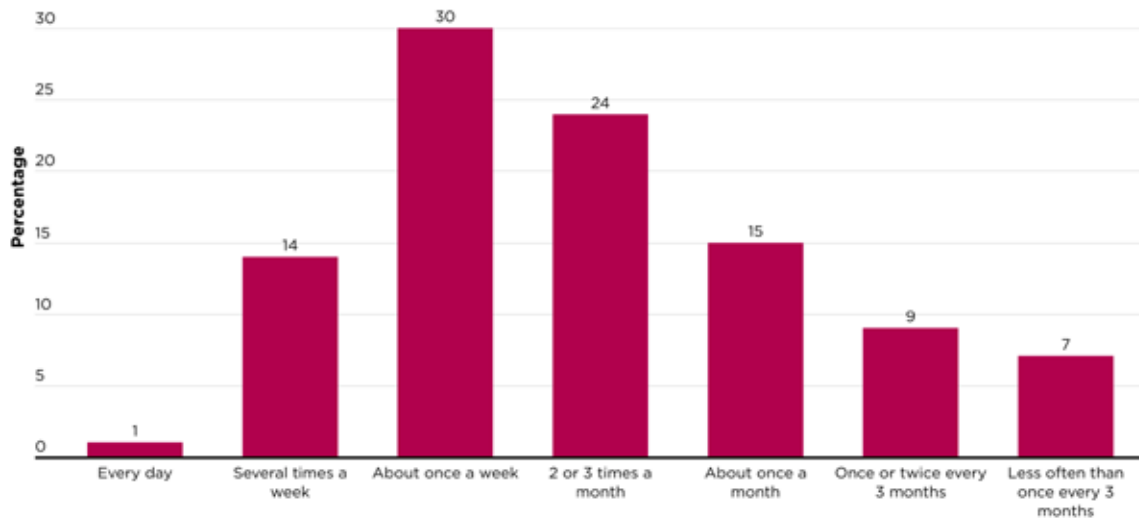
Two HILDA variables were identified to provide an indication of connection for this research. Each has results on a different scale and so they are presented individually here. Because of these different scales, it was not possible to construct an aggregate measure.

The first variable is the question 'How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you?', which provides an indication of the approximate level of social activity respondents engaged in. Response options ranged from a maximum frequency of 'Every day' through to a minimum frequency of 'Less often than once every 3 months'.

On this measure, the largest percentage of respondents (30%) indicated 'about once a week' (Figure 3). About 14% of respondents reported socialising more frequently than weekly and over half (55%) less often than weekly. Almost one-third of parents reported socialising only about once a month or less.

These results indicate that parents of children aged 0–5 generally socialise a bit less frequently than the broader population. Findings from the broader HILDA Wave 23 population indicate that 20.1% of persons socialise more frequently than weekly, 30.3% socialise 'about once a week', and just under 50% socialise less often than weekly (Laß et al., 2025).

Figure 3: How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you?



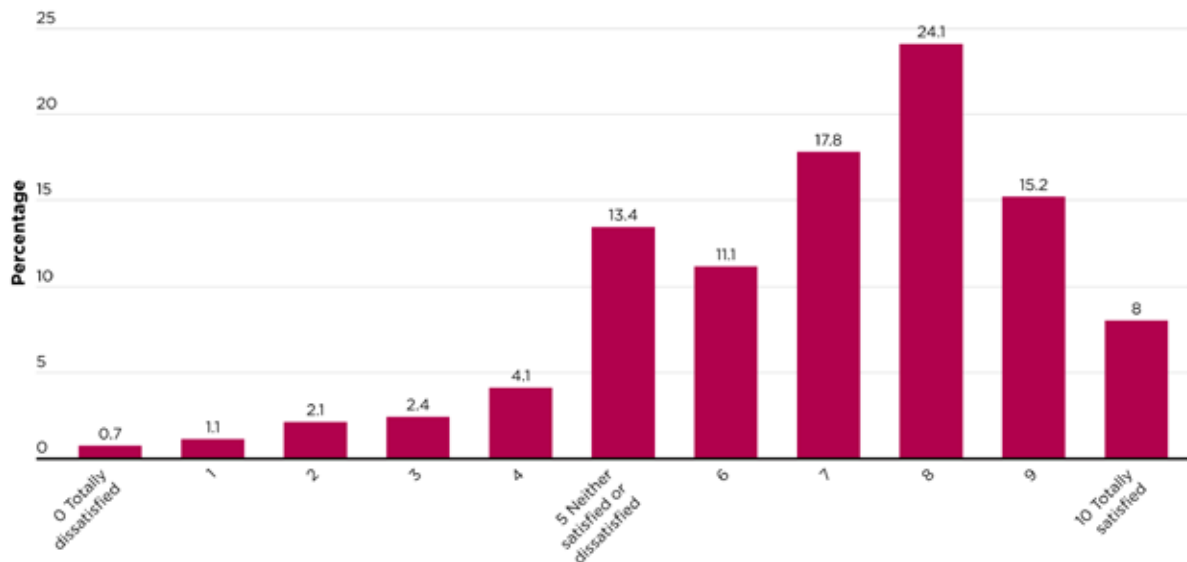
Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

The second indicator of connection is taken from a series of questions about how satisfied respondents are with various aspects of their lives. This question is related to 'local community' and asks for a ranking from 0 (totally dissatisfied) to 10 (totally satisfied) as to how satisfied they are with 'feeling part of their local community'.

As shown in Figure 4, the vast majority of respondents indicated a satisfaction level in the top end of the spectrum, with over 57% of responses in the range of 7, 8 or 9. Only 8% chose 10 (totally satisfied). Only 10% of respondents selected a score below 5 (i.e. a small proportion of respondents reported varying degrees of dissatisfaction).

Figure 4: Satisfaction with feeling part of your local community



Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Group differences

As was undertaken in the 'Empowerment' section, this section considers the 2 'Connected' variables and whether differences are evident when demarcated by gender, age, couple status or remoteness of residence.

For the group differences of the 'Connected' variables, only statistically significant results are presented here. The full results, including all the non-statistically significant data, are available in Appendix B, Table 54 to Table 55.

Gender

Unlike the results obtained when analysing gender differences for the empowerment variables, no statistically significant gender differences were found for 'How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you?' or 'Satisfaction with feeling part of your local community'.

Age

The only variable with a statistically significant difference when demarcated by age was 'Satisfaction with feeling part of the local community' (Table 27). While the results were variable at the individual score level, when considered overall, older parents appear to be more satisfied than younger parents in their perception of being part of their local community.

Further analysis beyond the scope of this report would be required to fully understand why this result has emerged.

Table 27: Age differences for 'Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community'

	0 Totally dissatisfied	1	2	3	4	5 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6	7	8	9	10 Totally satisfied	Obs.	p value
15-29	1.0	1.8	4.1	5.0	6.7	15.9	10.9	16.2	23.3	5.1	10.0	465	0.018*
30-34	0.6	0.6	2.2	2.1	4.9	12.9	9.0	17.4	26.1	12.8	11.3	712	
35-39	0.8	1.1	1.3	1.6	1.8	13.5	13.1	19.6	23.4	19.4	4.3	723	
40+	0.5	1.1	1.8	2.3	4.9	11.6	10.6	16.5	23.0	19.2	8.5	444	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Couple status

Parents who are part of a couple were more likely to be satisfied with 'feeling part of the local community', thus indicating higher levels of connectedness compared with single parents (Table 28). This relationship was found to be very highly significant, with over 76% of couple parents selecting a rating of 6 or higher compared to less than 56% of single parents.

