



Back to School 2022:

The Mental Health and Wellbeing Impact on Children in America

Research Brief

October 2022



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DotCom Therapy

Children in America were increasingly facing mental health challenges before COVID-19, but the impact of the pandemic intensified and accelerated the struggle for many families nationwide. As a result, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP) and the Children's Hospital Association (CHA) joined together in October 2021 to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health.

At the same time these leading pediatric healthcare organizations issued this stark warning and call to action, many children in America had just returned to school to begin their first full year of in-person learning since March 2020, marking a critical turning point in the pandemic. While masking and other restrictions remained at the beginning of the school year, getting back to school in person enabled children to start resuming critical social interactions – with peers, teachers, counselors and others – that are fundamental to their mental health and development.

In September 2021, just weeks after most children in the United States had physically returned to school, DotCom Therapy conducted its first back to school survey of parents across the country to gauge their view of the pandemic's impact on mental health and how children had adapted to re-entering school after more than a year of tumultuous change.

One year later, this survey and report continues that assessment, gathering views from parents across the country about the current state of children's mental health now that nearly all pandemic-era restrictions have subsided. This survey was conducted in August 2022, as most families in America were returning or preparing to return to school, and explores a wide range of issues impacting pediatric mental health – from the lasting impacts of the pandemic, to concerns around school safety that only continue to grow.

This survey queried 1,121 U.S. parents of children between the ages of five and 18. Their responses demonstrate five key findings highlighted in this report.



Key Findings

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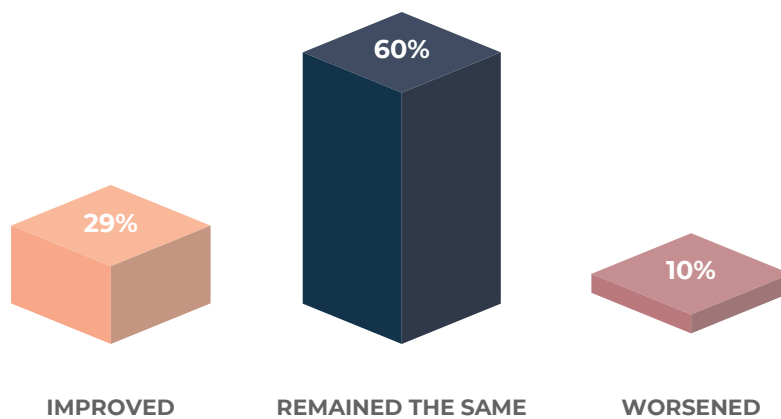
THE CRISIS MAY BE
STABILIZING, BUT IT'S STILL A CRISIS



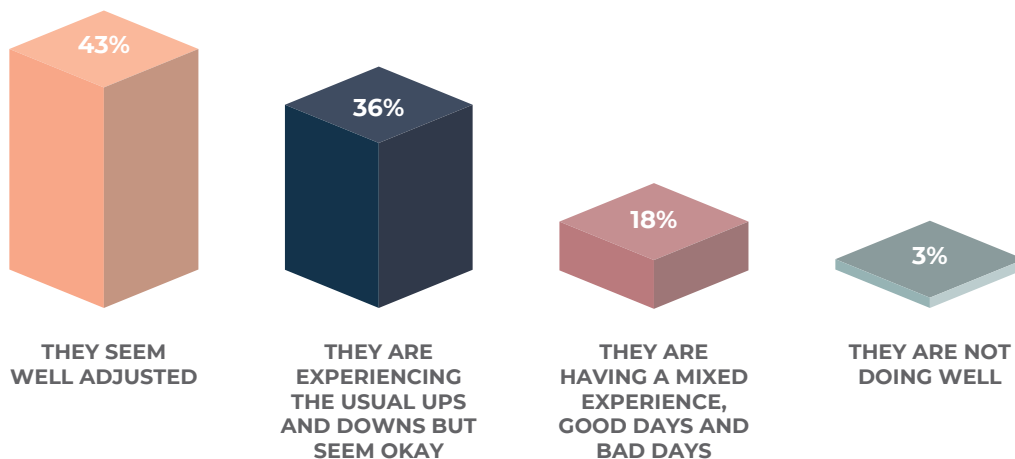
Many of the same mental health challenges for children in the United States have remained consistent from the fall of 2021 to the fall of 2022. But if there is a bright spot, the downward trend seems to at least be stabilizing instead of getting worse.

In this survey, 90% of parents said their children's mental health has improved (29%) or remained the same (61%) since last year. Only 10% say their children's mental health has gotten worse. Furthermore, as children enter the 2022 school year, 79% of parents said their kids seem well-adjusted (43%) or are simply experiencing "the usual ups and downs" (36%).

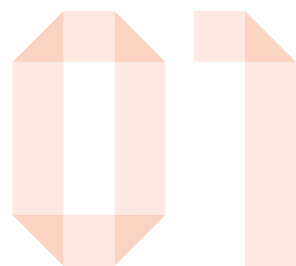
Parents' feelings about how their children's mental health has changed over the past year

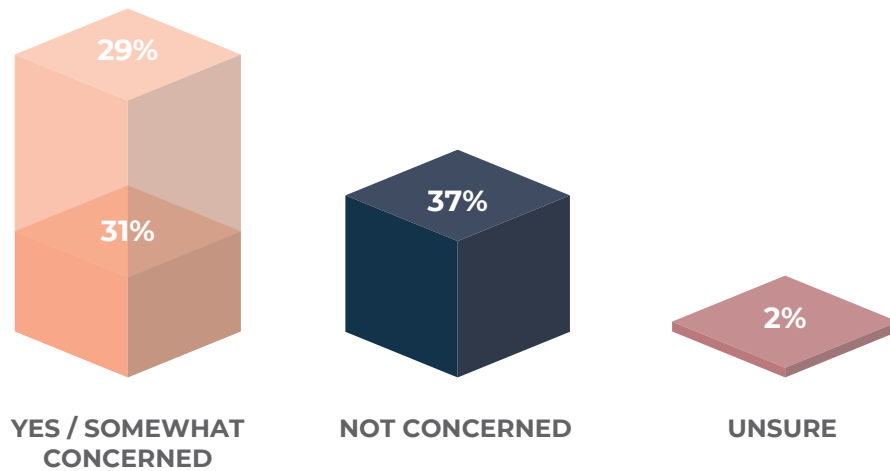


How parents describe their children's mental and emotional well-being as they enter the 2022 school year



