



**RethinkFirst**

## **KIDS' MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS IN 2023**

Parents' perspectives about how kids are really doing and what they need from schools



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Children in the U.S. have been back to the classroom, the sports field, and a normal way of life for quite some time, but as parents and teachers continue to breathe a collective sigh of relief, mental health is one pandemic-era effect that continues to be top of mind.

Although COVID-19 certainly shone a light on mental health, these concerns have [been at play for years](#), and rates of [anxiety](#), [depression](#), and [suicide](#) continue to be on an upward trend.

**"Mental health is the defining public health crisis of our time."**  
—[Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA](#)

**1 in 5 kids has anxiety while 1 in 4 has depression.**—[JAMA Pediatrics](#)

**The suicide rate among people aged 10–24 increased by 62% between 2007-2021.**—[U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#)

And when we consider what today's kids are up against, increasing rates of poor mental health should come as no surprise. Kids are faced with academic stress, pressure to get good grades, and get into the best colleges. School disruptions from the pandemic have also led to learning deficits, and those who are trying to catch up are likely to experience stress and anxiety. Add to that bullying/cyberbullying, school safety concerns, [social media](#) use, and the normal ups and downs of life, and it's no wonder kids are overwhelmed.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY continued

Teens who spend more than 3 hours per day on social media face 2X the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes such as symptoms of depression and anxiety.—[JAMA Psychiatry](#)

Poor mental health and stress impact kids' academic performance, level of engagement, behavior, and social interactions—something most schools have recognized as a growing need.

According to a report by the [National Center for Education Statistics](#), 70% of public schools reported an increase in the percentage of students seeking mental health services at school since the start of the pandemic. And, approximately three-quarters say they have seen an increase in staff voicing their concerns about kids who have symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and trauma.

To help school administrators better understand what parents think their kids need to cope with mental health challenges, RethinkFirst conducted an independent survey of 2,000 parents from across the U.S. These are key findings from that survey.

88% of public schools say they can't effectively provide mental health services to all students in need.—[National Center for Education Statistics](#)

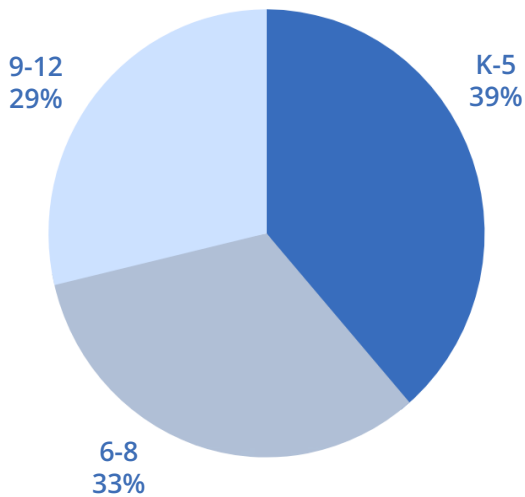




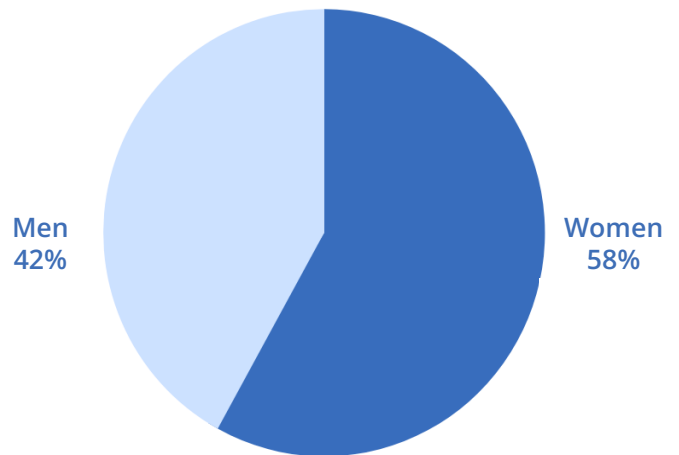
# ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS

RethinkFirst conducted its *Mental Health in the Classroom: The Impact on Kids, Teachers, and Working Parents* survey in June of 2023. Survey responses included 2,000 parents with school-age children across the U.S.

