

HCF CONSUMER INSIGHTS SERIES

**Growing Great Tweens:
A Navigating Parenthood Report**



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GROWING GREAT TWEENS: A NAVIGATING PARENTHOOD REPORT

Welcome to the third in a series of consumer insights reports that help start conversations about the healthcare issues and trends that matter most to Australians.

Now more than ever, at HCF we're committed to showing members a level of care that's uncommon. That's why, this time, we've surveyed Australian parents to find out more about the issues they're facing with their tweens.

'Tween' is the term given to those aged 8 to 12, who are no longer children, but not yet teenagers. They're in between. Ask any parent, and they'll agree it's a challenging time of transition both physically and emotionally for both the parent and the child.

We've published this report to coincide with the release of the fourth season of our Navigating Parenthood podcast: *Growing Great Tweens*.

In the six episodes, host, TV and radio presenter Dylan Lewis, discusses the experience of raising today's tweens with other familiar Australian parents including Susie Maroney, Robbie Buck, Pia Miranda and Dave McCormack (the voice of Bluey's dad). Lewis tackles issues faced by many families, from raising mentally strong kids and navigating the online universe, to how to foster family connection and recognise the identity biases faced by children in preadolescence.

Navigating Parenthood: Growing Great Tweens is available through [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#) and [Spotify](#)

In this report we delve deeper into those topics with fresh insights from Australian parents. To provide a guiding light, Kirrilie Smout, clinical psychologist at Calm Kid Central and director of Developing Minds Psychology, offers her expert insight into the topics in our Q&A.

HELP FOR OUR MEMBERS

If you feel that you, or your child, need extra support there are resources and experts who can help.

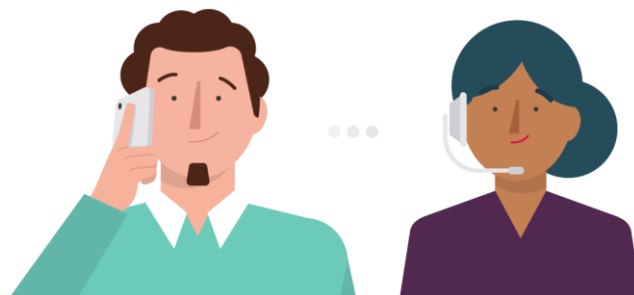
HCF members with hospital or extras cover have access to [Calm Kid Central](#), an online educational and support program to help kids aged 4-11 learn to act bravely and confidently, behave in positive ways, develop good friendships and manage tough life situations.

The program provides fast and confidential access to a team of experienced child psychologists as well as courses, video lessons, activities and animations to help them understand and better manage their feelings. There are also resources for children who are worried or unsettled by COVID-19.

HCF members also have access to video sessions with a [Healthy Minds Check-In](#) by *PSYCH2U*, for both children requiring additional support or for their parents in managing the stress/anxiety associated.

For more information, visit:

www.hcf.com.au/members/manage-your-health/mental-health-support/children-and-parents





KEY
FINDINGS



1. CHALLENGING TOPICS: CULTURAL AND GENDER IDENTITY



In episode one of Growing Great Tweens, we discuss the importance of **understanding identity and belonging** and how culture can shape a young person's identity. Host Dylan Lewis chats with mum, Carolyn Tate, about her eldest son's transitioning journey when he was 12 after experiencing gender dysphoria. We also hear from father of 4, Andy Saunders, who shares about how his grandfather shaped the way he shared his Aboriginal heritage with his sons.

And in episode five, we share the importance of **explaining gender stereotypes to kids**. Host Dylan Lewis is joined by parents Sean Szeps and Meshel Laurie for an insightful chat about raising fraternal twins and how to have those tricky gender-identity discussions with your tweens.

Here's what our research with everyday Australian parents uncovered on the topics of cultural and gender identity:

CULTURAL IDENTITY

- More than seven in ten (72%) Australian parents of tweens say they face challenges to talk to their tween about cultural identity
- Amongst parents who face challenges to talk to their tween about cultural identity, the most commonly reported challenges include that their child doesn't face

GENDER IDENTITY

- Seven in ten (69%) Australian parents of tweens say they face challenges when talking to their tween about gender identity
- Among parents who say they face challenges to talk to their tween about gender identity, the most commonly reported challenges include preferring to wait until their tween initiates a conversation/asks them about gender identity and talking to them about it then (39%), thinking their tween is not facing any issues with their gender identity so feeling like it is not relevant to bring it up (33%) and thinking they are too young still and wouldn't really understand (26%)
- Other challenges these parents report include that the school has not taught them about gender identity yet so there is no foundation to build off (22%), a lack of resources to guide them in how to talk to their tween about gender identity in an age-appropriate way (20%), their tween experiencing discrimination as a result of their gender identity and not wanting to upset them (19%) and a fear of saying the wrong thing (19%)

issues with their cultural identity so they would only want to bring something up if it became a problem (41%), thinking that their child is too young still and wouldn't really understand it (29%) and that their tween has experienced discrimination and/or racism because of their culture and they don't want to upset them (26%)