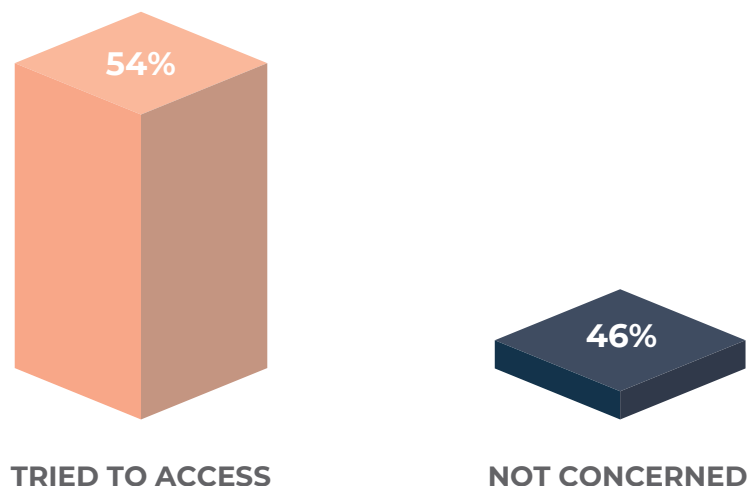
Signs of hope should not be misconstrued because there is still a long road ahead and many children will need help before the nation emerges from this crisis. In fact, 60% of parents surveyed voiced concern about their children's mental health. 31% expressed a definite concern, while 29% are somewhat concerned.



Parents who say they are concerned about their children's mental health

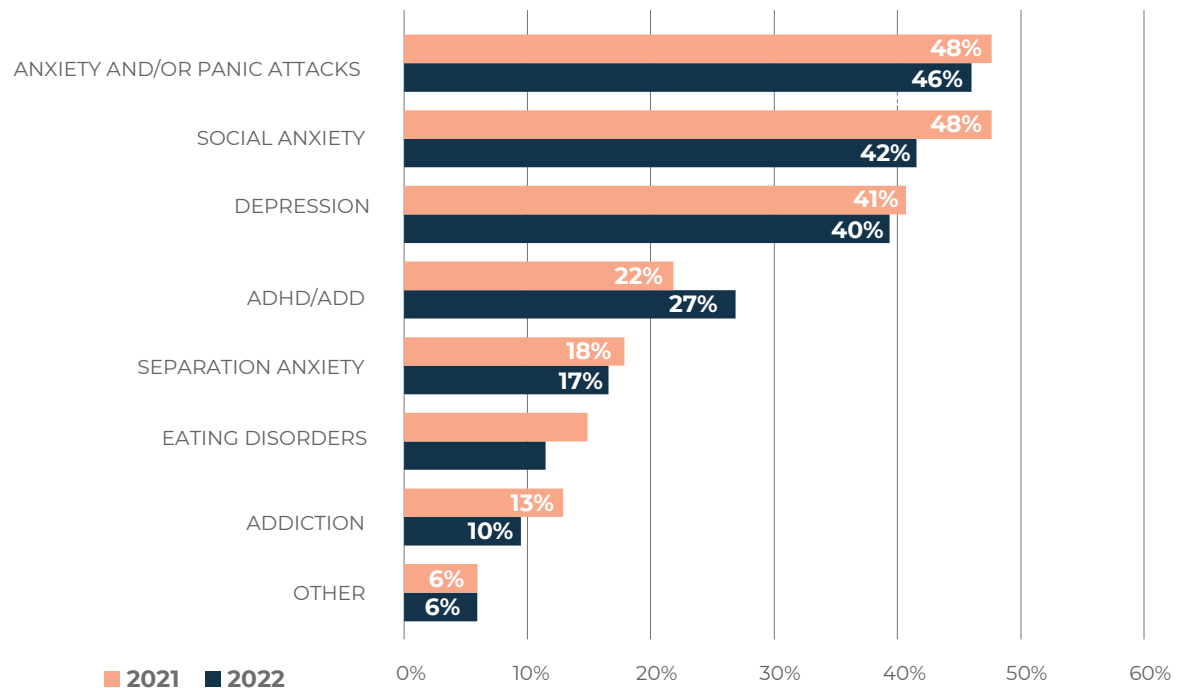
Considering that 60% of parents said they are at least somewhat concerned with the state of their children's mental health, one potential cause for alarm is that only 39% of all parents said they sought mental health care for their child in the past year. This is nearly identical to last year's survey, where the number of all parents who said they sought mental health care for their child was 40%.

Perhaps even more concerning, only a little more than half (54%) of parents who voiced concern for their children's mental health in the past year took steps to try and access mental healthcare for their child.

Parents who voiced concern for their child's mental health AND tried to access care in the past year

When asked which mental health challenges raise the most cause for concern, the view from parents is nearly identical year over year. Their concern for anxiety, panic attacks and depression have increased slightly, but still outweigh their concerns for other challenges by a wide margin.

Mental Health Challenges that raise the most concern among parents: 2021 vs 2022

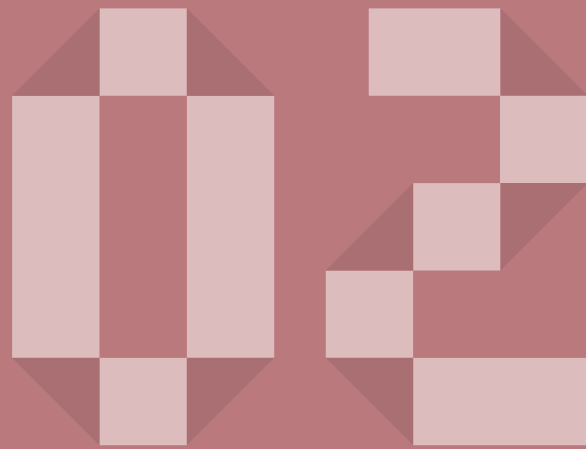


DCT ANALYSIS

“When reviewing this data, one of the areas that stands out is the gap between the parents’ concern for their child’s mental health and accessing care to address that concern. We know that parents face accessibility barriers to securing mental health therapy services for their children. What we don’t know is whether or not those barriers are the main issue, or whether other barriers or reasons for reluctance exist. In the field, accessing therapy services at the early signs of an issue, rather than waiting for a crisis, can support children in understanding their emotions, developing coping skills, preventing escalating behaviors and symptoms and improving overall mental health. Early identification and intervention is key, and I would encourage parents to share their observations and concerns with their child’s pediatrician, school counselor or other trusted care provider. Getting help may require formal therapy, and it may not, but the important thing is to start the conversation.”

