

FAMILY CONCERNS INTENSIFY AS AUSSIES CONTINUE TO NAVIGATE PANDEMIC LIVING

New research reveals latest concerns for Aussie families across key issues, from the impact of the pandemic to online safety and financial security.

SYDNEY, OCTOBER 2021 – While it's natural for parents to want to keep their children safe both physically and emotionally, the dramatic change in our lives over the past 18 months has led to increased concern for Australian families, with nine in 10 parents (89.7%) now worrying about protecting their families – an increase of 9.3% compared to pre-pandemic data in 2017 (80.4%).

Fear, uncertainty and lengthy lockdowns has made it tough for families, as new research reveals the top perceived threats include the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (63.1%), followed by mental health/wellbeing (57.8%) and financial hardship (52.0%).

The Real Family Concerns report 2021, commissioned by Real Insurance, explores the concerns parents are currently experiencing to keep their family safe. The report clearly demonstrates that the COVID-19 pandemic is a significant concern for parents, with more than three in five people (61.9%) saying they are considerably or very strongly concerned about the continued economic impact of COVID-19, and nine in 10 are at least reasonably concerned.

While we have seen parents adjusting to the new norm and becoming more familiar with repeated threats over time – some financial stresses have slightly eased since the early phases of the pandemic, but unfortunately financial concerns are still prevalent amongst Australian families.

Parents reported being concerned about covering day-to-day expenses, bills and debts for their family (66.8%), the rising cost of living (80.3%), job security (43.5%) and having enough money to cover emergencies or unexpected costs (72.7%).

Family psychologist, Clare Rowe, says that financial stress experienced by adults in the household can easily trickle down and impact children.

“Young people are vulnerable to taking on the emotions of those around them. In times of crisis, it is difficult to shield them from the increased symptoms of stress exhibited by parents such as irritability, fatigue and anxiety. Financial stress in the family is not just an issue that is isolated to one family member and chronic stress can adversely impact on everyone's functioning.”

Other family concerns have clearly heightened due to more permanent changes to our way of living, with one in two children (54.9%) now spending more non-educational time in front of screens than in 2019.

“In many ways, technology has been an enormous assistance during the recent lockdowns, enabling a continuation in some sorts of education, work and maintaining social relationships. However increased screen time has also been repeatedly linked to increases in mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Parents are consistently reporting concerns around their children's screen habits that has seen an increase in social media activity and a decrease in family engagement. There is also a concern about how to manage the expected

decrease in screen time when lockdown restrictions ease and how families navigate a way back to face to face engagement.” Ms Rowe added.

With an increase in time spent on devices, online safety is becoming increasingly important to parents. Parents' concerns about online threats are many and varied but online predators (59.3%), exposure to bullying (54.1%), online scams (52.0%), online addiction (51.5%) and porn (48.3%) are the top five.

However, the reasoning behind these growing online safety concerns are justified given the study alarmingly revealed that one in three parents is aware of their children actually having experienced concerning online threats such as online privacy issues (16.5%), scams (14.2%) or cyber bullying (18.7%).

Perhaps surprisingly the findings suggest that the rates were similar for pre-teens (32.4%) and teens (35.5%), showing that it's not just a problem for teens and the real dangers are being realised at an even younger age.

Ms. Rowe explained that the impact on children when they receive online threats is opening them up to be vulnerable for issues such as online bullying, identity fraud and sexual grooming. “These threats are even more pertinent with younger children who lack the maturity, life experience and cognitive ability to fully understand and take these threats seriously.”

Many parents are actively trying to teach their children how to manage these threats, with 4 in 5 parents saying they have discussed key online threats with their children. However, almost 9 in 10 (87.5%) parents feel strongly that online safety education for children should be included into the curriculum in every year of schooling.

According to Ms Rowe, parents should be vigilant and consistent when educating their children about online safety. “This is not a ‘set and forget’ conversation – it needs to be revisited multiple times. Most parents are aware of this but struggle to implement it consistently. Schools can play a role in structured education around online use too but at the end of the day the best protection is parental involvement, talking to your child and monitoring their online usage.”