- Other challenges parents raised include the school not teaching their tween about cultural identity yet so there is no foundation to build off of (24%), a lack of resources to guide them in how to talk to their tween about cultural identity in an age-appropriate way (24%), being worried they would say the wrong thing (22%) and life being very busy and finding it difficult to find the time (20%).
- Mothers are more than twice as likely than fathers to cite thinking that their child is too young and they wouldn't understand it as a challenge faced to talk to their tween about cultural identity (38% compared to 17%).
- Gen X parents are more likely than Millennial parents to say that the barriers to talking to their tween about cultural identity include that there are no resources to guide them in how to talk to their tween about cultural identity in an age-appropriate way (32% compared to 20%) and life being busy and finding it difficult to find the time (27% compared to 16%)

- Fathers are more likely than mothers to say that the school has not taught their child about gender identity yet so they don't have a foundation to build off of is a challenge they face when talking to their tween about gender identity (26% compared to 16%)
- Furthermore, fathers are nearly three times as likely as mothers to admit that they don't understand the importance or relevance of teaching their tween about gender identity (14% compared to 5%)
- Similarly, Gen X parents are more likely than Millennial parents to say that the school has not taught their child about gender identity yet so they don't have a foundation to build off of (30% compared to 18%) and life is very busy and they find it difficult to find the time (25% compared to 14%) are challenges they face to talk to their tween about gender identity
- Gen X parents are also more than twice as likely as Millennial parents to say that they don't understand the importance or relevance of teaching their child about gender identity (15% compared to 6%)

2. CONNECTED: SAFE INTERNET USE

In episode three of Growing Great Tweens, host Dylan Lewis dives into the benefits of **technology for kids** and gaming online in our latest episode. Dylan sits down and chats with Dr Catriona Wallace and dad, Mark Serrels, about how to raise savvy children in a very connected world and the tech rules that are worth ditching.

Here's what we found in our consumer research on the topic:

STRATEGIES FOR SAFE INTERNET USE

- More than nine in ten (95%) Australian parents of tweens use strategies to make their tween's use of the internet safer
- Among parents who use strategies to make their tween's internet use safer, the main approaches used include talking to their tween about the benefits and dangers of the internet so they are equipped to make good decisions when online and notify them of any issues that arise (59%), checking their internet history and bringing up any sites they think are inappropriate (39%), limiting the total time their tween can spend online outside of any schoolwork they do online (35%) and vetting/restricting the games their child plays online to make sure they are suitable (35%)
- Other strategies used include spending online time together playing games, watching videos and doing research for school projects and talking about safe use of the internet while browsing (33%), only allowing their tween to use the internet on a computer they can supervise them from (33%), using online time as a reward that they can only access once they have completed their homework, chores and had time outside/exercising (27%) and installing software filters to restrict the websites their tween can access to protect them from inappropriate content (26%)
- Fathers are more likely than mothers to say that they spend online time with their child playing games, watching videos and doing research for their school projects and talk about safe use of the internet while browsing as a strategy for making their tween's internet use safer (39% compared to 27%)
- Millennial parents are more likely than Gen X parents to cite checking their tween's internet history and bringing up any sites they think are inappropriate as a strategy for making their tween's internet usage safer (47% compared to 32%)





POSTING PHOTOS OF OTHER KIDS

- Eight in ten (80%) parents of tweens post photos that contain other children online/to social media with most of these parents (88%) taking some action before doing so
- The most common actions parents who post photos that contain other children online/to social media take include checking with relevant parents if it is okay to post the photo online (57%) and only posting the photo if they know the parents and already know they will be okay with it (55%)
- Other precautions taken prior to posting photos containing other children online include if possible cropping out other children so only their own child is visible (49%) and blurring out the faces of any other children so they are not able to be identified (39%)
- Mothers are nearly twice as likely as fathers to say they crop out other children where possible so only their child is visible when posting photos containing other children online (64% compared to 34%)



3. LONG COVID: THE LASTING IMPACT

Learning **how to raise resilient kids** can come with its challenges. In episode two, host Dylan Lewis chats with mums, Lauren Patterson and Susie Maroney, about building mental strength with their tweens and when it's best to let your little ones tackle tricky situations on their own.

