



Parenting through the pandemic

Parents need more support



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Summary

Parenting is always hard and the pandemic exacerbated many of the challenges parents face. More specialist online support would enable more parents to get the help they need.

Since the onset of the pandemic, Action for Children has supported more than 15,000 parents through 1 to 1 support sessions. We know from providing that help that parents have become increasingly worried about their children's mental health, education, and their child's development.

The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges facing parents

That is true for parents across the country as well as the parents we help. Our representative survey of more than 2,000 parents found that:

More than 4 in 5 have struggled with a symptom of parental burnout as a result of the pandemic. And beyond parental burnout, parents are worried about the impact of the pandemic on their children:

- 30% are worried about the impact on their child's education
- 24% are worried about the impact on their child's mental health

The need for parenting support is common

Those concerns are not unique to the coronavirus pandemic. Large numbers of parents need support to deal with parenting challenges. In the last 12 months, 61% of parents have said they have needed support with a parenting related issue:

- 25% have needed support with an issue related to sleep
- 22% have needed support with concerns about their child's emotional wellbeing

When parents get support, they find it helpful. 9 in 10 parents who had a 1 to 1 Parent Talk session say the help they received was 'good' or 'amazing'. Similarly, of all parents who said they had received parenting support in the last 12 months, more than 4 in 5 (81%) said they found it 'useful' or 'very useful'.

Too many parents struggle to get the support they need

However, too many parents find it difficult to get that support. Of parents who say they needed some form of parenting support in the last 12 months, more than half (58%) say they only sometimes or never got the support they needed. 1 in 7 (14%) say they *never* got the support they needed. That's equivalent to around 1.2 million parents unable to get parenting support in the last 12 months.

Online support can play a crucial role in helping more parents get the help they need. Of parents who have received support in the last 12 months, 16% say their most recent help was online. However, just 5% of all parents say they wouldn't seek parenting support online.

Government should fund an expansion of online parenting support services.

Online support is a cost effective way of helping parents to respond to challenges before they need more intensive support. Online parenting support complements face to face services and expanding it would directly support a range of government policy objectives – from improving early years services to rolling out Family Hubs.

Action for Children

Action for Children provides a vital lifeline to hundreds of thousands of children, parents, and carers every year. Last year we helped more than 600,000 people and their families through over 500 services across the United Kingdom.

Through those services we protect children and young people by:

- Providing practical and emotional care and support
- Ensuring their voices are heard
- Campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

We believe every child and young person in the country should have a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive.

Parent Talk

One way Action for Children supports families is through Parent Talk – which provides accessible and trustworthy advice, support, and reassurance for parents and carers of children aged 0-19.

The Parent Talk website has information, advice and guidance available 24/7 on a range of topics. Including mental health, behaviour, development, additional needs and disabilities, relationships, education, sleep and nutrition.

Parents and carers can also access 1 to 1 advice from our parenting coaches – trained family support workers – who provide advice that is tailored to their specific needs.

Parents can access the service as often as they want and when it's most needed. Typically, parents access advice and information articles and are then signposted to further information and given the option to contact us for 1 to 1 support.

When we support parents through Parent Talk, family support workers record the nature of the issues they help with, that enables us to track trends in the problems parents are facing. We use the data collected through the service in this briefing when describing the help we have provided through Parent Talk.

