



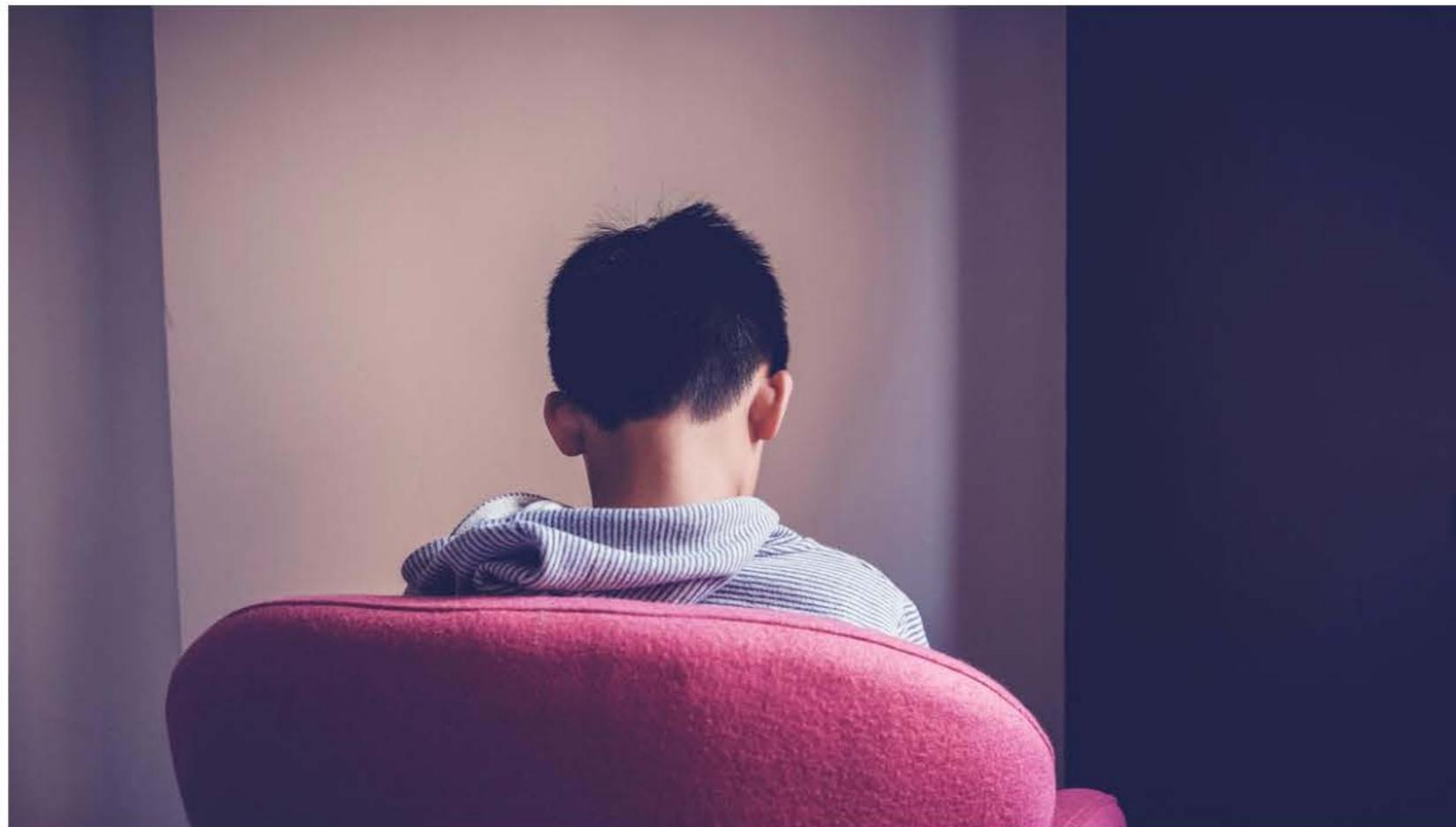
Anxious, stressed, angry and lonely: Australian children are struggling

EXCLUSIVE

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Primary and secondary school age children are increasingly struggling with stress and anxiety.