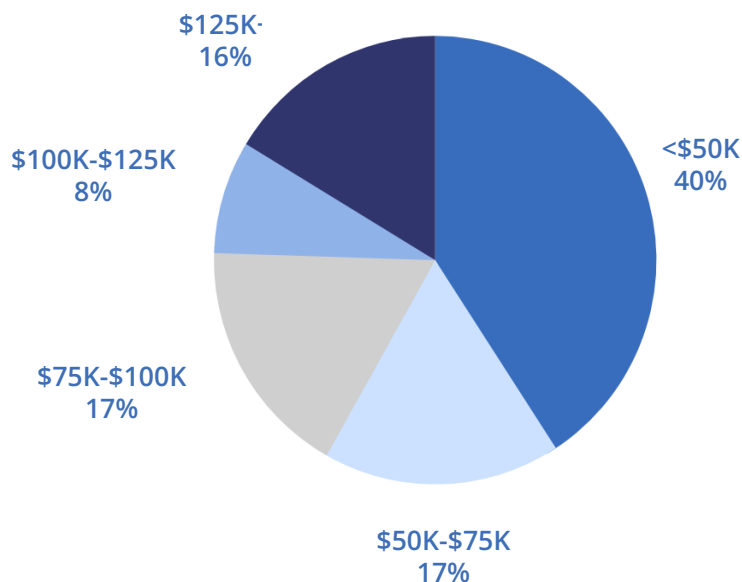
**Grade level of children:**



**Respondents:  
Men vs. women**



**Income of Respondents:**





# KEY FINDINGS

## Parents say kids are anxious and stressed.

26% of parents say anxiety is the top emotion their kids experienced last school year. Among those, 43% said their children are also *highly or extremely stressed*.

## Bullying is a top concern particularly for parents of younger kids.

36% of parents are worried about bullying. 42% of parents of kids in grades K-5 are concerned vs. 36% middle school and 28% high school parents.

## Parents have seen symptoms of poor mental health but aren't alarmed.

75% of parents observed one or more symptoms of poor mental health in their child during the last school year, yet 28% of these parents say they are not overly concerned.

## Parents say kids need help with emotional health.

Among parents who say their kids are anxious, 61% say their kids need skills that will teach them how to recognize and understand their emotions.

## Parents are looking to schools to support kids' mental health.

48% of parents say counseling services by mental health professionals at school are among the types of support their kids need.



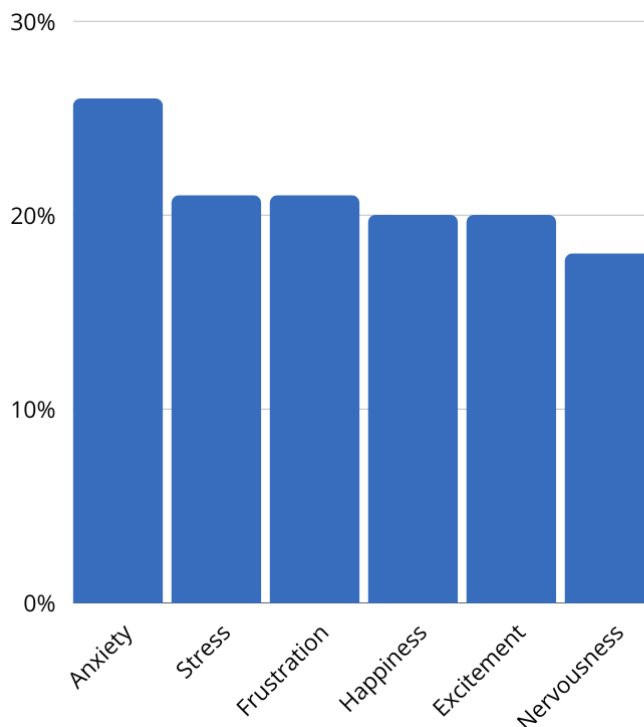
# 1. ANXIETY IS THE LEADING EMOTION PARENTS OBSERVE IN KIDS.