Jacqueline Wight

MA, LPC, Director of Mental Health Services, Dotcom Therapy



BRIGHT SPOTS & CHALLENGES WITH ACCESSING CARE

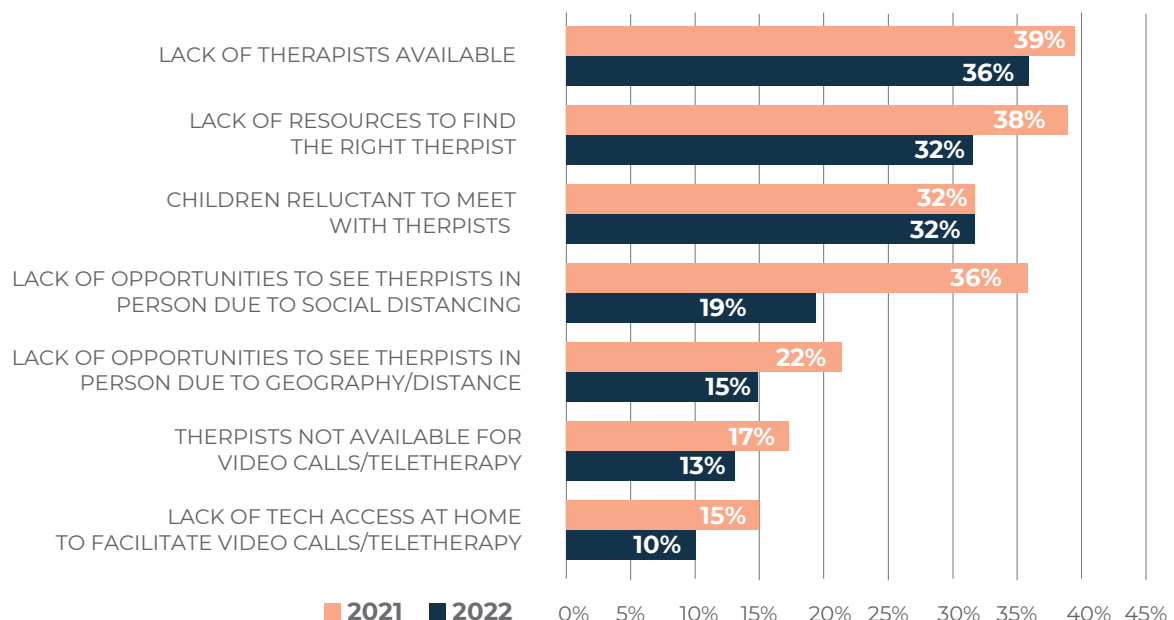


There are bright spots suggesting that access to mental health care among children is improving, but parents and children still face substantial barriers. Parents say the biggest challenge to accessing care is the lack of available therapists, and the second biggest challenge is a lack of resources to find the right therapist. These top two challenges to accessing care were also the top two challenges cited by parents in last year's research. However, there is small, but positive movement in the number of parents who cite these challenges.

The number of parents who cite challenges with a lack of therapists has fallen slightly year over year (from 39% to 36%), and the number of parents citing a lack of resources to find the right therapist has fallen even more (from 38% to 32%).

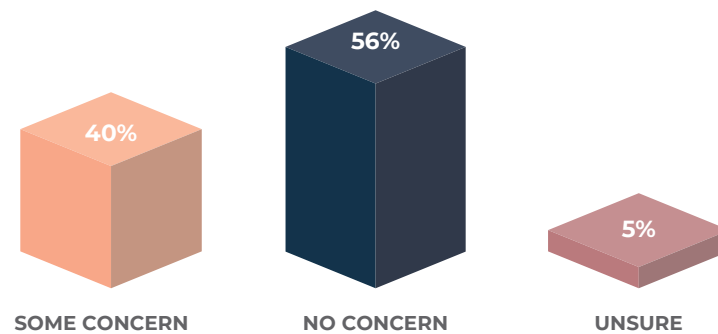
Parents still face substantial difficulties with accessing care, but are finding access to be at least slightly easier across many different challenges when compared to last year.

Challenges parents say they face accessing the right mental health care for a child

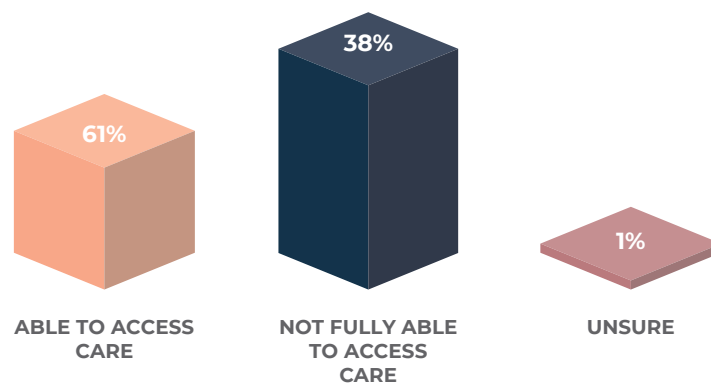


Despite small improvements in most of the challenges parents face accessing care, 40% still voice some concern about their ability to find the mental health care their child needs. In addition, 38% of parents are not fully satisfied with their ability to access adequate mental healthcare for their children in the past year.