Australia's primary school age children are angrier, [lonelier](#), more anxious and less able to control their emotions than they were five years ago, new research finds, despite the increased societal concern for childhood wellbeing and focus on resilience.

The picture is no less bleak in secondary school, where more than one in two students say they feel "very stressed", an upward trend since 2003, and 56 per cent say they have a hard time controlling their [sense of worry](#).

Newly released data from the Australian Council of Educational Research Social-Emotional Wellbeing survey of around 500,000 primary and secondary students between 2018 and 2023 reveals a [generation deep in emotional crisis](#) and lacking the tools to manage their emotions.

And girls at all ages are struggling to cope more than boys.

"Many social-emotional indicators of wellbeing examined in the survey have worsened and barely any have improved despite all the genuine attention and effort by schools and parents and the millions of dollars spent to fund youth wellbeing programs," the survey's author Michael Bernard, California State University Emeritus Professor and former Melbourne University Professor, said.

Professor Bernard said the new numbers were staggering, even before looking at recent trends.

“They point to an absolute crisis in the wellbeing of Australian children,” he told The Weekend Australian. “The numbers are bad for young primary schoolkids and get worse as they get older.”



Black Dog Institute's Director of Research Professor Jennie Hudson says she hopes the federal budget... demonstrates the government's commitment to mental health. Professor Hudson said the accumulation of traumas, especially during Australia's natural disasters, was an important matter to address to provide care at the right time. "Children are ... [More](#)

The survey reports one in three (32 per cent) of the more than 300,000 primary school age students say they “feel bad for long periods of time”, and almost half (44 per cent) say they can't calm down quickly when they feel bad. In secondary school 53 per cent of the 180,000 surveyed say they feel “very stressed”. By year 12 it is 77 per cent of girls and 55 per cent of boys.

Adolescent mental health expert and psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg said his practice had been deluged with “so many extremely anxious, extremely depressed kids.”

“In my 30 years in the field I’ve never seen anything like the level of stress and anxiety that today’s children and adolescents are going through,” Dr Carr-Gregg said.

The ACER data is collated from the wellbeing surveys completed by students undertaken by schools seeking to get a handle on the extent of the challenge. It captures kids from all states and territories, and from both government and non-government schools.

It shows a range of resilience markers have deteriorated in school-age children since 2018.

Among primary school students, more say they are experiencing prolonged periods of “feeling very bad”, up from 25 per cent in 2018 to 32 per cent in 2023, and a growing number admit to losing their temper (23 per cent to 29 per cent). Greater numbers of students also report feeling lonely, from 15 per cent in 2018 to 19 per cent in 2023.

Disturbingly, even at primary school, more are becoming worried about their schoolwork, up from 42 to 48 per cent.

For high schoolers the major changes have been in stress and anxiety. In 2018 46 per cent said they “feel very stressed”, rising to 53 per cent in 2023. More are feeling lonely (22 per cent to 25 per cent) and more are losing their temper a lot (26 per cent to 31 per cent).

“What is also interesting is the finding at primary school that more than six in 10 report they could be doing a lot better in their schoolwork, with the number rising to 70 per cent at high school,” Professor Bernard said.

“One reason as shown in the data is students not having the socio-emotional learning skills to stay engaged with an increasingly demanding academic curriculum.”

The reasons behind the numbers would come as no surprise to parents and teachers.

Murdoch Childrens Research Institute professor of paediatrics Harriet Hiscock has conducted research pre-Covid showing rising emergency department presentations among children for self-harm, anxiety and depression.



California State University emeritus professor Michael Bernard.

