

Australian Child Mental Health Report

By David Knuckey

The Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing provides information on the prevalence of mental disorders in children and adolescents in Australia.

The prevalence of mental disorders is the proportion of children and adolescents in the population who meet the DSM-IV criteria for a diagnosis of a mental disorder within the 12 months prior to the survey.

6,310 parents and 2,967 young people were surveyed. The sample was representative of Australian children and adolescents aged 4-17 on the basis of age, gender, parental education, income, employment, housing tenure and country of birth.

Prevalence of Mental Disorders

Almost one in seven 4-17 year olds were identified with a mental disorder in the previous 12 months - this is equivalent to 560,000 Australian children.

Males are more likely than females to suffer a mental disorder - 16.3% compared with 11.5%.

Based on the survey, it is estimated that in the past 12 months:

- 298,000 Australian children aged 4-17 years suffered ADHD,
- 278,000 had anxiety disorders,
- 112,000 had major depressive disorders,
- 83,600 had conduct disorder.

“In 40% of cases, a school staff member identifies that a student has a problem.”

Almost a third of all 4-17 year-olds had two or more mental disorders in the last 12 months.

Impact of Mental Disorders

- 60% of 4-17 year-olds with a mental disorder (or 8.3% of all children) had a mild disorder.

“In science, 33.7% of students with mental disorders rated below average, compared with 8.8% of those with no disorder.”

- 25% (or 3.5% of all children) had a moderate disorder.
- One in 7 had a severe mental disorder - this equates to 82,000 Australian young people.

Adolescents are three times more likely to experience a severe mental disorder than children.

Major depressive disorder has a greater impact on functioning than the other disorders.

School Services & the Impact of Problems on Schooling

Schools play a major role in supporting young people with emotional and behavioural problems and are often where symptoms of mental disorders are first identified.

- In 40% of cases, a school staff member identifies that a student has a problem.



- 11.5% of students use a school service for emotional or behavioural problems.
- 22.6% of young people were referred to a health service by their school.
- School staff provide informal support to 51% of students with a mental disorder.
- Of the four types of disorder, major depressive disorder has the greatest impact on school attendance - with an average of 20 days absent per year.
- Major depressive disorder also had the greatest impact on functioning at school.

It is more common that schools contact families about emotional or behavioural issues when the student is male. It is also more common for families to be contacted when the student is older.

School performance suffers for all those with a mental disorder. The greatest impact was on core subjects;

- In maths, 37% of students with mental disorders rated below average, compared with 10.5% of those no disorder.
- In English, 39.4% of students with mental disorders rated below average, compared with 10.8% of those with no disorder.
- In science, 33.7% of students with mental disorders rated below average, compared with 8.8% of those with no disorder.

What Adolescents Say About Self-Harm

The term self-harm refers to deliberately hurting or injuring yourself without trying to end your life. It is often done in secret.

“10.9% of 12-17 year-olds have self-harmed - this is equivalent to 186,000 young Australians deliberately injuring themselves.”

- 10.9% of 12-17 year-olds have self-harmed - this is equivalent to 186,000 young Australians deliberately injuring themselves.
- Twice as many females self-harm as men.
- Females aged 16-17 have the highest rates of self-harm.
- Self-harm is markedly higher for young people with major depressive disorder - a quarter of males and half of females with major depressive disorder have self-harmed in the previous 12 months.

12-month prevalence of mental disorders among 4-17 year-olds by family type and sex

| Family Type | Males (%) | Females (%) | Persons (%) |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Families with two parents or carers | 13.9 | 9.6 | 11.8 |
| Original family | 12.4 | 8.4 | 10.4 |
| Step family | 21.1 | 15.6 | 18.3 |
| Blended family | 24.0 | 16.4 | 20.2 |
| Other family (a) | 29.5 | 18.4 | 23.7 |
| Families with one parent or carer | 25.3 | 19.2 | 22.4 |

12-month prevalence of mental disorders among 4-17 year-olds by household income and sex

| Household income before tax | Males (%) | Females (%) | Persons (%) |
|-----------------------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| \$130,000 or more per year | 12.3 | 8.8 | 10.5 |
| \$52,000-\$129,999 per year | 13.8 | 10.8 | 12.3 |
| Less than \$52,000 per year | 24.4 | 16.1 | 20.5 |

What Adolescents Say About Suicidal Behaviours

- One in 13 12-17 year-olds have seriously considered suicide in the last 12 months - this equates to 128,000 young Australians.
- One in 20 had made a plan.
- One in 40 reported having attempted suicide in the previous 12 months - this equates to 41,000 Australians aged 12-17 attempting suicide in the last year.
- Suicidal behaviours are more common in females than males.
- The rates of suicidal behaviours are markedly higher in young people with major depressive disorder.
- Half of females with a major depressive disorder reported seriously considering suicide and 22.1% had attempted suicide.
- 13.8% of males with major depressive disorder had attempted suicide in the previous 12 months. ■

Source: 2015 The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents - report on the second Australian child and adolescent survey of mental health and wellbeing.