Parents who are concerned about their ability to find the mental health care their child needs

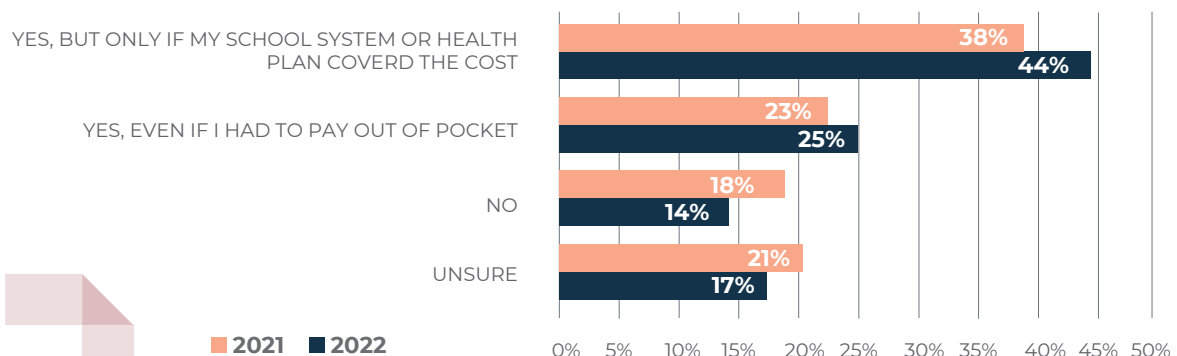


Parents who were able to access adequate mental health care for their child in the past year



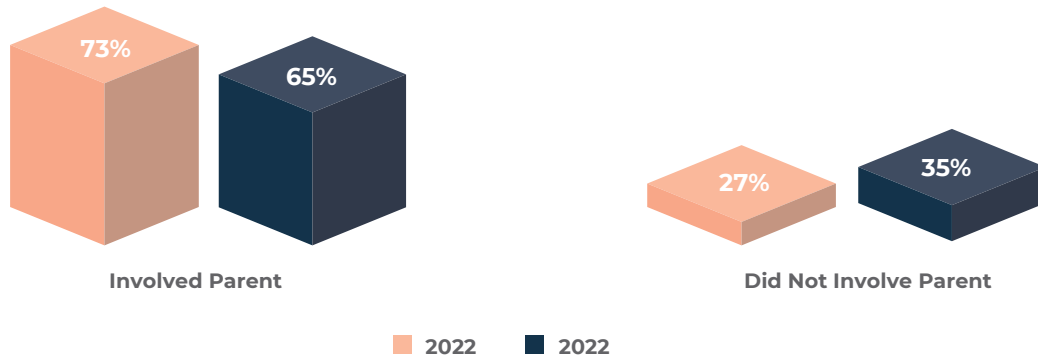
One encouraging sign for increasing access to care is that teletherapy is clearly more accepted by parents than it was even a year ago. In a 13% jump from last year, 69% of respondents said they would take advantage of a service that could match their child with the right therapist and facilitate teletherapy at home. In fact, 25% of parents would pay out of their own pockets (up from 23% last year), while 44% said they would engage in such a service if their school or health plan covered the costs (up from 38% last year).

Parents interested in a service that could match their child with the right therapist and facilitate teletherapy at home



In another encouraging sign, therapists seem to be involving parents more often in their child's therapy. Among children who have been engaged in mental health therapy before, 73% of parents said the therapist involved them in their child's care and progress, compared to only 65% last year. 27% said they were not involved, compared to 35% last year.

Parents who say their child's therapist directly involved them in their child's care and progress



DCT ANALYSIS

The inability to find an available mental health provider when a child is in need can be highly frustrating and make a parent feel helpless – especially when they see their child struggling. While the mental health therapist shortage is a reality, it is interesting to note that the number of parents who cited a lack of resources to find the right therapist was very close to the number who cited a lack of therapists all together. It's possible that in some cases, parents are experiencing a perceived lack of therapists because they don't have the resources to find one. Schools, leaders in government and organizations in the private sector should take steps to address this. In the meantime, parents can utilize their network, including their child's pediatrician, their school counselor/social worker/psychologist, faith community, and other people they trust to identify therapists in their community. These individuals can function as critical connectors and resources when searching for a therapist."

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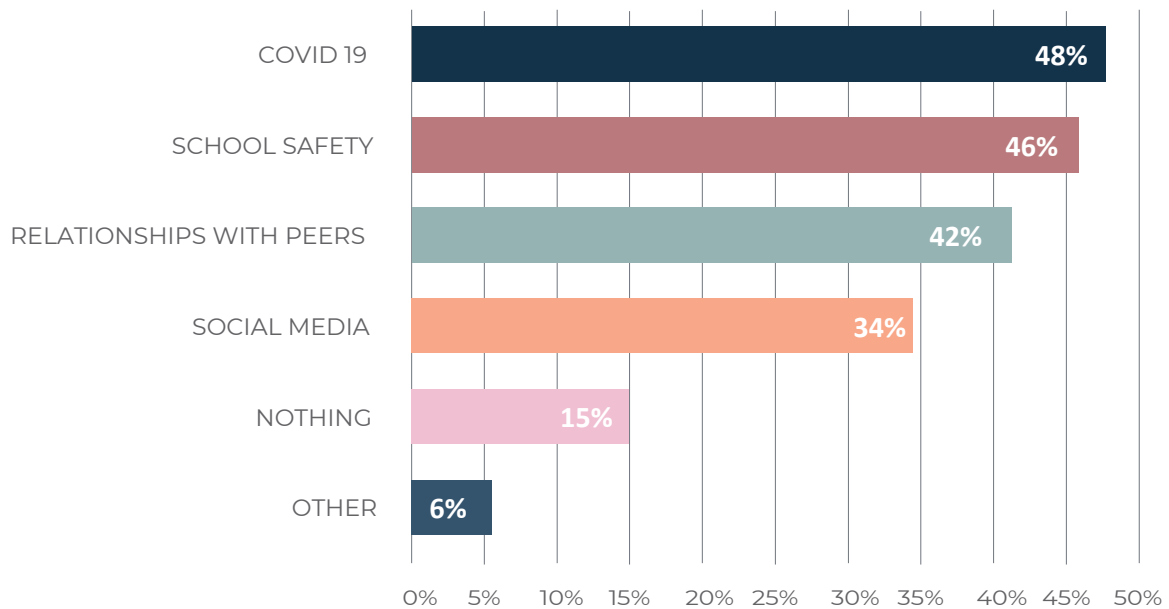


SCHOOL SAFETY IS A RISING CONCERN FOR KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH



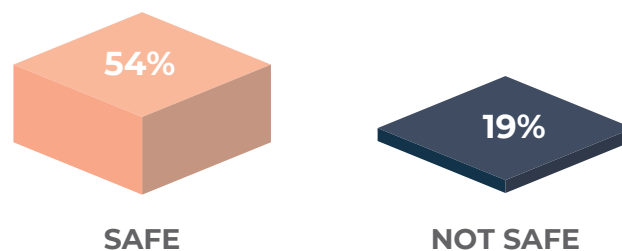
When asked which issues might negatively impact their kid's mental health this school year, the most common answer, indicated by 48% of respondents, was COVID-19. However, school safety was a close second, selected by 46% of parents.