The pandemic has been hard for parents

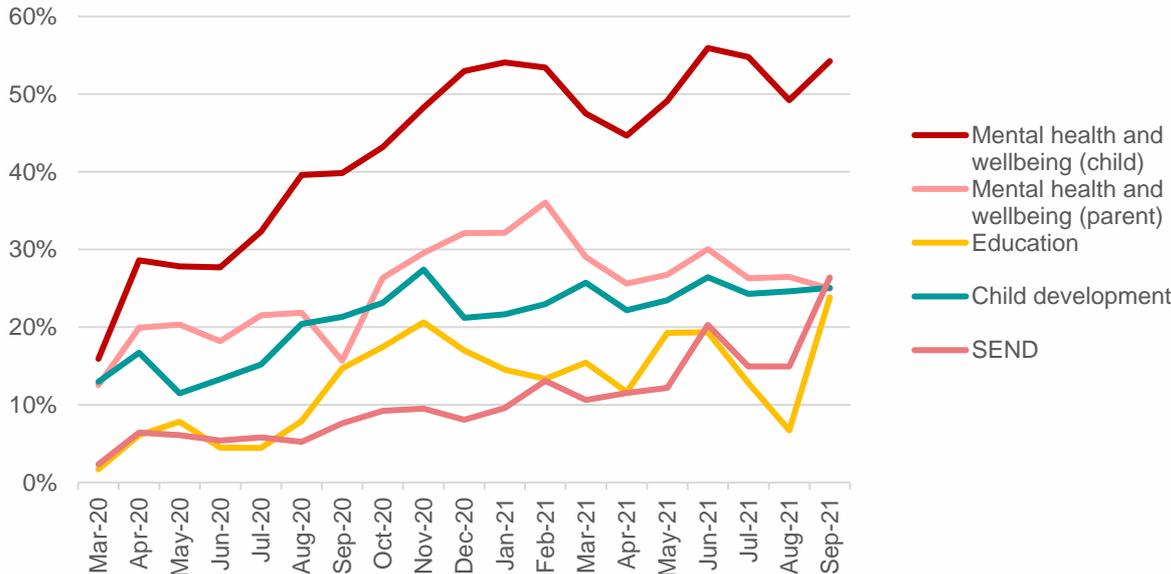
Parent Talk in the pandemic

Parenting is always difficult. It has been more difficult during the pandemic. Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 our Parent Talk services has supported more than 15,000 parents through 1 to 1 support sessions with family support workers.

Through providing that support, we have seen first hand how the pandemic has exacerbated the challenges that parents always face. During the pandemic a number of issues facing parents became more common. Comparing March – September 2020 with March – September 2021, we saw:

- A 60% increase in the proportion of Parent Talk chats where a parent is worried about a child’s wellbeing and mental health (from 32% of chats to 51%).
- A doubling (129% increase) in the proportion of parents worried about their child’s education (from 7% to 16%).
- A 56% increase in parents worried about their child’s development (from 16% to 25%).
- A 167% jump in the proportion of parents concerned about issues related to their child’s special educational needs or disability (from 6% to 16%).
- A 42% increase in parents worried about their own mental health (from 19% to 27%)

Chart 1: Proportion of parents raising key issues in Parent Talk 1 to 1 support sessions (March 2020 – September 2021)



The impact of the pandemic on parents

Those challenges are not unique to the parents who get in touch with Action for Children. Parents across the country have faced a range of challenges as a result of the pandemic.

Survey of UK Parents

We worked with Savanta ComRes to conduct a representative survey of 2,022 parents of children under 18 in the UK. Field work was undertaken between Tuesday 5th and Friday 8th October 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

We asked them about their experiences of parenting in the pandemic, whether they had needed support with issues related to them or their children, and whether they had got the help they needed. We use the data from that survey in this briefing to highlight the experience of parents nationally.

Large numbers of parents struggled with symptoms of parental burnout

Looking at parents' experiences across the UK, more than 4 in 5 (82%) say they struggled with at least one symptom of potential parental burnout – normally described as a syndrome characterised by feeling physically and mentally overwhelmed by their role as a parent. – since the onset of the pandemic.¹ Nearly a third (30%) of parents say they have struggled with more than three symptoms.

The table below shows the five most common symptoms that parents say they have experienced as a result of the pandemic.

Table 1: Symptoms of parental burnout suffered since the onset of the pandemic (since March 2020)

Symptom	Percentage of parents	Female	Male
Anxiety	46%	52%	37%
Disruption to sleep	34%	38%	28%
Feeling isolated	33%	38%	25%
Depression	32%	35%	27%
Overwhelming mental exhaustion	27%	33%	17%