Table 28: Couple status differences for ‘Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community’

	0 Totally dissatisfied	1	2	3	4	5 Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	6	7	8	9	10 Totally satisfied	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Single	0.7	4.1	6.8	5.3	12.4	14.8	9.3	13.4	15.4	10.9	6.9	240	0.000***
Couple	0.8	0.9	1.9	2.6	3.9	13.5	13.3	19.8	24.8	10.4	7.9	1,878	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Remoteness

When the sample of parents is demarcated by whether they live in major cities or regional/remote areas, there is only one statistically significant difference, being the ‘satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community’ variable (Table 29). On this measure, those living in major cities tend to be more satisfied than their regional/remote counterparts, despite a slightly higher percentage of the regional/remote group selecting 10 (Totally satisfied).

This may be reflecting findings by Andrews and colleagues (2015), which identified different types of social connections for parents depending on where they live and that those in outer suburban areas have more difficulty in establishing networks than those in inner areas.

While the differences between outer and inner suburbs are not likely to be the same as those evident between regional/remote and major cities, there may be similarities, particularly in terms of service provision, ease of accessing in terms of transport and other factors related to the broader environmental circumstances.

Table 29: Remoteness differences for ‘Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community’

	0 Totally dissatisfied	1	2	3	4	5 Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	6	7	8	9	10 Totally satisfied	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Major cities	0.5	0.9	2.2	2.3	3.5	13.1	11.5	18.0	23.4	16.8	7.7	1,558	0.050*
Regional/remote	1.3	1.7	1.8	2.8	6.0	14.2	9.9	17.2	26.1	10.0	8.9	781	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values with an * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

What other factors influence connection?

As was the case in the analysis of other influential factors in the ‘Empowerment’ section above, the results here are based on mean scores recorded for the 14 independent groups of interest and for each of the 2 dependent variables. Due to the different nature and scales associated with these 2 dependent variables, the mean scores are essentially opposite to each other in terms of connection.

That is, for the variable ‘How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives’, a low mean score indicates a higher level of connection whereas for ‘Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community’, a high mean score indicates a high level of connection.

Results are presented in Table 30 and on this occasion all 14 variables were found to have a statistically significant difference for at least 1 of the 2 dependent variables (see Appendix C, Table 71 and Table 72 for full data). The groups for which a **higher level of connection** is indicated on both measures are:

- university educated (compared to not university educated)
- post-school education (compared to no post-school education)
- parent(s) living with children <15 only (compared to parent(s) living with children <15 and other family)
- low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high distress)
- active members of clubs/associations (compared to those that are not active club members)
- participate in physical activity once a week or more often (compared to physical activity less than once a week).

Of these, it is the 2 education variables, the 2 lifestyle variables and the mental health measure that all stand out with very highly significant differences detected. Notably, a relationship with mental health was also found by Botha (2022) using the broader suite of HILDA data, with poor mental health being associated with lower rates of social contact.

There were 2 other independent variables for which statistical differences were detected for both of the dependent variables but for which the differences were not the same. That is:

- Parents who only had children aged 0–5 years were statistically more likely to have a higher level of connection than those parents of children aged 0–5 who also had older children when measured by the ‘frequency of socialising’ variable. However, they were less likely to report higher connectedness when measured by the ‘satisfaction with feeling part of the community’ variable.
- Small families were statistically more likely to have a higher level of connection than large families when measured by the ‘frequency of socialising’ variable but were less likely to report ‘satisfaction with feeling part of the community’ variable. That is, frequency of socialising does not appear to be associated with feelings of satisfaction with community engagement. Further research is necessary to explore the reasons underpinning this, particularly the type of socialising and why.

Table 30: Mean scores for individual ‘Connection’ variables by selected variables

	How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you?		Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community	
	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value
In the labour force	3.89	0.721	6.91	0.000***
Not in the labour force (NILF)	3.91		4.92	
Employed	3.88	0.350	6.94	0.000***
Unemployed/NILF	3.95		6.38	
Employed	3.88	0.130	6.94	0.001***
Unemployed	4.14		6.10	
Full-time employed	3.99	0.000***	6.91	0.405
Part-time employed	3.65		7.00	
University education	3.59	0.000***	7.22	0.000***
No university education	4.09		6.57	
Post-school education	3.83	0.001***	6.97	0.000***
School education only	4.07		6.42	
Does not have children older than 5	3.75	0.000***	6.75	0.043*
Has children older than 5	4.10		6.93	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	3.83	0.010**	6.81	0.007**
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	4.03		7.08	
Parent(s) living with children <15 only	3.86	0.026*	6.91	0.001***
Parent(s) living with children <15 and other family members	4.22		6.15	

	How often do you get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you?		Satisfaction with feeling a part of the local community	
	Mean	<i>p</i> value	Mean	<i>p</i> value
Low/moderate psychological distress	3.77	0.000***	7.08	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	4.25		6.05	
Yes, has disability or a long-term health condition	3.97	0.324	6.13	0.000***
No, does not have disability or a long-term health condition	3.88		6.93	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	3.88	0.100	6.87	0.000***
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	4.11		6.04	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	3.60	0.000***	7.46	0.000***
No, not currently an active member of a club	4.00		6.56	
Physical activity less than once a week	4.12	0.000***	6.55	0.000***
Physical activity once a week or more often	3.80		6.92	

Notes: Weighted means. For the frequency of socialising variable a lower mean equates to higher connectedness while for the community satisfaction variable a higher mean equates to higher connectedness. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Support

This third domain is focused on the issue of social support. Access to informal and formal support is recognised as fundamental to positive outcomes for both children and parents alike (Bailey et al., 2007; Dunst, 2023). The extent of social support available to parents and families has been found to be an important predictor of psychological and general wellbeing overall (Botha, 2022).

Having a network of support is recognised as an important protective factor that helps parents and families deal with difficult situations through connecting with people and services that can assist (Armstrong et al., 2005; Innis, 2014). Support networks can have a beneficial effect on wellbeing whether or not the person is under stress and can also protect individuals from the harmful effects of stressful events (Armstrong et al., 2005).

The nature of support, in general, can be information-based (general or specific), emotional or practical (Cochran, 1993) and can come from both formal and informal sources. Many parents, for example, will reach out to informal support networks to find information or get help and to learn from the experiences of others in similar situations (DSS, 2024b). Such networks can help parents gain the confidence and skills to help them feel more empowered in their parenting and to help their children build resilience and positive mental health as well (DSS, 2024d).

This chapter focuses on how supported parents and families with children aged 0-5 years are and identifies differences between the demographic groups of interest and other factors that influence support levels. The analysis is based on HILDA data from 2023. The measures of support are relatively general in nature without distinction made between formal and informal support or the type of support received (e.g. informational, emotional, practical).

Key messages

- For the most part, parents tend to report being well supported in their lives. For all 11 independent variables examined (10 individual HILDA questions plus 1 composite measure), the response distribution was biased towards the higher support end of the scale and, for most, the trend was extremely clear.
- The only measures for which the response distribution was closer to neutral were:
 - ‘People don’t come to visit me as often as I would like.’
 - ‘I seem to have lots of friends.’
- Amongst the 4 demographic groups examined, differences were most notable when comparing single parents and couple parents. For 9 of the 11 variables examined, couple parents felt more supported than single parents.
- Parents living in major cities also appeared to be more supported than those in regional and remote areas.
- Other factors identified as being strongly linked to higher levels of support included:
 - university educated (compared to not university educated)
 - employed (compared to unemployed/NILF)
 - low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high psychological distress)
 - not having disability or a long-term health condition (compared to having disability or a long-term health condition).

Measures

For the support domain, 10 individual measures were used in the analysis. As detailed earlier, 5 of these measures are based on negative statements and 5 are based on positive statements. This means that for the 5 negative statements a response of ‘7 = Strongly agree’ indicates respondents perceived low levels of support, whereas for the 5 positive statements ‘7 = Strongly agree’ indicates perceived high levels of support. For this reason, the 5 negative and 5 positive statements are detailed separately below for ease of interpretation.