Issues parents think might negatively impact their children's mental health this school year



While almost half of the parents surveyed feel issues around school safety could negatively impact kids' mental health this year, 81% think their children feel safe returning to school.

Parents who believe their children felt safe returning to school this year



The one-fifth of parents who do not think their children feel safe returning to school see a much higher rate of mental health challenges among their children.

Among these parents:

- **73%** feel school safety might negatively impact their children's mental health this year (compared to **46%** of all respondents)
- **75%** are at least somewhat concerned about their child's mental health (compared to **60%** of all respondents)
- **53%** are at least somewhat concerned about their ability to find the mental health support their child needs (compared to **40%** of all respondents)
- **66%** are at least somewhat concerned about the mental health support at their child's school (compared to **49%** of all respondents)



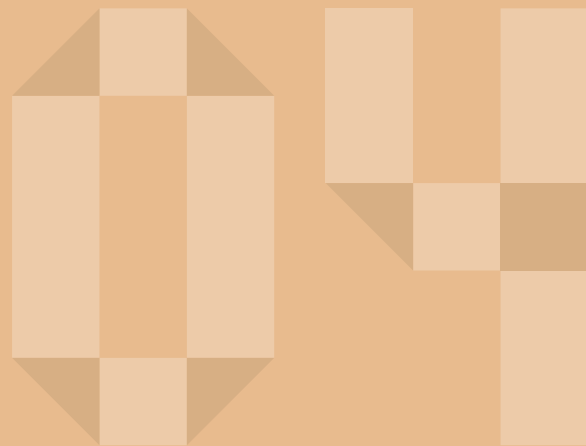
DCT ANALYSIS

"It comes as no surprise that when children feel a sense of safety in their school environment, it supports their wellbeing, mental health and ability to engage in learning. Many schools are focusing on proactive ways to increase students' experience of connectedness and belonging, as this has profound protective factors."

Jacqueline Wight

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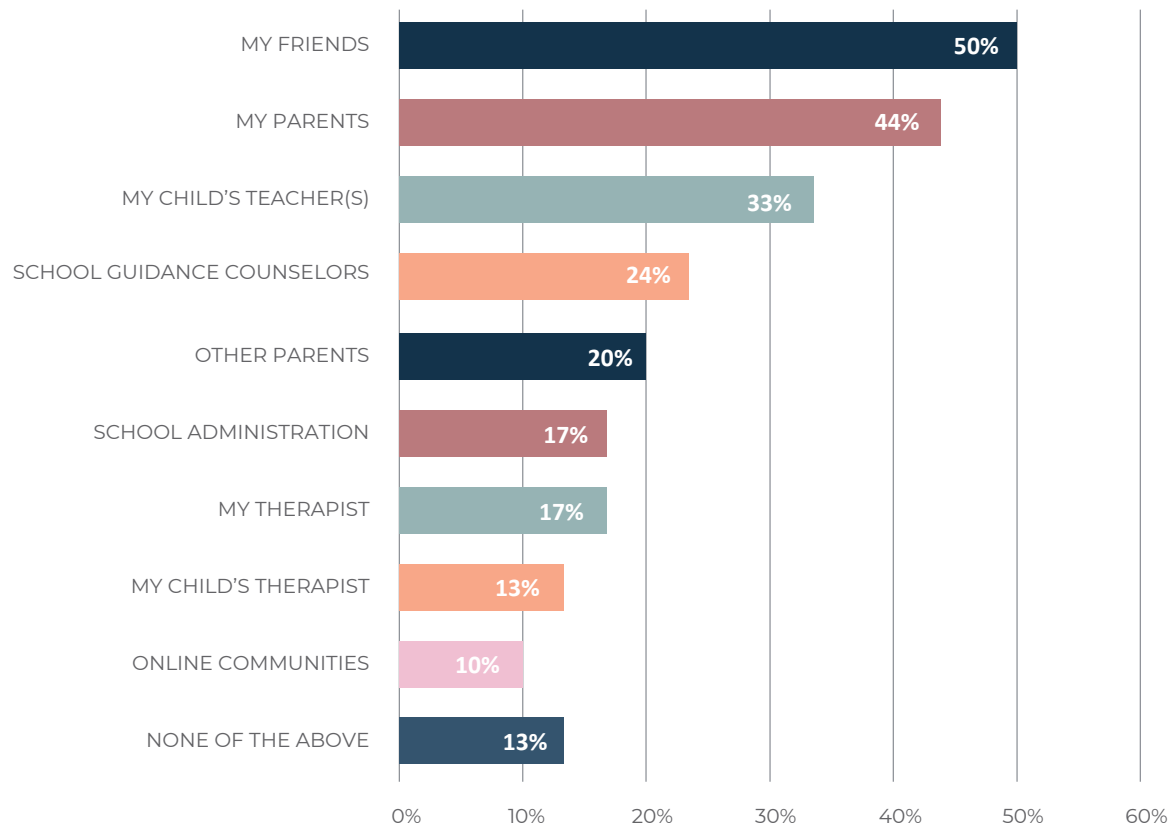


SCHOOLS DELIVER – AND ARE ASKED FOR MORE



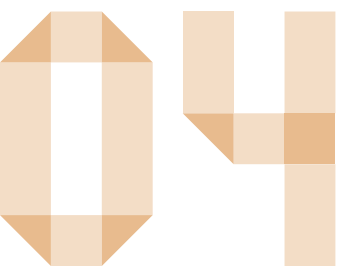
Schools are a critical resource for parents and already shoulder much of the burden for stewarding the mental health of children in America— but parents are still looking to them for more help. When asked who they count among their support network, parents naturally identified friends (50%) and their parents (44%) at the top of the list. After that, they turn to their schools. 33% of parents cited their child's teachers and 25% cited school guidance counselors, the third and fourth most popular answers. 17% say they rely on school administration. Notably, only 13% count a child's therapist among their support network.