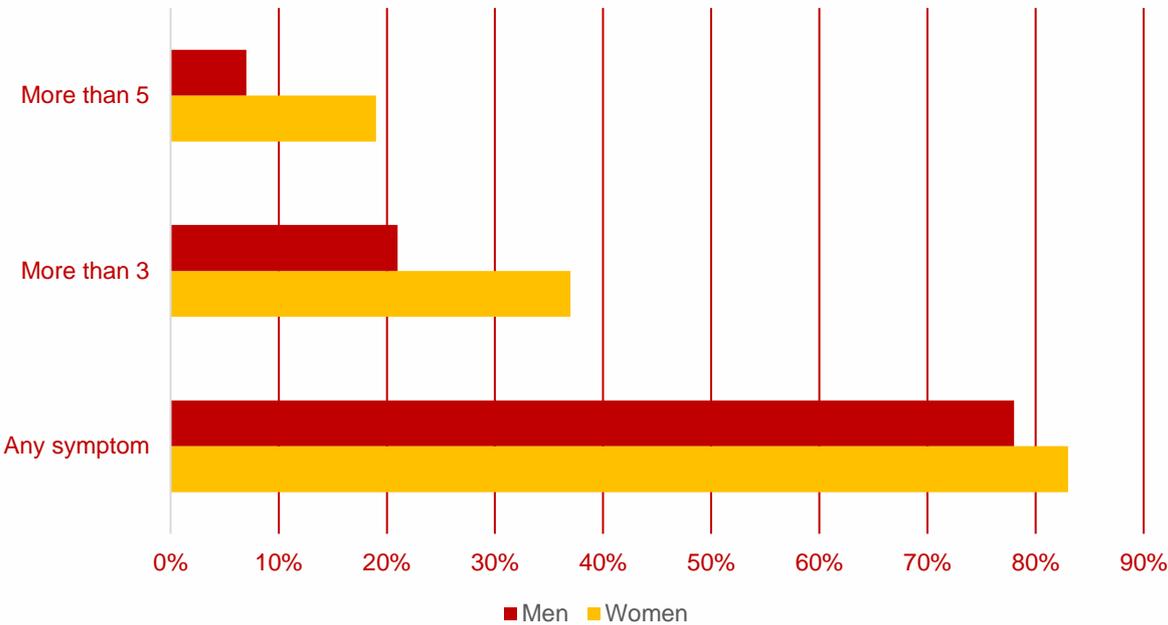
¹ CPD Online – [What is parental burnout?](#)

Women are more likely to say they have struggled with symptoms of parental burnout

The table above also shows the difference between what proportion of men and women have struggled with symptoms of parental burnout. Looking at the five most common symptoms, women are significantly more likely to say they have struggled with all of them as a result of the pandemic.

As well as being more likely to have suffered one symptom of parental burnout, women are more likely to say they have suffered from multiple impacts of dealing with the impact of the pandemic.

Chart 2: Proportion of parents struggling with symptoms of parental burnout



Parents of younger children have been more severely affected

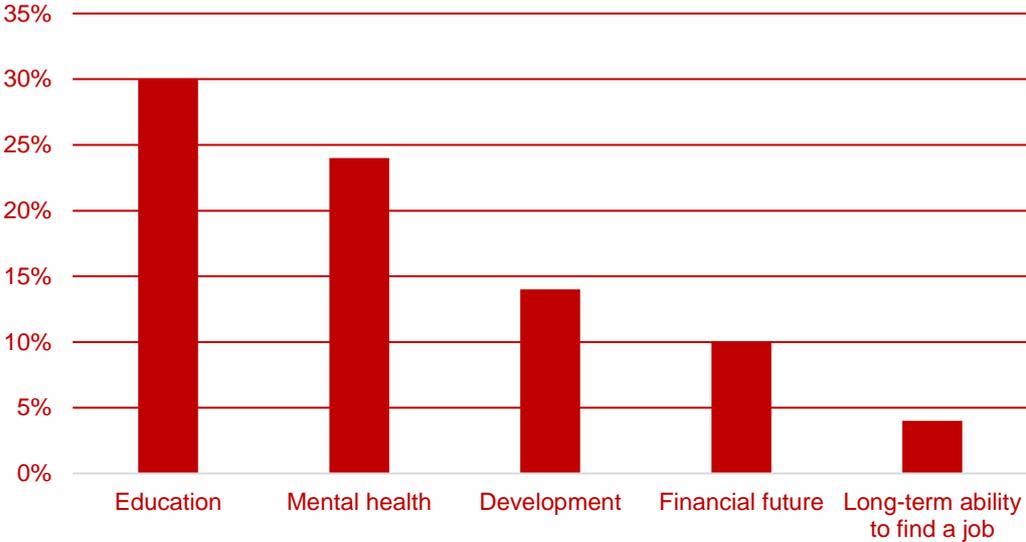
Another group that was more likely to say they have struggled with symptoms of parental burnout is parents of young children. With parents of pre-school children 10 percentage points more likely to say they have struggled with a symptom of parental burnout than parents of secondary school aged children:

- 86% of parents of 0-4 year olds reported at least one symptom of parental burnout
- 84% of 5-11 year olds reported at least one symptom of parental burnout
- 76% of 12-18 year olds reported at least one symptom of parental burnout

Parents are worried about the impact of coronavirus on their children

As well as the impact on them, parents are concerned about the impact of the pandemic on their children. Nearly 9 in 10 (88%) of parents said they were worried about the impact that coronavirus on their child or their child’s future. The chart below shows the proportion of parents that are worried about a range of impacts.