Negative statements

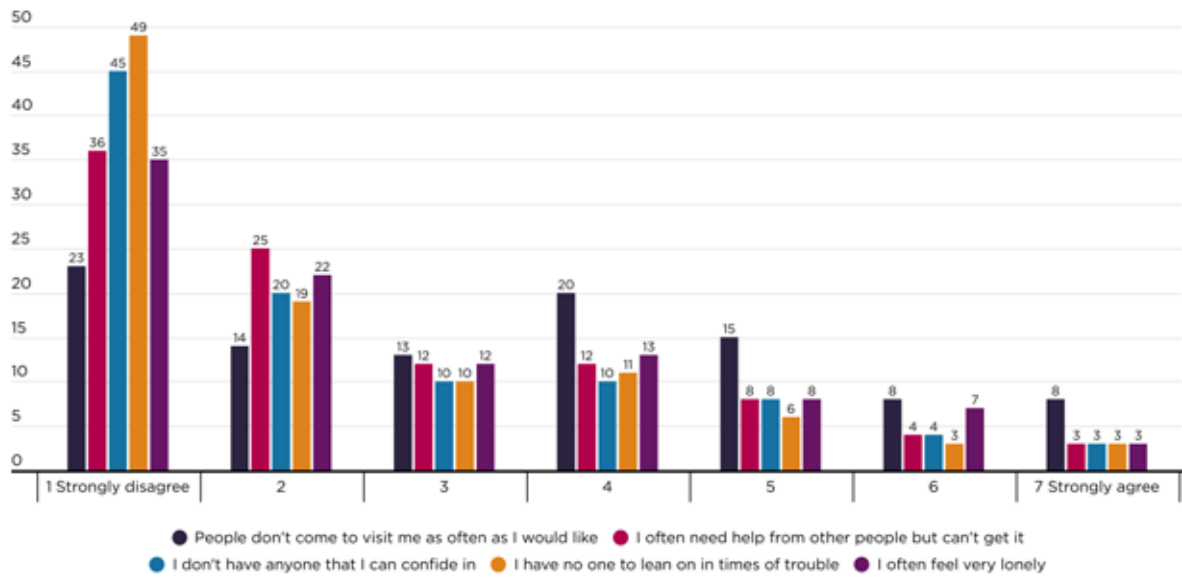
Response distributions to the 5 negative statements are detailed in Figure 5. In general terms, the 5 statements all have a similar distribution profile, tending towards the positive support end of the scale – in that most respondents disagree with these negative statements. Furthermore, for all 5 statements, the highest percentage of responses is ‘Strongly disagree’ and the lowest percentage is ‘Strongly agree’. More specifically:

- 78% of respondents disagreed (selected 1, 2 or 3) that they ‘Have no one to lean on in times of trouble.’
- 75% disagreed that they ‘Don’t have anyone to confide in.’
- 73% disagreed that they ‘Often need help from other people but can’t get it’.

These findings are consistent with research from the Parenting Today in Victoria study, which found that most parents (80%) report having someone they can turn to for advice when required (Kienhuis et al., 2022).

The one variable here, however, which stands out as being different is the first – ‘People don’t come to visit me as often as I would like’. For this statement there is a relatively large percentage at the neutral response of 4 (20%), as well as slightly higher rates towards the ‘strongly agree’ end of the scale than is evident for the other 4 variables.

Figure 5: Distribution of responses to individual 'Support' variables (negative statements)



Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

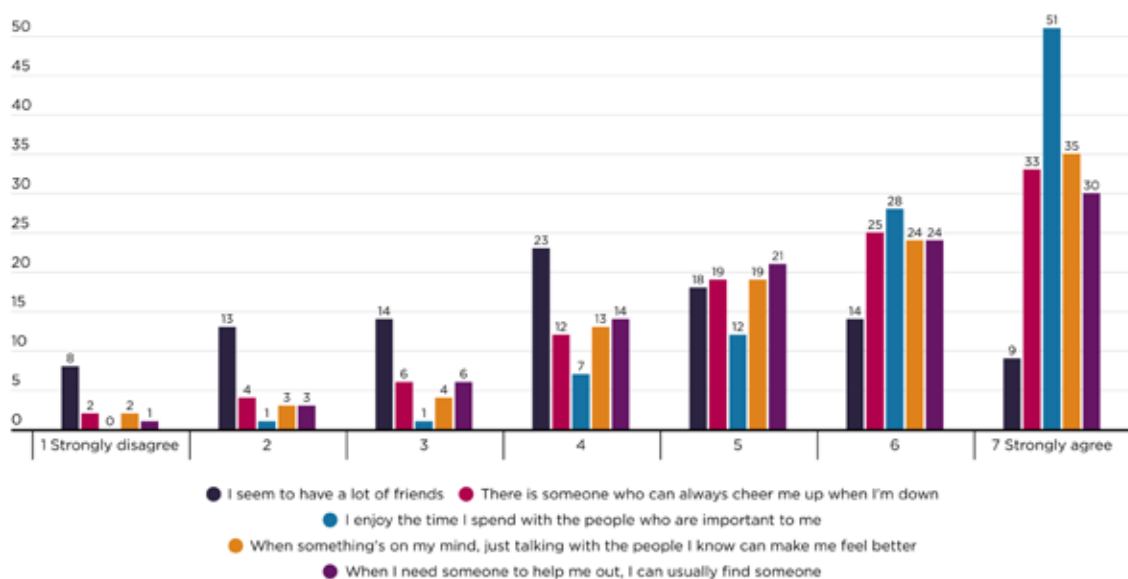
Positive statements

As was the case for the negative support statements, the first of the positive statements has a different response distribution profile compared to the other 4 statements. As is evident in Figure 6, the statement 'I seem to have a lot of friends' has a response distribution profile that peaks at 23% at position 4 (neutral) and then scales away gradually in each direction.

In contrast, the other 4 statements all have profiles biased towards the high end of the scale (7 = Strongly agree) before tailing away to very low response rates at the other end of the scale (1 = Strongly disagree). In particular, the item 'I enjoy the time I spend with the people who are important to me' had more than 50% of respondents selecting 7 (strongly agree) and a further 28% selecting option 6 and 0% of respondents choosing 1 (strongly disagree).

The other 3 positive statements had distributions very similar to each other with around 30% selecting 7 (strongly agree), gradually trailing away to 1%-2% selecting 1 (strongly disagree).

Figure 6: Distribution of responses to individual 'Support' variables (positive statements)



Notes: Weighted proportions.