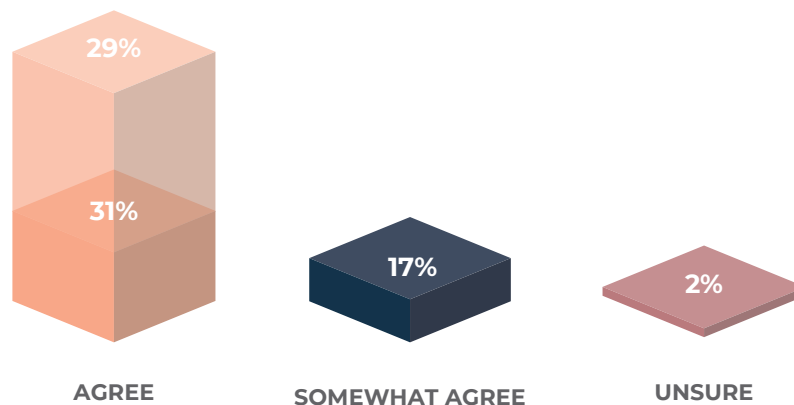
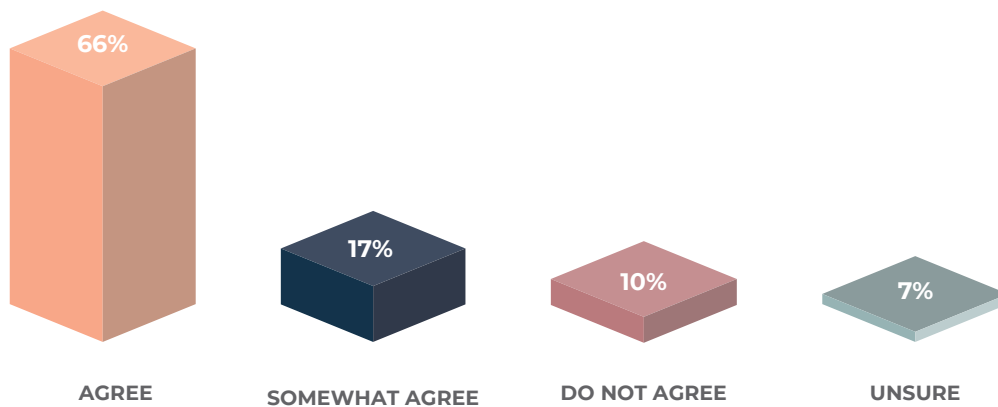
Where parents say they turn for their support network



While parents rank the people and resources at their children's school among the most important elements of their own support network, they also voice grave concerns about the mental health care children are getting at school. For example, half of all parents (50%) are at least somewhat concerned about the lack of mental health support at their children's schools. This is essentially the same as last year where 49% of parents expressed concern about mental health support in schools.

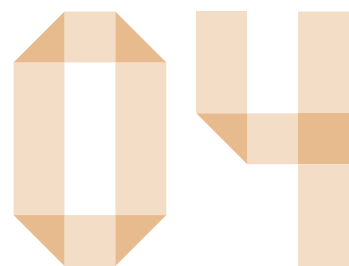
When asked if healthcare and educational institutions should do more to provide better mental health services, 83% agreed (66%) or somewhat agreed (17%). This is a slight jump from last year, when 78% of parents said they thought healthcare and education institutions should do more.

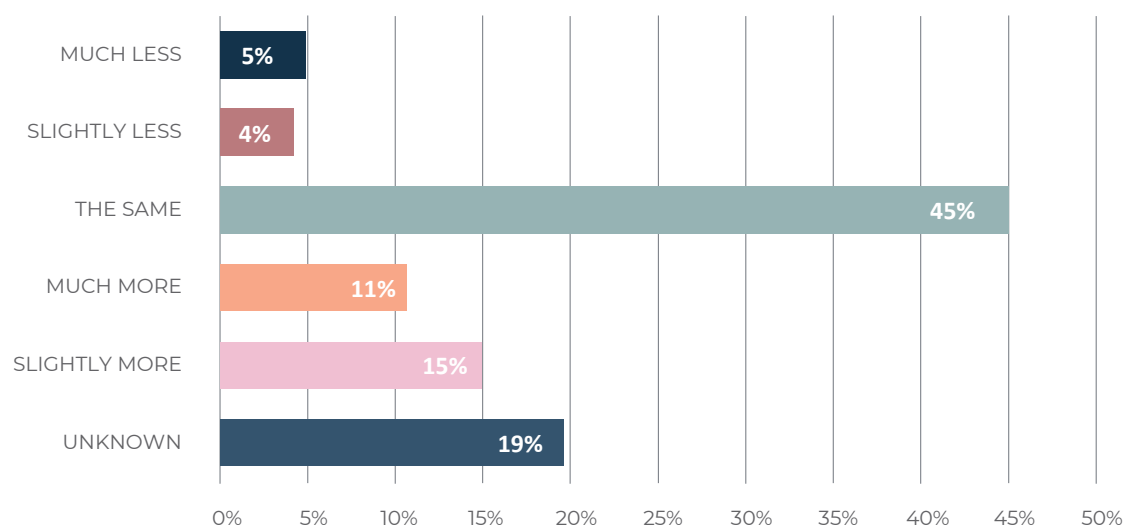


Parents concerned about the lack of mental health support at their children's school right now**Parents who feel healthcare and educational institutions should do more to provide better mental health services to children**

When asked about any changes in mental health resources offered by their children's school in the past year, nearly half of all parents surveyed (45%) said the level of resources stayed the same. However, in a sign that some schools are dedicating more resources to deal with the mental health crisis, 26% of parents say their schools increased services. But at the same time, 9% believe their schools reduced services.

Notably, one in five parents (19%) did not have enough knowledge about resources in their children's school to gauge whether resources stayed the same, got better, or got worse.