Chart 2: Parents' main concerns about the impact of the pandemic on their children



Parents need support

Parent Talk shows parents need a wide range of support

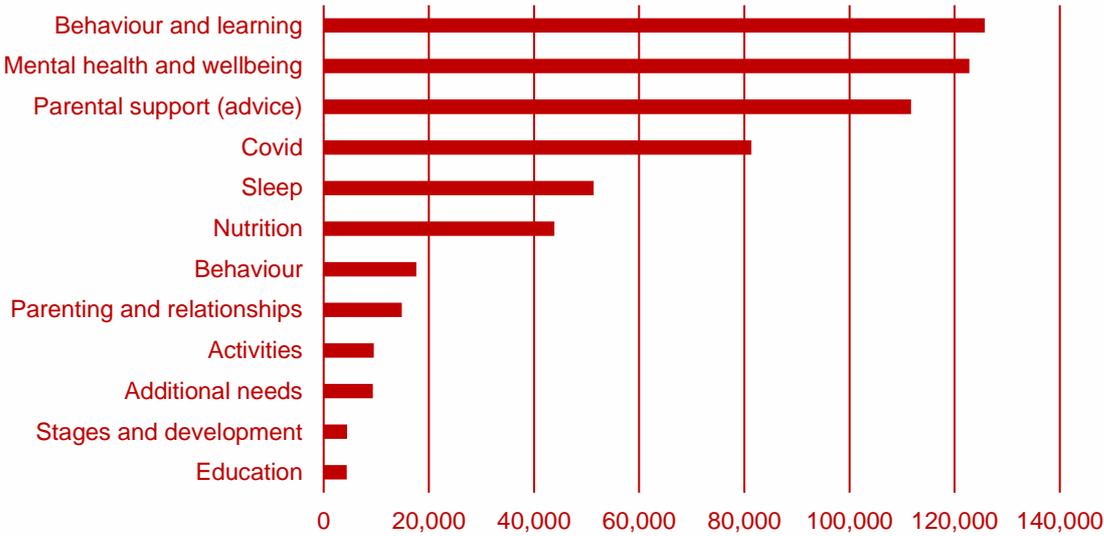
The impact of the pandemic on parents has increased the challenges they face, but the challenges of parenting aren't new. We know from delivering Parent Talk that parents need support in a wide range of areas.

Last financial year, Parent Talk supported 427,000 parents and carers including providing 1 to 1 support to 10,640 parents and carers² (and more than 15,000 between March 2020 and September 2021). Some of that support related to coronavirus and the impact of the pandemic, but many parents needed support with the challenges that parenting poses even in normal years.

Looking at the advice and information pages, the most used information was help around behaviour and learning, mental health and wellbeing, and general parenting support. The chart below shows how many people used information and advice by broad category.

² April 2020-March 2021

Chart 3 – Unique visits to Parent Talk advice and information pages (July 2020 – July 2021)