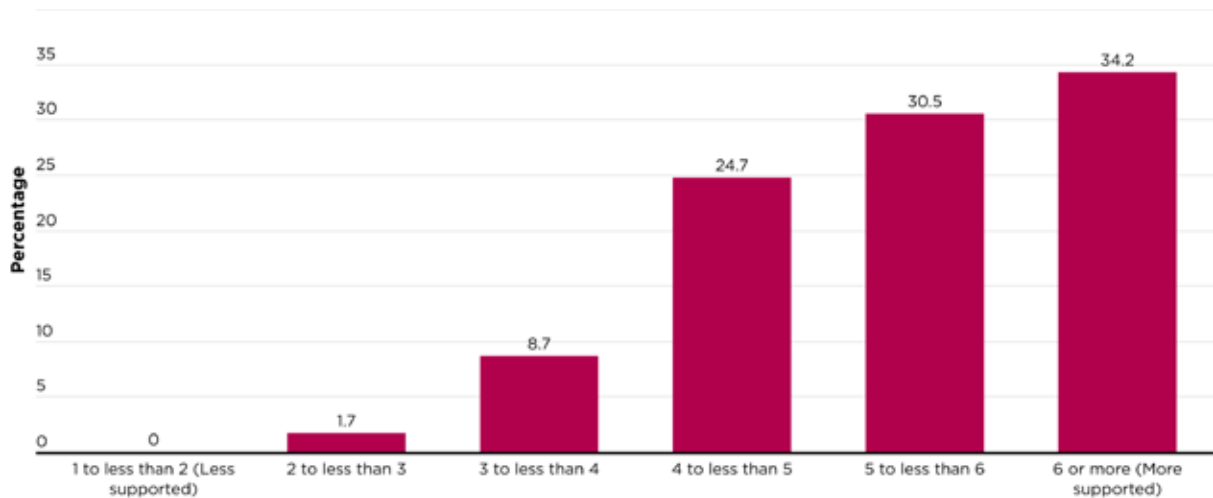
Source: HILDA Wave 23

Aggregate support measure

As for the 'Empowerment' domain, in addition to the above individual measures, a total 'Aggregate Support' measure has been prepared, combining the 10 individual items into a single measure. As outlined earlier, due to 5 of these statements being negative in nature and 5 being positive, to create this aggregate measure it was necessary to reverse the scoring on the 5 negative items to ensure that a high score for all 10 equated to higher levels of support.¹⁹

The aggregate result for each person was then divided by 10 to give a score out of 7. Results are presented in Figure 7 and highlight the generally positive results for the support items. Nearly 65% of parents have a support score of 5 or above (indicating they had high perceived levels of support). Only 10% had a score below the neutral point of 4.

Figure 7: Distribution of 'Aggregate Support' scores



Notes: Weighted proportions.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Group differences

As was the case in the 'Empowerment' and 'Connection' chapters, this section considers differences in levels of support by gender, age, couple status and remoteness of residence. Again, only statistically significant results for this analysis are discussed in this section. The full results, including all the non-statistically significant data, are available in Appendix B, Table 56 to Table 66.

Gender

Of the 10 individual support variables, 5 had statistically significant differences when results are separated by parent gender. Two of the differences are for the 5 'negative statements' (Table 31):

- Males are more likely than females to indicate they 'don't have anyone to confide in'.
- Females are more likely than males to report 'often feeling very lonely'.

¹⁹ This follows the approach used by Botha (2022), which also uses HILDA data.

Table 31: Statistically significant gender differences for individual 'Support' variables (negative statements)

	1 Strongly disagree (More support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (Less support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
I don't have anyone that I can confide in									
Male	38.2	24.4	9.9	9.2	9.1	5.8	3.4	956	0.017*
Female	50.6	15.9	10.1	11.5	6.2	2.8	2.9	1,137	
I often feel very lonely									
Male	38.0	23.7	13.0	11.9	7.3	3.8	2.2	957	0.034*
Female	32.4	20.6	11.0	14.5	8.9	8.9	3.7	1,138	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

For the 5 positive statement variables (Table 32), 3 are statistically significant with females indicating more support than males in the following 3 variables:

- 'There is someone who can always cheer me up when I am down.'
- 'I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me.'
- 'When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better.'

On all 3 measures, the strength of the statistical difference is high based on the *p* value being <0.01 and in the case of 'When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better', it is very high.

Table 32: Statistically significant gender differences for individual 'Support' variables (positive statements)

	1 Strongly disagree (Less support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down									
Male	1.6	3.2	8.0	13.0	19.0	27.2	27.9	957	0.004**
Female	1.8	4.4	3.2	10.7	18.9	22.4	38.5	1,137	
I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me									
Male	0.2	1.2	1.6	7.8	15.3	29.8	44.1	956	0.003**
Female	0.6	0.6	0.5	5.8	9.3	26.7	56.4	1,136	
When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better									
Male	2.3	3.3	5.5	16.0	22.5	22.8	27.5	957	0.001***
Female	1.2	2.8	3.1	10.2	16.5	24.2	41.9	1,137	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values with an * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Overall, with females reporting statistically higher levels of support than males on 4 of the 10 measures and males on only 1 measure, the findings here align with other research including:

- Botha's (2022) work, which found that females consistently reported higher levels of support than males in her analysis of 20 years of HILDA data
- results reported by (Kienhuis et al., 2022), indicating that mothers in the Parenting Today in Victoria study were significantly more likely than fathers to report having a 'trusted support person'.

Age

There are only 2 statistically significant results when demarcating the sample by age – one for a negative statement (Table 33) and one for a positive statement (Table 34). Collectively, the 2 results show that older parents generally indicated higher levels of support and/or less social isolation than younger parents.

Table 33: Age differences for ‘I often feel very lonely’

	1 Strongly disagree (More support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (Less support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
15-29	20.4	22.4	15.7	14.4	9.9	11.8	5.3	408	0.038*
30-34	38.1	24.5	9.7	12.4	8.5	4.8	2.2	635	
35-39	34.8	23.1	12.4	12.0	8.6	6.0	3.1	661	
40+	43.3	17.1	11.3	15.5	5.7	5.3	1.8	391	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Table 34: Age differences for ‘I seem to have a lot of friends’

	1 Strongly disagree (Less support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
15-29	17.4	15.6	16.4	24.0	14.8	5.7	6.1	408	0.027*
30-34	7.6	11.9	13.6	23.4	17.2	15.8	10.5	635	
35-39	5.7	13.7	12.4	19.8	21.5	17.7	9.2	661	
40+	4.8	12.9	15.6	26.6	15.5	13.6	11.0	391	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Couple status

Of the 4 sets of group differences examined in the ‘Support’ section, couple status clearly emerges as having the most statistically significant differences amongst the 10 individual ‘support’ variables. Of the 10 support statements examined, 8 have been identified as having a statistically significant association when assessed against the couple status variable.

That is, parents who are part of a couple tended to indicate they are more supported in their lives than are single parents on those 8 measures. This finding is in accordance with Botha’s (2022) findings from the broader HILDA dataset, which indicated single parents with children reported the lowest social support of all family types.

There are 4 negative statements (Table 35) and 4 positive statements (Table 36) with significant results. In particular, the results for the following variables are all very highly significant (i.e. showing parents who were part of a couple felt more supported):

- ‘I often need help from other people but can’t get it.’ (negative statement)
- ‘I often feel very lonely.’ (negative statement)
- ‘I have no one to lean on in times of trouble.’ (negative statement).
- ‘I seem to have lots of friends.’ (positive statement)
- ‘I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me.’ (positive statement)

The variables for which couple status did not produce statistically significant differences were:

- 'I don't have anyone that I can confide in.' (negative statement)
- 'When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better.' (positive statement).

Table 35: Statistically significant couple status differences for individual 'Support' variables (negative statements)

	1 Strongly disagree (More support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (Less support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
People don't come to visit me as often as I would like									
Single	11.7	10.9	14.2	18.1	16.1	11.5	17.6	206	0.011*
Couple	18.2	14.4	15.0	20.9	16.1	7.6	7.8	1,688	
I often need help from other people but can't get it									
Single	22.0	27.9	7.6	14.6	8.5	7.0	12.5	206	0.000***
Couple	33.1	27.0	12.0	13.7	8.2	3.4	2.6	1,690	
I often feel very lonely									
Single	13.4	14.3	18.3	13.1	14.4	13.1	13.4	206	0.000***
Couple	33.9	23.8	13.8	14.4	7.6	4.5	2.1	1,690	
I have no one to lean on in times of trouble									
Single	36.9	14.3	16.5	16.3	3.5	6.4	6.2	206	0.000***
Couple	48.1	21.0	8.3	12.6	5.4	3.0	1.6	1,689	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Table 36: Statistically significant couple status differences for individual 'Support' variables (positive statements)

	1 Strongly disagree (Less support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
I seem to have lots of friends									
Single	16.7	11.3	18.9	26.5	6.4	7.5	12.6	206	0.000***
Couple	7.4	11.7	16.3	25.4	19.2	12.7	7.3	1,690	
There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down									
Single	3.0	8.7	9.7	15.2	16.1	18.5	28.9	206	0.009**
Couple	1.7	3.1	5.6	13.5	22.6	24.0	29.4	1,689	
I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me									
Single	0.0	4.0	1.7	6.7	14.6	22.7	50.2	203	0.001***
Couple	0.3	0.4	1.1	7.9	13.0	28.8	48.5	1,690	
When I need someone to help me out I can usually find someone									
Single	3.2	5.2	11.3	20.8	23.0	12.6	23.9	207	0.002**
Couple	1.0	3.1	5.4	16.3	21.3	23.8	29.1	1,690	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values with an * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

For the aggregate 'support' variable there is also a very highly significant difference for couple status. This is unsurprising, given that this variable is derived from the 10 individual variables of which 8 produced a significant result for couple status.