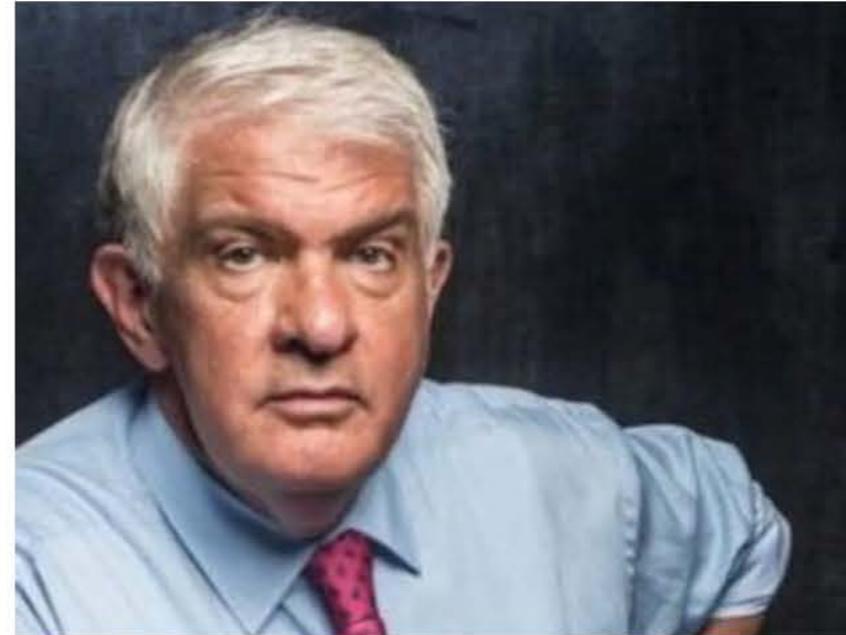
“Social media has been part of it, no doubt,” professor Hiscock said. “It’s a two-edged sword where kids can connect through it, but there is the other side where they feel like others’ lives are better. And access is 24/7 with home no longer a safe haven.”

She said uncertainty about the future is starting younger. “Those thoughts around cost of living are there. How will I get a job? How will I have a house? They are real factors making kids more anxious, as is climate change and the future of the planet.”

Dr Carr-Gregg said the Covid pandemic and the lockdowns had far-reaching and ongoing impacts on the wellbeing of children. Keeping them apart from friends, stopping them taking healthy risks and having them so close to parents at a time they should be finding their individuality was damaging.

“Covid turbocharged everything to the point where the level of anxiety for some escalated to the point where leaving their bedroom became problematic,” he said.

The data shows girls are significantly more vulnerable to emotional challenges than boys across all school years.



Leading child psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg.

For instance 64 per cent of high school girls say they feel very stressed, compared to 41 per cent of boys. Nearly 70 per cent say they have a hard time controlling their worry compared to 44 per cent for boys. In primary school 53 per cent of girls say their feelings are easily hurt compared to one in three boys, and 54 per cent of girls worry a lot about their schoolwork compared to 42 per cent for boys.

The ACER data is not without an upside. Despite the increasing levels of stress and anxiety, more than nine in 10 primary school children and 88 per cent of high school students consider themselves a “happy person.” Similar proportions say they like the person they are, and a large majority are hopeful about the future.

“While this may seem surprising and contradictory, we know that with positive relationships, support and love, young people do feel positive about themselves while experiencing negative feelings associated with stress,” Professor Bernard said.

He is calling for a “national action plan” to address the crisis.

“Many of the educational challenges we are witnessing in young people such as school refusal, vulnerability to bullying, high stress, anxiety, depression and educational under-achievement are directly relatable to the social-emotional capacity of our young.

“Some schools are accepting this challenge, but, due to the very large demands of the academic curricula, not enough class time at each year level is being allocated to teaching students how to cope with stress and manage emotions, especially in secondary schools.”

“And while many parents have the time and are very motivated, they don’t really know what to say and do to develop their children’s social-emotional strengths,” he said.

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Stephen Lunn is The Australian's Social Affairs Editor, covering social policy issues including ageing, disability, welfare, immigration and population policy. He has previously been the paper's environment writer