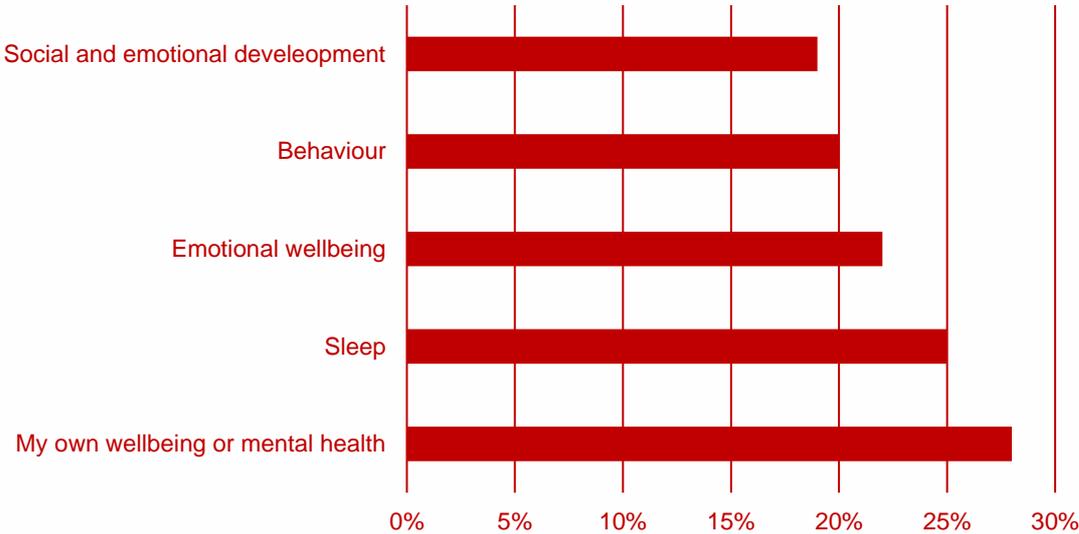


Parenting challenges are common

The way parents rely on Parent Talk is reflected in the support that parents in the UK say they need more generally. In our representative survey of UK parents, more than 6 in 10 (61%) say they have needed support with an issue relating to parenting in the last 12 months. Like Parent Talk, the help parents have wanted in that time varies widely and involves both issues affecting them and issues directly affecting their children.

Of the 61% of parents who say they have needed help in the last 12 months, 86% say they either always or sometimes got the help they wanted. The most common five issues are shown in the chart below.

Chart 4 –Top five issues reported by parents that needed help or support with their parenting over the last year.



Parents want help when they are worried about their children

Parents are more likely to say they needed support with an issue affecting their child than an issue affecting them. Half of all parents said they needed support with an issue affecting their child and just over 3 in 10 said they needed help with something related to their own challenges – such as their emotional wellbeing or practical problems with things like finances and housing issues.

Support from friends, family, and online sources is crucial

When they look for support, parents use a range of sources. When asking parents about their most recent experience of seeking support in the last 12 months, parents were most likely to say they had received support from friends and family and through online sources. The table below shows the five most common sources of support.

Table 2: Top five sources of support for parents that got help with their parenting over the last year.

Source of support	Percentage of parents
Spoke to friends or family	27%
Online from other parents or organisation that works with children	16%
Medical professional	15%
Charity, local authority, housing association, faith/church group	8%
Nursery staff	8%

Parents find support helpful

When parents get that support they find it helpful. We know that from our own services - of parents who used Parent Talk services last year:

- 90% of parents rated the 1 to 1 support they received as good or amazing
- 78% of parents found information, advice and guidance articles to be useful or very useful
- 90% of parents who used information, advice and guidance articles found the information they were looking for

Beyond our service users, the vast majority of parents who say they had some form of parenting support in the last 12 months found it useful, with 81% say they found it useful or very useful. However that means that nearly 2 in 5 said they didn't find the help they had useful.

Of those who did find it useful, parents recognised a range of benefits. They said they felt reassured (42%), they got an answer to their question (36%), were signposted to further

information (26%), and got practical help they needed such as with housing or finances (25%).

Parents don't always get the help they need

Parent Talk can't reach all the parents who look for support

Despite large numbers of parents getting the help they need, too many don't. Currently, we're not able to provide help around 15% of parents and carers who try to use the Parent Talk 1 to 1 support service and its reach is severely limited by its current funding levels.

Too many parents struggle to get the support they need

Outside of parents looking to access Parent Talk, too many parents struggle to access parenting help when they need it.

Of the 61% of parents who said they needed support in the last 12 months, more than half (58%) say they never, or only sometimes, got the support they needed. Including more than 1 in 7 (14%) that said they *never* got the help they needed. That equates to around 1.2 million parents being unable to get the support they need in the last 12 months.³ Nearly half (44%) of parents say they always got the support they needed.

Parents face a range of barriers to accessing support

Delivering Parent Talk – an online service – often highlights that some parents face barriers to seeking support which online support can help them overcome.

The most common barriers parents say they face to seeking support are feeling 'judged' or 'embarrassed'. On top of those parents can struggle to get support for a number of reasons. The table below highlights the most common barriers parents who said they either only sometimes or could never get the help they needed in the last 12 months say they faced.