As indicated in Table 37, over 31% of parents who are part of a couple scored 6 or more, indicating high levels of support as compared to only 19% of single parents. At the other end of the scale, almost 24% of single parents recorded an aggregate score below 4, compared to less than 11% of couple parents.

Table 37: Couple status differences for 'Aggregate Support' variable

	1 to less than 2 (Less support)	2 to less than 3	3 to less than 4	4 to less than 5	5 to less than 6	6 or more (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Single	0.1	3.5	20.1	31.1	25.8	19.4	202	0.000***
Couple	0.0	1.4	9.4	25.0	32.5	31.7	1,686	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Remoteness

Comparing parents who live in major cities with those from regional/remote areas resulted in 4 statistically significant differences out of the possible 10 individual 'support' variables. Table 38 (negative statements) and Table 39 (positive statements) report on the variables that have produced statistically significant differences, with those living in major cities more likely than those living in regional/remote areas to have higher perceived levels of support based on their responses to:

- 'People don't come to visit me as often as I would like.' (negative statement)
- 'I have no one to lean on in times of trouble.' (negative statement)
- 'I often feel very lonely.' (negative statement)
- 'I seem to have lots of friends.' (positive statement).

For all 4 variables with a statistical difference, it was those in major cities who appear to be more supported and in all 4 cases the differences were deemed highly significant with all having *p* values <0.01.

Table 38: Statistically significant remoteness differences for individual 'Support' variables (negative statements)

	1 Strongly disagree (More support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (Less support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
People don't come to visit me as often as I would like									
Major cities	24.9	14.5	12.7	19.2	15.1	7.2	6.4	1,398	0.006**
Regional/remote	16.4	12.4	14.6	21.4	13.7	11.1	10.4	693	
I have no one to lean on in times of trouble									
Major cities	51.2	18.1	8.9	9.4	6.2	2.5	3.8	1,396	0.007**
Regional/remote	42.3	21.3	11.6	14.0	4.3	4.7	1.8	695	
I often feel very lonely									
Major cities	37.5	21.8	11.7	13.1	7.7	6.4	1.9	1,398	0.002**
Regional/remote	27.8	23.3	13.1	13.9	9.2	6.6	6.2	695	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Table 39: Remoteness differences for 'I seem to have lots of friends'

	1 Strongly disagree (Less support)	2	3	4	5	6	7 Strongly agree (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Major cities	6.5	12.7	13.4	22.7	18.5	16.2	9.9	1,398	0.004**
Regional/remote	11.9	15.3	16.1	23.5	16.5	8.8	7.9	695	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Looking lastly at the aggregate 'support' measure, there is also a statistically significant difference when the results are analysed by the remoteness of residence of the parents (Table 40). With over 37% scoring 6 or more, parents located in major cities appear to feel more supported than their regional/remote counterparts (for whom only 25% scored 6 or more). The difference is deemed very highly significant with a *p* value of 0.001.

Table 40: Remoteness differences for 'Aggregate Support' variable

	1 to less than 2 (Less support)	2 to less than 3	3 to less than 4	4 to less than 5	5 to less than 6	6 or more (More support)	Obs.	<i>p</i> value
Major cities	0.0	1.5	7.9	24.2	29.0	37.3	1,395	0.001***
Regional/remote	0.0	2.4	11.5	25.6	35.2	25.4	689	

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted). *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

What other factors influence support?

Adopting the same approach as was undertaken for the 'Empowerment' concept, Table 41 details the mean 'Aggregate Support' scores and associated *p* values for each of the 14 independent variables of interest. For this analysis, almost all of the independent variables indicated a statistically significant association to varying degrees, with many having very highly significant differences.

The only 2 variables that did not have significant differences were 'full-time compared to part-time employees', and 'parent(s) living with children <15 only' compared to those who also live with other family members.

The groups that were found to feel significantly more supported were:

- persons in the labour force (compared to those not in the labour force)***
- employed persons (compared to unemployed/NILF)***
- employed persons (compared to unemployed persons)***
- university educated (compared to no university education)***
- post-school education (compared to no-post-school education)***
- does not have children aged over 5 years (compared to has children aged >5)***
- small families (compared to large families)*
- low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high psychological distress)***
- does not have disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have disability or a long-term health condition)***
- does not have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have a disability or long-term health condition)***
- active members of a club (compared to 'not currently an active member of a club)***

- participates in physical activity once a week or more often (compared to physical activity less than once a week)**.

In addition, those who have less than 3 children in their household were identified as tending to have more support than those who have 3 or more children but this difference was not to the same statistical significance strength as those detailed above.

Table 41: Mean 'Aggregate Support' scores by selected variables

	Obs.	Mean	p value
In the labour force	1,716	5.35	0.000***
Not in the labour force (NILF)	370	4.96	
Employed	1,654	5.37	0.000***
Unemployed/NILF	432	4.92	
Employed	1,654	5.37	0.000***
Unemployed	62	4.68	
Full-time employed	1,110	5.35	0.212
Part-time employed	543	5.42	
University education	820	5.55	0.000***
No university education	1,266	5.11	
Post-school education	1,565	5.35	0.000***
School education only	521	5.07	
Does not have children older than 5	1,243	5.37	0.000***
Has children older than 5	843	5.15	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	1,534	5.33	0.012*
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	468	5.19	
Parent(s) living with children <15 only	1,907	5.31	0.154
Parent(s) living with children <15 and other family members	82	5.14	
Low/moderate psychological distress	1,557	5.57	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	526	4.42	
Yes, has disability or a long-term health condition	255	4.84	0.000***
No, does not have disability or a long-term health condition	1,830	5.34	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	1,976	5.31	0.000***
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with disability or a long-term health condition	110	4.76	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	570	5.47	0.000***
No, not currently an active member of a club	1,510	5.21	
Physical activity less than once a week	609	5.17	0.002**
Physical activity once a week or more often	1,475	5.33	

Notes: Weighted means. A higher mean equates to higher support. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

As with both the empowerment and connection analysis, in this section we only discuss results where at least one statistically significant result has been identified. For ease of interpretation, the 5 negative statements are presented separately to the 5 positive statements. Full results, inclusive of the observations and those for which significant differences were not detected, are located in Appendix C, Table 73 to Table 82.

Turning first to the 5 negative statements detailed in Table 42, it is apparent that all 14 independent variables in the analysis identified a statistically significant association with at least one of the 5 statements.

As such, what becomes more important is to identify those variables for which there were significant results across all 5 negative statements. With this approach, it emerges that 7 of the 14 independent variables are in this category. In all 7 cases the differences indicate higher levels of support for the same groups, which are:

- in the labour force (compared to not in the labour force)
- employed (compared to unemployed/NILF)
- university education (compared to no university education)
- post-school education (compared to no post-school education)
- low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high psychological distress)
- does not have disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have disability or a long-term health condition)
- does not have a child aged 0–5 with disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have a child aged 0–5 with disability or a long-term health condition).