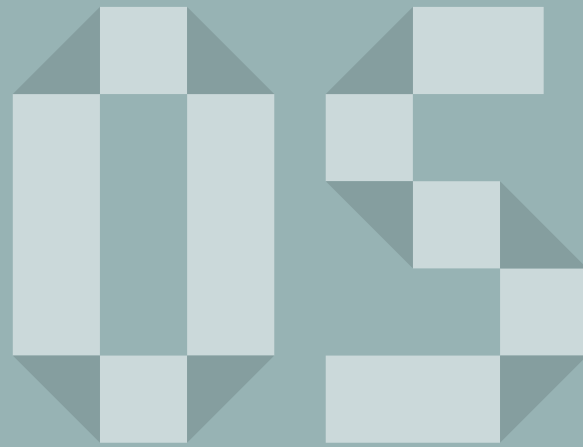
Parents view on the change in mental health resources provided by their school over the past year**DCT ANALYSIS**

"As schools adjust to an unprecedented and changing landscape, it has become increasingly clear that they must care for the entire child, including their social and emotional wellbeing. In addition to implementing school-wide SEL programs and providing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff on topics related to mental health and trauma informed practices in the classroom, many schools are exploring opportunities to increase mental health counseling support for children and finding ways to support parents and guardians with education and support as they navigate the challenges many children are facing."

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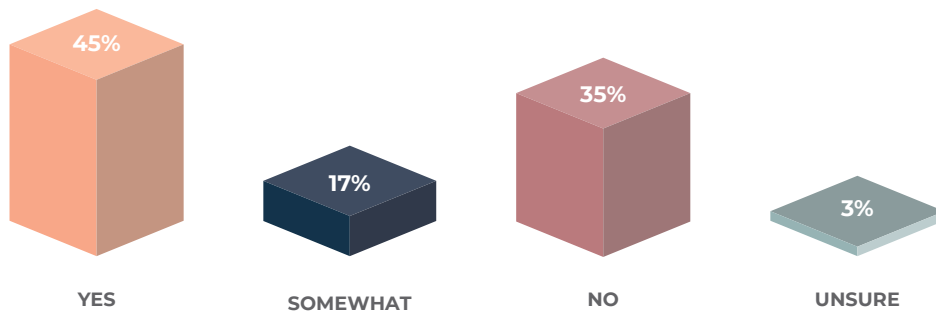


TO CARE FOR THEIR KIDS,
PARENTS NEED TO CARE FOR
THEMSELVES

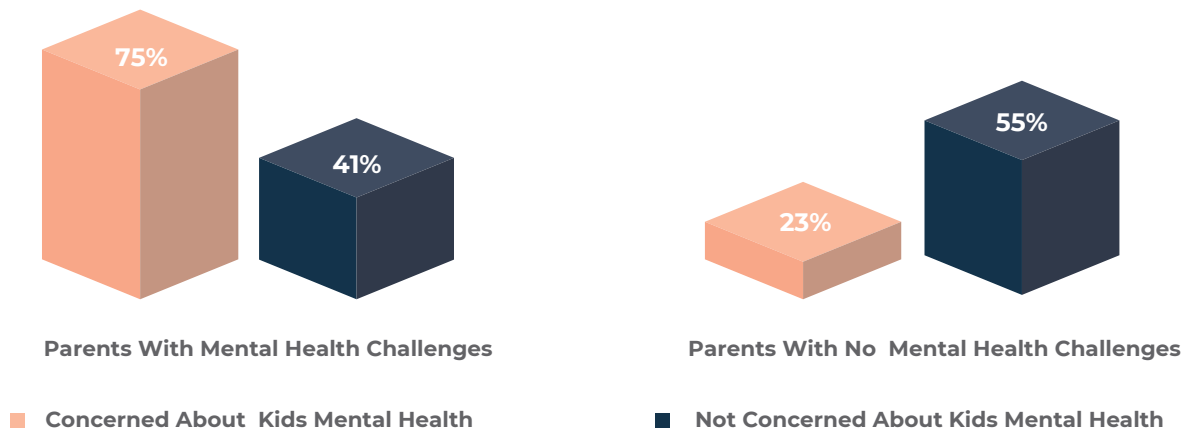


A majority (62%) of parents surveyed said they experienced some mental health challenges of their own in the last year. Within these families, the survey confirmed a strong correlation between the mental health of parents and their children. For example, among parents who say they are at least somewhat concerned for their child's mental health, 75% said they experienced some mental health challenges of their own over the past year. Among parents who are not concerned for their child's mental health, 41% experienced their own mental health issues over the past year.

Parents who experienced mental health issues over the past year

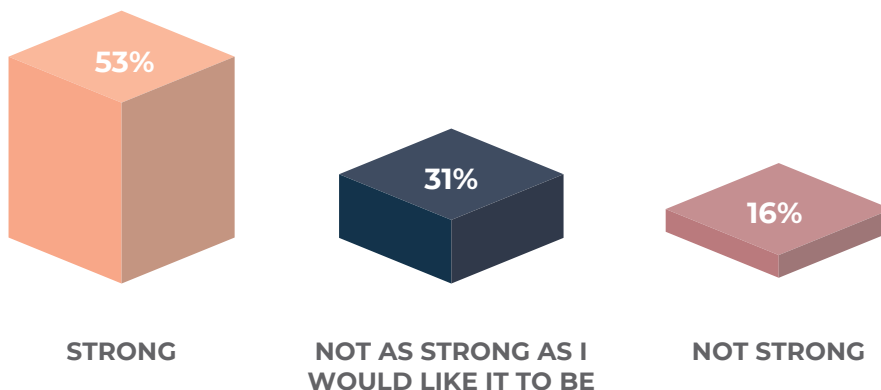


Comparison: How parents who experienced their own mental health issues express concern for their child's mental health



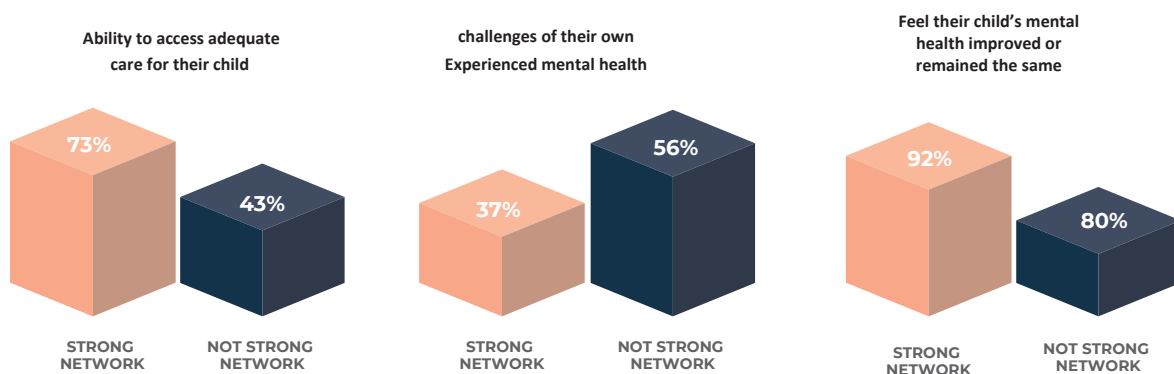
When asked if they feel they have a strong support network, half of all parents (53%) said they do. However, the other half (47%) said their support network is not strong (16%) or not as strong as they'd like (31%).