Table 2: Barriers to seeking help with parenting

Barrier	Percentage of parents
I was afraid of being judged for asking for help or support	22%
I was embarrassed about looking for help	21%
I didn't know where to look	19%
I looked for help but couldn't find it	18%
I wasn't sure the issue was serious enough to need support	18%

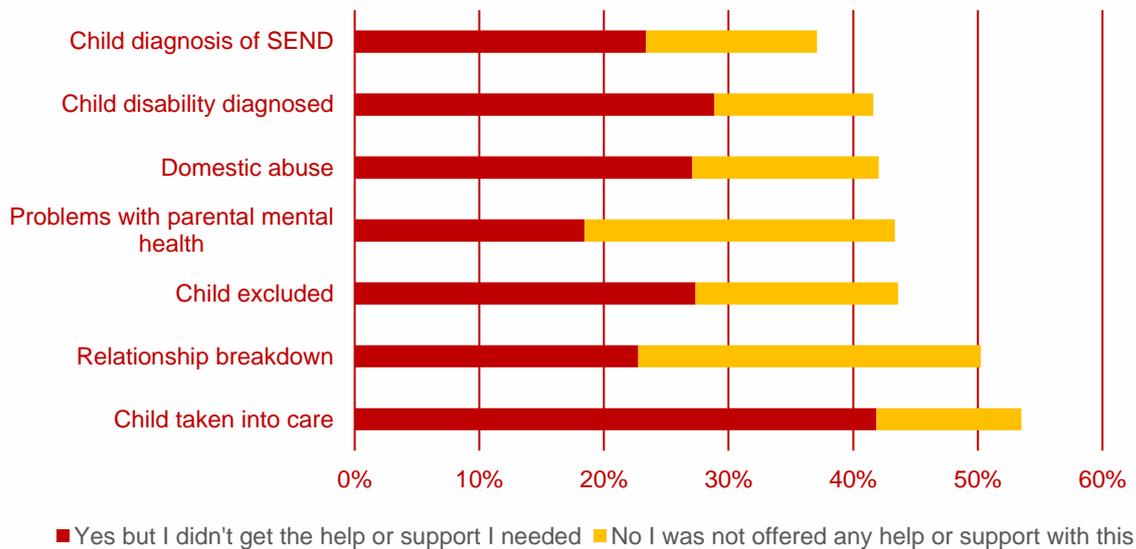
³ ONS, [Families and Households 2020](#) – According to the ONS there are 6.3 million couples with dependent children and 1.7 million lone parent families with dependent children. On that basis, we estimate there are around 14 million parents and carers in the UK.

Parents aren't offered help at crucial moments in their children's lives

One feature of the advice we provide through Parent Talk is that parents often seek help around key moments or big changes in their children's lives.

Too many parents going through major challenges – such as domestic abuse, relationship breakdown, and having their child diagnosed as having a Special Educational Need or Disability – say they haven't been offered help.

Chart 5: Proportion of parents experiencing a major life challenge in the last 12 months who didn't get the support they needed



Online services can help more parents get support

Parent Talk and other digital children's services provide a valuable service alongside face to face parent support services. Currently it is too difficult for parents to get trusted and accurate parenting support online.

Of parents who have received support in the last 12 months 16% say their most recent support was online – 9% from other parents and 6% from professionals or organisations that work with parents and children. Far more would consider getting help online – with just 5% of parents saying they wouldn't consider using any online source to look for help with parenting if they needed it. Of all parents:

- 67% would look on Google
- 60% would read information shared by an organization that works with children
- 60% say they would look for information shared by other parents
- 49% would use a one to one conversation with a professional

Parents need more support

Large numbers of parents need access to universal, trusted, and free advice and support to help through the challenges of parenting. Those challenges are wide ranging and common.

Providing support online is a cost effective way of helping parents to respond to challenges before they or their children need more intensive support and can complement existing services by helping parents who are waiting for or seeking support from those services.

To help more parents benefit from parenting support, the government should commit to funding an expansion of online parenting support services.

That funding would support a wide range of government priorities including the [Early Years Healthy Development Review](#), rolling out [Family Hubs](#), [Supporting Families](#), and [Reducing Parental Conflict](#).

Beyond online services, government should look at the parenting support *new* parents are able to access. Our survey found that parents of pre-school children were more likely to struggle with symptoms of parental burnout. Despite this high level of need, [our recent research](#) revealed that too many parents of 0-5s were unable to access support in their local area.

As well as investing in online support, the government should establish a minimum guarantee of the face-to-face early years services families should be able to access in their local area. That should include universal provision of parent and baby groups and parenting skills sessions.

For more information about this research please contact joe.lane@actionforchildren.org.uk