Of these results, the 3 that stand out through having very highly significant differences (p value <0.001) for all 5 of the negative statements are:

- university education (compared to no university education)
- low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high psychological distress)
- does not have disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have disability or a long-term health condition).

Table 42: Mean scores for individual ‘Support’ variables (negative statements) by selected variables

	People don't come to visit me as often as I would like		I often need help from other people but can't get it		I don't have anyone that I can confide in		I have no one to lean on in times of trouble		I often feel very lonely	
	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value
In the labour force	3.59	0.016*	2.52	0.000***	2.31	0.000***	2.14	0.000***	2.59	0.000***
Not in the labour force (NILF)	3.84		3.2		2.71		2.68		3.38	
Employed	3.59	0.015*	2.48	0.000***	2.27	0.000***	2.1	0.000***	2.55	0.000***
Unemployed/NILF	3.83		3.23		2.8		2.76		3.39	
Employed	3.59	0.53	2.48	0.000***	2.27	0.000***	2.1	0.000***	2.55	0.000***
Unemployed	3.73		3.41		3.31		3.29		3.49	
Full-time employed	3.64	0.087	2.47	0.618	2.3	0.208	2.15	0.024*	2.49	0.022*
Part-time employed	3.48		2.51		2.2		1.98		2.68	
University education	3.3	0.000***	2.32	0.000***	2.03	0.000***	1.88	0.000***	2.39	0.000***
No university education	3.85		2.84		2.6		2.46		2.95	
Post-school education	3.58	0.017*	2.54	0.000***	2.25	0.000***	2.12	0.000***	2.63	0.000***
School education only	3.8		2.93		2.75		2.58		3.02	
Does not have children older than 5	3.59	0.133	2.49	0.000***	2.26	0.000***	2.1	0.000***	2.66	0.029*
Has children older than 5	3.71		2.86		2.55		2.44		2.83	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	3.64	0.712	2.58	0.018*	2.31	0.057	2.15	0.002**	2.65	0.028*
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	3.6		2.79		2.48		2.41		2.85	
Parent(s) living with children <15 only	3.63	0.452	2.62	0.873	2.33	0.124	2.2	0.378	2.66	0.000***
Parent(s) living with children <15 and other family members	3.47		2.65		2.62		2.35		3.47	
Low/moderate psychological distress	3.4	0.000***	2.26	0.000***	2.08	0.000***	1.9	0.000***	2.26	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	4.34		3.76		3.25		3.22		4.1	
Yes, has disability or long-term health condition	4	0.001***	3.31	0.000***	2.87	0.000***	2.74	0.000***	3.49	0.000***

	People don't come to visit me as often as I would like		I often need help from other people but can't get it		I don't have anyone that I can confide in		I have no one to lean on in times of trouble		I often feel very lonely	
	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value
No, does not have disability or long-term health condition	3.59		2.54		2.31		2.16		2.62	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with disability or long-term health condition	3.6	0.001***	2.59	0.000***	2.36	0.021*	2.2	0.000***	2.69	0.000***
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with a disability or long-term health condition	4.21		3.58		2.73		2.77		3.47	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	3.52	0.089	2.38	0.000***	2.21	0.005**	2	0.000***	2.47	0.000***
No, not currently an active member of a club	3.68		2.73		2.44		2.32		2.83	
Physical activity less than once a week	3.72	0.167	2.70	0.332	2.45	0.21	2.31	0.181	2.89	0.007**
Physical activity once a week or more often	3.60		2.62		2.35		2.21		2.66	

Notes: Weighted means. A lower mean equates to higher support. *p* values: indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

For the 5 positive statements detailed in Table 43, the same approach is taken. Initially it is apparent that 13 of the 14 independent variables in the analysis resulted in at least one statistically significant result (only the comparison of families living with/without other family members does not).

However, of those 13 variables, only 4 have recorded statistically significant associations across all 5 dependent variables. The 4 groups for which higher levels of support tended to be apparent were:

- university educated (compared to no university education)
- does not have children older than 5 (compared to does have children older than 5)
- low/moderate psychological distress (compared to high/very high psychological distress)
- does not have disability or a long-term health condition (compared to does have disability or a long-term health condition).

Of these results, the only variable that stands out through having very highly significant differences (p value < 0.001) for all 5 of the positive statements is mental health, with those with low/moderate levels of psychological distress having very highly significant differences in their responses to all 5 positive support statements compared to those experiencing higher levels of distress.

Table 43: Mean scores for individual 'Support' variables (positive statements) by selected variables

	I seem to have lots of friends		There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down		I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me		When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better		When I need someone to help me out I can usually find someone	
	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value
In the labour force	4.07	0.000***	5.42	0.021*	6.17	0.102	5.47	0.967	5.48	0.000***
Not in the labour force (NILF)	3.48		5.21		6.06		5.47		4.99	
Employed	4.1	0.000***	5.44	0.001***	6.19	0.002**	5.47	0.826	5.52	0.000***
Unemployed/NILF	3.47		5.15		6.00		5.46		4.91	
Employed	4.1	0.001***	5.44	0.001***	6.19	0.000***	5.47	0.537	5.52	0.000***
Unemployed	3.36		4.77		5.64		5.36		4.42	
Full-time employed	4.15	0.081	5.44	0.925	6.16	0.127	5.36	0.000***	5.47	0.025*
Part-time employed	4		5.44		6.24		5.71		5.63	

	I seem to have lots of friends		There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down		I enjoy the time I spend with people who are important to me		When something is on my mind just talking to the people I know can make me feel better		When I need someone to help me out I can usually find someone	
	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value	Mean	p value
University education	4.31	0.000***	5.57	0.000***	6.22	0.030*	5.64	0.000***	5.64	0.000***
No university education	3.74		5.26		6.11		5.36		5.23	
Post-school education	4.05	0.000***	5.42	0.032*	6.18	0.076	5.51	0.033*	5.45	0.001***
School education only	3.71		5.26		6.08		5.35		5.2	
Does not have children older than 5	4.07	0.001***	5.46	0.005**	6.19	0.026*	5.53	0.036*	5.51	0.000***
Has children older than 5	3.81		5.26		6.08		5.39		5.21	
Small family (<3 children aged <15 in household)	4.03	0.011*	5.44	0.015*	6.18	0.493	5.48	0.734	5.45	0.012*
Large family (3 or more children aged <15 in household)	3.81		5.24		6.14		5.46		5.25	
Low/moderate psychological distress	4.2	0.000***	5.67	0.000***	6.32	0.000***	5.7	0.000***	5.68	0.000***
High/very high psychological distress	3.28		4.51		5.65		4.8		4.53	
Yes, has disability or long-term health condition	3.49	0.000***	5.01	0.000***	5.98	0.011*	5.24	0.007**	4.86	0.000***
No, does not have disability or long-term health condition	4.03		5.43		6.17		5.5		5.47	
No, does not have a child aged 0-5 with a disability or long-term health condition	4.01	0.000***	5.39	0.053	6.17	0.004**	5.49	0.059	5.43	0.000***
Yes, does have a child aged 0-5 with disability or long-term health condition	3.13		5.11		5.86		5.22		4.76	
Yes, currently an active member of a club	4.37	0.000***	5.55	0.002**	6.22	0.071	5.57	0.050*	5.57	0.001***
No, not currently an active member of a club	3.81		5.31		6.12		5.43		5.32	
Physical activity less than once a week	3.763	0.001***	5.285	0.070	6.061	0.017*	5.29	0.001***	5.276	0.022*
Physical activity once a week or more often	4.046		5.418		6.188		5.546		5.438	

Notes: Weighted means. A higher mean equates to higher support. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Grandparent involvement in parenting

Research has identified that grandparental support is a potential enabling factor for parents' wellbeing. For example, 40% of grandparents with grandchildren aged under 13 years in the Families in Australia survey indicated that they provided child care to grandchildren to support parents' work and/or for other reasons (Baxter, 2022). This finding included grandparents providing care to self-employed parents as well as providing 'flexible' child care around parents' shifts (Baxter, 2022).