How parents feel about their support network



Survey data shows that the overall impact of a parent's mental health and the strength of their support network greatly impacts many aspects of their children's mental health. For example, among parents who have a strong support network:

- **73%** were able to access adequate mental health care for their child, versus **43%** who do not have a strong network.
- **37%** say they experienced mental health challenges during the past year, versus **56%** who do not have a strong network.
- **92%** feel their child's mental health has improved or remained the same in the past year, versus **80%** who do not have a strong network.



DCT ANALYSIS

"The known link between parents' mental health and the mental health and well-being of their children is not a new concept, but this data highlights the real impact. Additionally, it shines a necessary light on the importance of the parent/caregiver support network. Parents with strong support networks indicated better access to mental health care for their children, a critical component to improving mental health in the long term. This data reinforces the need for parents to prioritize their emotional well-being by ensuring that they have a support network to lean on as they navigate challenges."

Jacqueline Wight

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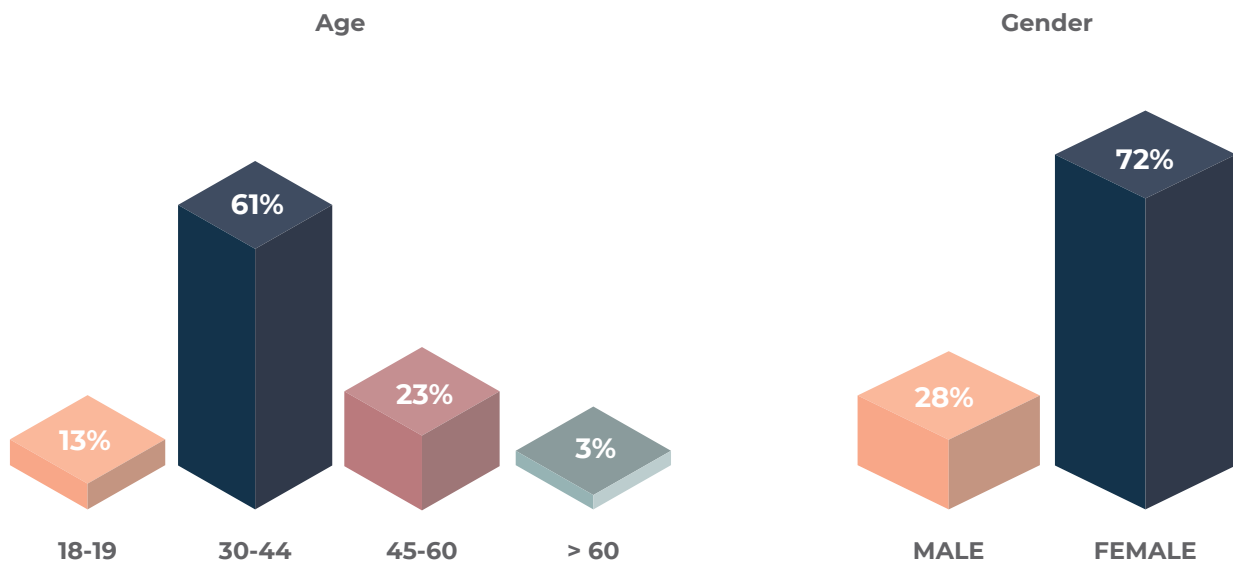
Conclusion

This research confirms the widespread mental health crisis among children in the United States through the eyes of the people who know them best – their parents. There are some small, but positive signs that this crisis – which the pandemic fueled and accelerated – is beginning to stabilize. However, it's important to remember that “getting better” is far different than “not getting worse.” Reversing some of the troubling trends with children’s mental health that have gotten worse in recent years, will require a coordinated effort among all stakeholders to improve the many areas highlighted in this report. This includes improving access to care, recognizing and supporting schools for the outsized role they play, and better supporting and educating parents so they’re better equipped to support their children.

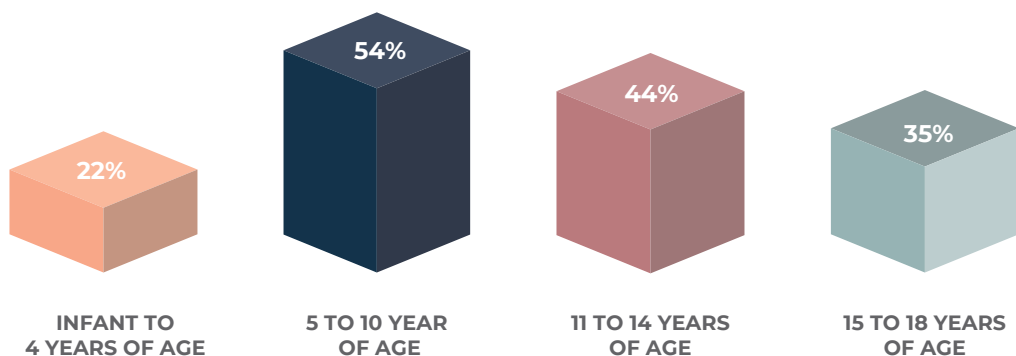


Makeup of Respondents

In total, 1,121 parents or guardians of children between the ages of five and 18 were surveyed online from August 2 - 3, 2022. A majority of respondents to the survey (84%) were between the ages of 30 and 60. The age ranges of children whose parents or guardians took the survey were fairly evenly distributed between elementary (5-10 years), middle (11-14 years) and high school age (15-18 years). Many survey respondents have multiple children in more than one of these age ranges.



Age children of Respondents



About DotCom Therapy

DotCom Therapy is the most comprehensive pediatric teletherapy provider for healthcare and educational organizations serving families across the nation. With a 5-star patient rating and 97% retention among its network of professional therapists, DCT provides the flexibility families and organizations require to meet the mental health, behavioral, speech, and occupational therapy needs of children in their care. DCT is headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin with team members and therapists located across the United States.

For more information

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