Given the experiences Australian families have had living through the pandemic, our research delved into the impact parents think it will have, and found:

- Four in five (80%) parents of tweens believe their tween will be impacted in the longer term as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic
- Amongst parents who believe their tween will be impacted in the longer term as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most commonly anticipated impacts are increased dependence on technology for entertainment (60%), struggles with schoolwork due to disrupted learning / gaps in their understanding of basic concepts (45%) and increased social anxiety towards interacting with other children in person / going to school (40%)
- Other long term impacts include a lack of interest in other extracurricular activities due to disruptions in schedules (38%), a lack of interest in participating in sport due to disruptions in playing schedules (35%), increased dependency on one or both parents / fear of being away from parents (32%) and disrupted sleeping patterns / increased general anxiety about life (26%)

4. HOME TRUTHS: GENDERED ROLES AT HOME

In episode five, we share the importance of **explaining gender stereotypes to kids**. Host Dylan Lewis is joined by parents Sean Szeps and Meshel Laurie for an insightful chat about raising fraternal twins and how to have those tricky gender-identity discussions with your tweens.

To find out what's happening in Australian homes, we asked parents what their households look like and found:

- Two in five (39%) Australian parents of tweens report that in their household the male parent has the responsibility for earning and the female parent has the main responsibility for caring, while one in three (32%) say that they have a male and female parent in the household who share responsibilities for earning and caring equally
- In contrast, one in seven (14%) state that they are in a single parent household and take responsibility for both earning and caring while just over one in ten (12%) say the female parent has the main responsibility for earning and the male parent has the main responsibility for caring
- Same-sex couple households with clearly divided responsibilities across earning and caring and same-sex households with shared responsibilities across earning and caring account for 1% each respectively
- Mothers are more than five times as likely to report that they are part of a single parent household and take responsibility for both earning and caring (22% compared to 4%). In contrast, fathers are more likely to report they are in a household where the male parent has the main responsibility for earning and the female parents has the main responsibility for caring (46% compared to 33%)

5. RELATIONSHIPS: WITH PEERS AND PARENTS

In episode six, Dylan Lewis chats with parents Dave McCormack and Robbie Buck about the benefits of spending one-on-one time with your kids and what to do to keep a strong **family connection**. In this final episode, we find out what it takes to make lasting memories by **connecting with your kids**.

Here's what our research showed about relationships with friends and families:

VIEW OF TWEEN'S FRIENDSHIPS

- Seven in ten (70%) Australian parents of tweens say their child has close friends and they have no concerns about them spending time with any of them
- However, one in five (20%) admit that their child has close friends but they have concerns that one or more of them may not be a good influence on their child, while one in ten (9%) admit that they are worried their child does not have many / any close friends they can spend time with
- Mothers are more than twice as likely as fathers to admit that they are worried that their child does not have many/any close friends they can spend time with (13% compared to 5%)

CHANGING OF THE GUARD

- Seven in ten (71%) Australian parents of tweens describe the relationship they have with their tween as better than the relationship they had with their own parents at the same age, including nearly one in two (47%) who would describe the relationship as much better
- Nearly one in four (24%) say that the relationship they have with their child is about the same as the relationship they had with their own parents, just 4% would describe the relationship they have with their child as worse than the relationship they had with their parents
- Gen X parents are more likely than Millennial parents to say that the relationship they have with their tween is better compared to the relationship they had with their own parents at the same age (76% compared to 66%)
- Conversely, Millennial parents are more likely than Gen X parents to report that the relationship they have with their tween is about the same as the relationship they had with their own parents at the same age (29% compared to 18%)



6. Q&A: HELP TO GET YOU THERE

HELP FOR OUR MEMBERS

Our survey results show that modern parenting comes with its own set of modern challenges, from navigating safe online use to the long-term emotional impact of the pandemic on our family members.

To help kids, tweens, teens and parents to feel calm, confident and to cope well with challenges, clinical child and adolescent psychologist Kirrilie Smout, director of Developing Minds Psychology and Calm Kids Central, spoke to us about some of the key themes.

Q) HOW IMPORTANT IS A SENSE OF BELONGING TO A TWEEN AT HOME, SCHOOL, AND IN PEER GROUPS?

A) "Relationships are vital to tween's mental health - this is true of course for children/teens of any age, however many tweens experience increasing needs for acceptance with their peers.

"Tweens also need parents/caregivers to continue to provide love, empathy and support but with very increasing autonomy."