Furthermore, other analysis suggests that grandparent support has a major impact on labour market structures in Australia as it allows parents to participate in the labour market (Craig et al., 2025). As such, interest in the role of grandparents in parenting was a central element underpinning this research, and the results are presented here separately from other potentially protective factors.

Key messages

- Almost 32% of parents reported having used grandparents to care for preschool aged children for any reason.
- Overall, the evidence suggests that grandparental involvement in child care may be a protective or enabling factor for the levels of empowerment, connection and support among parents of children aged 0–5 years.
- Of the 18 relationships between variables examined, 12 resulted in significant differences, all of which were in the connection and support variables; that is, parents who had used grandparents for child care tended to score higher on the measures for connection and support but this was not the case for empowerment. For example, parents who had used grandparents for child care:
 - more frequently socialised with friends/family not living with them
 - were less likely to report feeling lonely
 - were more likely to agree that ‘When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone’.
- Further research is required to unpack the relationships identified in this research between grandparental involvement with parenting and parental empowerment, connection and support.

Measures

Within the HILDA dataset, there is a wide range of variables that capture information about grandparents of participants’ children, including whether they have been used for child care, how much they have been paid for child care and the amount of time they have been involved in child care during the previous week. Each of the 30 grandparent child care variables is very specific and is based on combinations of whether:

- grandparents have been used, amount of time and costs
- children are school-aged or not
- child care is for employment reasons or not
- the grandparent(s) live in the same household or not
- child care is during school term or school holidays.

For the purposes of this report, it was necessary to limit the number of variables involved in the analysis. Therefore, one derived variable was prepared for this analysis:

- Grandparents have been used for child care in the previous week (includes grandparents who live with the family and/or elsewhere and for employment and/or non-employment reasons).

Although this variable provides some insights on the level of grandparental involvement in parenting for families with children aged 0–5 years, there are likely other ways that grandparents provide assistance that are not captured in these data.

Table 44 shows that more than 31% of parents of children aged 0–5 indicated they had used grandparents for child care in the previous week.

Table 44: Grandparents used for care of non-school aged children in previous week

	Used (%)	Not used (%)	Observations
Grandparents used for care of children not yet at school	31.8	68.2	2,087

Notes: Weighted proportions. Observations (Obs.) represent the number of participants responding to the item (unweighted).

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Relationship with empowerment

Table 45 presents results for relationships between whether grandparents have been used for child care or not and mean scores for the 5 empowerment variables used in this report. None of the analyses produced statistically significant results. That is, having recent access to grandparent child care was not associated with feeling more empowered (as recorded by these measures).

Table 45: Mean scores for individual 'Empowerment' variables by whether grandparents used for care of non-school-aged children in previous week

	Used		Not used		p value
	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	
Being a parent is harder than I thought it would be	584	4.74	1,230	4.79	0.607
I often feel tired, worn out or exhausted from meeting the needs of my children	584	5.07	1,229	4.96	0.161
I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent	584	3.26	1,230	3.24	0.894
I find that taking care of my children is much more work than pleasure	584	2.95	1,230	3.06	0.186
Aggregate empowerment	584	4.01	1,229	4.01	0.942

Notes: Weighted proportions. A lower mean equates to higher empowerment. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Relationship with connection

The same analysis for the connection variables revealed 2 statistically significant differences in mean scores and whether grandparents were used for child care (Table 46). On the first variable there was a significant association between having grandparent child care in the previous week and getting together socially with someone. There was a less strong but still statistically significant association with feelings of satisfaction with feeling part of the local community.

Table 46: Mean scores for individual 'Connection' variables by whether grandparents used for care of non-school-aged children in previous week

	Used		Not used		p value
	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	
How often get together socially with friends/relatives not living with you	600	3.63	1,265	3.98	0.000***
Satisfaction - Feeling part of your local community	663	7.02	1,419	6.82	0.034*

Notes: Weighted proportions. For the frequency of socialising variable, a lower mean equates to higher connectedness while for the community satisfaction variable a higher mean equates to higher connectedness. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Relationship with support

As in earlier chapters of this report, for ease of reading, the results here are separated into 2 tables - negative statements and positive statements. The 'Aggregate supported' measure is included with the latter, given it too has a positive association with mean scores (i.e. a high mean is indicative of higher support).

Looking first at the negative support statements (Table 47), there are 4 statistically significant differences, 2 of which are very highly significant and 1 of which is highly significant. In all 4 cases, those who used their grandparents for child care reported having higher support. The only variable without a significant difference is 'People don't come to visit me as often as I would like.'

Table 47: Mean scores for individual 'Support' variables (negative statements) by whether grandparents used for care of non-school-aged children in previous week

	Used		Not used		<i>p</i> value
	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	
People don't come to visit me as often as I would like	602	3.51	1,266	3.68	0.068
I often need help from other people but can't get it	602	2.30	1,267	2.77	0.000***
I don't have anyone that I can confide in	600	2.16	1,267	2.40	0.002**
I have no one to lean on in times of trouble	600	1.94	1,267	2.31	0.000***
I often feel very lonely	602	2.55	1,267	2.73	0.035*

Notes: Weighted proportions. A lower mean equates to higher support. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Turning to the positive statements (Table 48), statistically significant differences are evident for all 6 variables (the 5 individual variables and 1 aggregate support variable). In all 6 cases, those who had grandparents recently care for their non-school-aged children had higher mean scores, indicating higher perceived support. The 2 variables for which the highest level of statistical significance is evident are:

- 'When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone' (very highly significant)
- Aggregate support (very highly significant).

Table 48: Mean scores for individual 'Support' variables (positive statements) and 'Aggregate Support' by whether grandparents used for care of non-school-aged children in previous week

	Used		Not used		<i>p</i> value
	Obs.	Mean	Obs.	Mean	
I seem to have a lot of friends	602	4.11	1,267	3.91	0.021*
There is someone who can always cheer me up when I'm down	602	5.53	1,266	5.35	0.021*
I enjoy the time I spend with the people who are important to me	601	6.26	1,266	6.12	0.011*
When something's on my mind, just talking with the people I know can make me feel better	602	5.59	1,266	5.42	0.016*
When I need someone to help me out, I can usually find someone	602	5.66	1,268	5.30	0.000***
Aggregate support	599	5.48	1,263	5.23	0.000***

Notes: Weighted proportions. A higher mean equates to higher support. *p* values: * indicates a statistically significant difference, ** indicates highly significant difference and *** indicates a very highly significant difference.

Source: HILDA Wave 23

Summary and discussion

Ideally, every Australian child should have a strong start in life, thrive in their early years and have the opportunity to reach their full potential, nurtured by empowered and connected families who are supported by strong communities (DSS, 2024b).

It is widely acknowledged that supporting parents in their role is fundamental to improving child outcomes (Kienhuis et. al., 2022). Family environments are a vital area for understanding child and parent wellbeing across the life span (Repetti, 2002).

Understanding parents' needs and experiences, particularly in the early years, has an important role to play in informing policies, programs and services aiming to improve child outcomes in the short and long term (Kienhuis et. al., 2022).

Through analysis of ABS and HILDA Wave 23 data, this report helps to further build our understanding of families with children aged 0–5 years in Australia and the extent to which parents are empowered, connected and supported.