The findings also show that pandemic living has substantially increased the importance of insurance cover as a form of family protection. Parents reported that life insurance (38.7%) and funeral insurance protection (30.2%) are more important than ever before. However, despite insurance protection being more top of mind, confidence with having enough cover is dropping, with over three in five parents (63.8%) being concerned about having sufficient insurance cover of any kind to ensure the protection of their family.

Further findings from the research

Protecting the family – COVID-19 our biggest concern

- 61.9% are considerably or very strongly concerned about the economic impact that COVID-19 has had, or will have, on the global and local economy.

Financial concerns

- 66.8% of parents are at least reasonably concerned about covering day-to-day expenses, bills and debts for their family. It has slightly improved from 2020 with fewer families feeling considerable or very strong concern (32.6% vs 47.1%).
- 80.3% of parents are at least reasonably concerned about the rising cost of living. However fewer families feel considerable or very strong concern when compared to 2019 (51.5% vs 69.3%).
- 72.7% of parents have concerns about having enough money to cover emergencies or unexpected costs. Those with considerable and very strong concerns has improved from 2020 (45.6% vs 57.9%) and returned to levels similar to 2019 (48.4%), before COVID-19.

Job security

- 43.5% of parents say that they worry about or feel very little job security – something that is more concerning for females when compared to males (47.4% vs 39.8%)
- A concern for job security means impacts on relationships (35.9%), not being able to plan annual holidays (38.2%) and concerns about paying for school fees (35.8%).

Insurance

- 63.8% of parents are at least reasonably concerned that they may not have sufficient insurance cover to ensure the protection of their assets and family.
- 83.3% of parents are either unsure if they have enough life insurance cover or don't have any cover at all - confidence has dropped significantly since 2017 (16.7% vs 33.2%).
- 88.7% of parents are either unsure if they have enough funeral insurance cover or don't have any cover at all.

Retirement

- 75.5% of parents are at least reasonably concerned if they are putting enough money away for retirement – there is not much difference between males (75.2%) and females (76.2%), it's a concern they both share equally.
- Only 1 in 4 (25.0%) feel they are on track for a retirement they feel they will be happy with. However, females are less likely to feel on track when compared to males (19.4% vs 30.5%).

Online safety

- Parents of younger children tend to focus most on screen time discussions, not talking to strangers and understanding that some material is not appropriate for them.
- Teens are more often being taught responsible use online by parents.
- Ratings of school's performance in educating students about online safety and effectively managing the risks see private schools ahead of public schools (61.4% vs 48.9%) in terms of Excellent and Good ratings.

Further insights from the research can be found on the Real Insurance website

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About the *Real Family Concerns* report

The *Real Family Concerns* report forms part of the Real Insurance Research Series and is a follow on from the Real Concerns of Parents 2020 and Real Concerns Index 2019. In its latest instalment, this study explores various concerns of parents across several categories such as family, finances and children's online security and in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

The report is compiled based on research commissioned by Real Insurance and conducted by CoreData between 20 and 26 July 2021. The research was conducted via a quantitative online survey, gathering **1,359** responses from Australians who have at least one child under 18 years old living at home with them.

This research explores the concerns that families experience ranging from online concerns to financial concerns. *COVID-19 has been particularly challenging for many and has had a big impact on the concerns of families. It's important to keep that in mind when reading this report.*

The report also compares results to those gathered previously in the following reports:

- Real Concerns of Parents (November 2020) – 1,207 responses
- Real Concerns Index (May 2019) – 2,099 responses (parents subset)
- Real Family Protection (April 2017) – 1,032 responses
- Real Kids and Technology (February 2017) – 1,074 responses

The sample is representative of the general population of Australian parents in terms of age, gender, wealth, and state/territory.

About Real Insurance

Real Insurance is an award-winning Australian Insurer specialising in life, funeral, pet, car, home and bike insurance. In the market since 2005, Real Insurance has protected the quality of life of many Australians, through the delivery of innovative and affordable products. Real Insurance has been the recipient of the Feefo Gold Trusted Service Award 2019 and 2020, Readers Digest Quality Service Award in the life and funeral insurance categories 2019 and in the funeral insurance category in 2020. Real Insurance is a trading name of Greenstone Financial Services Pty Ltd and The Hollard Insurance Company Pty Ltd.