Q) WHY IS RESILIENCE SO IMPORTANT FOR TODAY'S TWEEN?

A) "Resilience was defined by the American Psych Association in 2004 as "the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or even significant sources of stress."

"There is no doubt that resilience is an important psychological skill.

"There has been a huge interest in resilience in the last decade, and especially the resilience of young people - with many public figures/articles/social media posts suggesting that young people of this generation are less resilient than previous generations.

"It should be noted that there is not enough evidence to claim this as incontrovertibly true, although some studies are hinting this - it is hard to tease apart mental health concerns (which do appear to be increasing in young people) and resiliency.

"However, despite some loud voices in the area, there are a couple of misconceptions about resilience:

a) "Resilience is influenced by a range of factors and is not simply a result of helicopter/protective parenting, as some

claim. There are likely to be biological, temperament, environmental, and peer influences on resiliency.

b) "Resilience is likely to be different in the same individual in different situations. I know many young people who are incredible resilience when it comes to coping with peer conflict, but less resilient when it comes to coping with study related problems.

c) "To help young people develop resilience, it is true that parents/caregivers need to support young people to experience negative consequences for their actions, to support them to build independence and to allow them to experience difficulties and hardship. However, it's important to know that doing this does help young people develop resilience but ONLY if these things happen in the context of otherwise supportive and empathic parenting. In fact, harsh and low support parenting styles are actually linked to lower resilience in young people."

Q) WHAT ARE THE EARLY SIGNS OF SOCIAL ANXIETY IN TWEENS AND WHAT CAN PARENTS DO IF THEY NOTICE THESE SIGNS?

A) "Excessive anxiety and worry about what their peers think of them and withdrawal from social activities are the two most important warning signs.

"In terms of what can be done, the most important actions are to provide empathy and support; and to help young people take small steps to "face" their fears."

Kirrilie said that research shows the following are important factors in helping young people with anxiety:

1. Provide an age appropriate level of independence and autonomy: allow kids and teens to make decisions, have time by themselves/with peers, problem solve independently, have their own chores and manage life tasks (without us hovering or directing unnecessarily).

2. Show a high level of warmth and acceptance towards our young people: tell them they are loved, show them we enjoy being with them, find ways to praise and recognize their skills and be physically warm and affectionate.

3. Help, encourage and support our children to face their fears (bit at a time, and gently): confidently assume they can do things, don't allow them to avoid feared situations for the long term, don't provide too many opportunities for them to opt out, avoid or stay away from (important) life or social situations.

4. Tell (and show) young people know that being anxious or worried is not terrible: tell them we believe they can cope with feeling worried and being in difficult situations, using a neutral or positive facial

expression and confident tone of voice when talking about anxiety.

5. Get support for our own anxiety and stressors: actively work on our own anxieties and stressors so that children and young people can see us act in brave, confident and self-assured ways in a range of life situations.

Q) WHY DO TWEENS LOVE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES?

A) "Social connection is central to tween's self-esteem and mood. Given most young people use social networking to communicate, most tweens feel a strong desire to join in those conversations/participate in these communities."

Q) WHAT SHOULD YOU DO IF YOU'RE WORRIED YOUR CHILD IS BEING BULLIED, OR IS BULLYING?

A) "It is important to acknowledge that conflict between tweens is extremely common, and to be very careful about using the term "bullying" unless it is accurate.

"It is very likely that tween distress about social exclusion, conflict with friends, feeling upset/angry at peers is not the result of bullying, but instead the result of the very normal and common hurt/conflict which goes on. Parents/caregivers are often unaware of how common this is.

"Support tweens to develop conflict resolution, assertive communication, and kind behaviour skills. This takes modelling, rehearsal, practice and discussion.

"If there is bullying occurring, we do need to take steps to protect young people from this - this usually means discussions with schools/sporting clubs etc.

"Be patient and be prepared to listen and be empathic for a long time. Supporting tweens/teens with social dilemmas and difficulties is something that potentially needs to occur daily/weekly for many years. It is one of our most important (and time consuming) jobs as parents of tweens/teens."

Q) IS IT EVER TOO YOUNG TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES?

A) "No, never too young!"

Q) IF I'M FINDING IT HARD TO CONNECT WITH MY TWEEN, WHAT CAN I DO?

A) "Remember it is normal for communication to get harder for some tweens/parents compared to when kids were younger - don't panic.

"Find activities (if you can) to do with your tween while talking, and talk about their interests or topics they like talking about, rather than focussing on things you are interested in.

"I recommend asking more specific questions than general ones; and to also share things about yourself.

"When problems occur, ask more questions than give advice. And finally, be patient."