Families with children aged 0–5 years in Australia

Analysis of 2 major ABS datasets showed that families with children aged 0–5 years have a diverse range of characteristics and are a significant (but shrinking) component of the Australian population. While most of these families are mixed-sex couples with children who live in capital cities in single family households, there are large numbers of families with children aged 0–5 years living in other circumstances. This includes over 200,000 single-parent families (14.2%), 14,000 same-sex couple families (1.1%) and 80,000 families living in multi-family households (6.2%).

Across this diversity of family types there exists a wide range of other circumstances overlaying the above demographic characteristics that may affect the wellbeing of families, such as employment, income and health issues. Although not fully explored in this report, the circumstances of families in Australia are clearly very diverse for parents and children alike, and their experiences will likely be similarly varied, ranging from very positive to very negative.

Empowerment, connection and support

This diversity of family experience in the early years has partially been examined in this report through analysis of HILDA Wave 23 data, specifically in relation to experiences of empowerment, connection and support for parents of children aged 0–5 years. The analysis indicated that Australian parents had mixed experiences of parenthood and family life.

In terms of empowerment, while most parents did not ‘feel trapped’ in their role as parents, many had underestimated how difficult it would be. Females, in particular, appeared to feel less empowered than their male parent counterparts, which may be due to mothers generally absorbing a much greater proportion of parenting responsibilities than fathers (Baxter, 2024).

Overall, most parents appeared to be generally satisfied with their levels of social contact and support in their communities. In contrast to levels of empowerment, there were no notable differences between males and females when examining levels of connection and support. Instead, there was a significant difference between parents who were part of a couple and single parents, with those in couple relationships having higher rates of both perceived connection and support than single parents.

Factors related to empowerment, connection and support

Looking to other issues that appear related to higher levels of empowerment, connection and support, the lone independent variable that had an association with every dependent variable examined in the empowerment, connection and support chapters was the level of psychological distress. Parents with low/moderate levels of psychological distress reported feeling more empowered, connected and supported than those with higher distress on every measure examined.

Other independent variables that regularly emerged as having positive associations with many of the dependent variables examined were:

- not having children with disability or a long-term health condition
- not being a parent with disability or a long-term health condition
- being in the labour force and employed (full-time employment was important for empowerment but less so for connection and support)
- being an active member of a club or association.

The above factors were identified as consistently having statistically significant relationships with all 3 of the core themes examined – empowerment, connection and support – sometimes across multiple dependent variables. That is, parents with fewer personal health challenges who were in employment, active members of clubs and who did not have children with disabilities or long-term health conditions had more positive perceived parenting experiences, support and social connection. Correspondingly, those who were dealing with health issues (either

for themselves or their children), who did not have employment and did not engage with local clubs and associations tended to indicate more difficulties or challenges through their responses.

The 2 family-related variables (does/does not have children older than 5; small/large family) also emerged on several occasions as having a relationship with some of the individual variables. Most notable were:

- Those with smaller families (<3 dependent children aged under 15) reported better results on several of the perceived empowerment measures than those with larger families.
- Parents who did not have children aged over 5 years tended to report higher levels of support than did those who did have children aged over 5 years.

There was also some limited evidence in the analysis to suggest that grandparent involvement in child care may be an enabling factor in relation to feelings of connection and support for parents with children in the early years but this was not evident for the empowerment variables examined.

One set of independent variables that showed conflicting results was those related to education. While having higher levels of education, particularly university education, was found to be positively associated with most connection and support measures, the opposite was the case for empowerment. That is, those who had lower levels of education tended to report more positive experiences of parenting than those with higher levels of education.

Further research is needed to better understand the drivers behind this and, indeed, all of the findings noted in this report. As is always the case, there can be several reasons for why associations between independent and dependent variables are identified in survey research, including that the results may simply be an artefact of the questions and resultant data used.

Policy implications

Despite the clear limitations of the ABS and HILDA datasets for advancing our understanding of empowerment, connection and support for parents with children aged 0–5 years in Australia, the results detailed here do provide some insights for policy consideration.

In particular, this report provides evidence that may inform thinking on the future design and delivery of policies, programs and services to support children and families in the early years. It also highlights particular groups of parents and families who had lower perceived levels of empowerment (noting the limitations of the available data on this concept), connection and support, indicating that these groups may benefit from additional or more targeted support to assist them in their parenting role.

Although the analysed measures do not necessarily map directly to either parental wellbeing or child outcomes, they do indicate that there are some groups of parents who may find parenting in the early years more challenging than others and/or feel less able to access supports, which may have flow-on consequences for child and family wellbeing over the longer-term (Farewell et al., 2022; Schuijers et al., 2024).

Of particular note was the finding that parents experiencing higher levels of psychological distress consistently had lower perceived levels of empowerment, connection and support than did other parents. This highlights the importance of investing in high-quality prevention and early intervention activities to ensure parents with children aged 0–5 years who may need additional support are identified as early as possible and referred to more specialised services and supports, preventing the further escalation of risk over time. As noted in Truong and Gahan (2026), research consistently highlights the importance of positive parental wellbeing, which, in turn, can positively contribute to child outcomes.

Similarly, parents coping with either their own or their child's other health challenges (including disability or long-term health conditions) were also identified in the analysis as having lower levels of perceived empowerment, connection and support. This highlights the need for ongoing investment in high-quality, evidence-based early intervention services for young children with disability and/or developmental delay, alongside wraparound supports for their families to ensure they are adequately supported in their parenting role.

Single parents also emerged as a group who tended to report lower levels of empowerment, connection and support than those in 2-parent households and, as such, are another priority group that may benefit from additional support. Further research and evaluation are required to identify what supports are most effective for improving the wellbeing of single-parent families.

Furthermore, policies and programs that seek to help fathers in their parenting role are also supported by the results here. Mothers of children aged 0–5 years in the HILDA data tended to indicate more challenges in parenting or to find parenting more tiring or stressful than did fathers. The HILDA data does not in itself explain these differences but the broader research on parenting suggests that these results may be related to mothers still tending to take on a greater share of the parenting role – both in terms of practical tasks and the cognitive load of making decisions about parenting (Baxter, 2024).

This suggests a need for initiatives that encourage and enable fathers to take on a more central role in parenting and for more father-inclusive and encouraging practices within both general services and family-specific services.²⁰ This, in turn, may have a positive effect on mothers' perceptions of parenting challenges and parenting stresses.

Another area that may warrant further exploration is the issue of grandparent child care, particularly given this research identified links between labour market participation/employment and perceived levels of parental empowerment, connection and support. That is, while grandparental child care is not an option for all parents (e.g. due to distance issues), as Baxter (2022) notes, when it is available, parents with grandparent support generally felt better about parenting (or less stressed) and grandparents themselves were also found to value this role.

This indicates that having informal child care support can help parents to feel more empowered, connected and supported, and may also help parents enter or remain in employment – which, in turn, the data indicate can have positive effects on parental wellbeing. As such, it may be worth further exploring how informal grandparent child care fits with more formal early childhood education and care arrangements, and how grandparents may be better supported in this role.

Conclusion

Ultimately, further research is required to better understand the drivers of the relationships identified in this report, and the extent to which they might be interpreted as protective or enabling factors that could inform the development and implementation of policies, programs and services to support children and families in the early years.

Such research should seek to expand on the narrow range of measures employed here and could also be extended to other datasets, particularly with a view to understanding how some of the issues identified here may apply to smaller subpopulations – such as First Nations families with children aged 0–5 years.

Further, while this analysis has been limited to families with children aged 0–5 years, comparisons with other types of families might be helpful in understanding specific needs and experiences of families in the early years (e.g. compared to those with older children).

In addition, all of the selected measures of empowered, connected and supported are available in multiple waves of HILDA. A comparison of multiple waves could be useful for exploring trends and changes over time.

²⁰ Examples of such initiatives are highlighted in Hall et al. (2024).

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