Whether it's uncertainty about a new school, new teachers, and new friends, worry about workloads, or concerns about navigating social situations, our survey reveals that among all emotions parents have seen in their kids, anxiety tops the list.

When asked about the most common emotions their children experienced during the last school year, 26% cited anxiety. Not surprisingly, when parents observed anxiety, they also saw higher stress levels: 43% said their children were *highly or extremely stressed* vs. 34% overall.

Our survey also revealed an interesting dynamic: kids can seem happy and still struggle with anxiety. Among respondents who said their kids are predominantly perceived as happy and excited, anxiety is still among the top 3 emotions they observed.

**Top Emotions Kids Experienced During the 2022-23 School Year**



**35% of parents are concerned or very concerned about their child's mental health.**

## 2. BULLYING IS THE #1 CONCERN AT SCHOOL.

Despite [anti-bullying laws](#), school policies, and prevention programs, bullying and cyberbullying are top of mind for parents. When asked which issues they were concerned about their kids encountering or dealing with at school last year, 36% said bullying took the lead.

Research shows that kids are less likely to report bullying as [they get older](#), so parents may not even be aware that it's happening—something our survey echoed.

Forty-two percent of parents with kids in grades K-5 are concerned vs. 36% of those with kids in grades 6-8 and 28% of those with kids in 9th-12th.

**Only 39% of high school students who were bullied notified an adult**  
—[Anti-Defamation League](#)

While bullying was a top concern for parents, it wasn't the only one. Parents also cited loneliness (26%), making new friends (28%), and pressure to get good grades (27%).





### 3. PARENTS OBSERVE SYMPTOMS OF POOR MENTAL HEALTH BUT A MAJORITY AREN'T WORRIED.

[Depression, anxiety, and stress](#) are all symptoms of poor mental health—and something 31% of teens say they experienced in the [last 30 days](#).

Yet our survey findings suggest that parents observe poor mental health at rates more than two times higher than what kids have self-reported. Among survey respondents, 75% of parents have observed one or more symptoms of poor mental health in their child during the last school year.

Still, even for those who reported symptoms of poor mental health, a significant number aren't overly concerned—likely because their kids' symptoms aren't severe. Of the parents who observed one or more symptoms of poor mental health, 28% are not at all concerned or are minimally concerned.



## 4. KIDS NEED THE SKILLS TO COPE WITH STRESS AND EMOTIONS.

Raising healthy kids takes a village and parents recognize the vital role that schools play in supporting their children. When asked what parents would find helpful for their children when they're faced with mental health issues and stressful situations, skills that support emotional development and communication came out on top.



Among parents who observed anxiety in their kids, how to recognize and understand their emotions (61%), how to use social skills such as effective communication, empathy, and conflict resolution (56%), and how to manage stress through deep breathing, meditation, and relaxation (56%) were the top three skills parents said kids need.

What's more, parents say these skills are important regardless of how concerned they are about their kids' mental health.

**What skills would be helpful for your child to learn in school to help with mental health and stressful situations?**

**49%**

how to recognize and understand their emotions.

**46%**

how to use social skills such as effective communication, empathy, and conflict

**43%**

how to manage stress through deep breathing, meditation, and relaxation.

**"If I had learned about my mental health earlier on — been taught about my condition in school the way I was taught about other subjects — my journey could have looked very different."**

—[Selena Gomez](#)

## 5. PARENTS WANT MORE MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT.

Stress and challenging situations are inevitable, but empowering and equipping kids with effective ways to navigate what comes their way builds resiliency and confidence.

Unfortunately, nearly 1 in 4 of survey respondents say their children are unprepared to deal with stress or mental health issues they encounter at school.

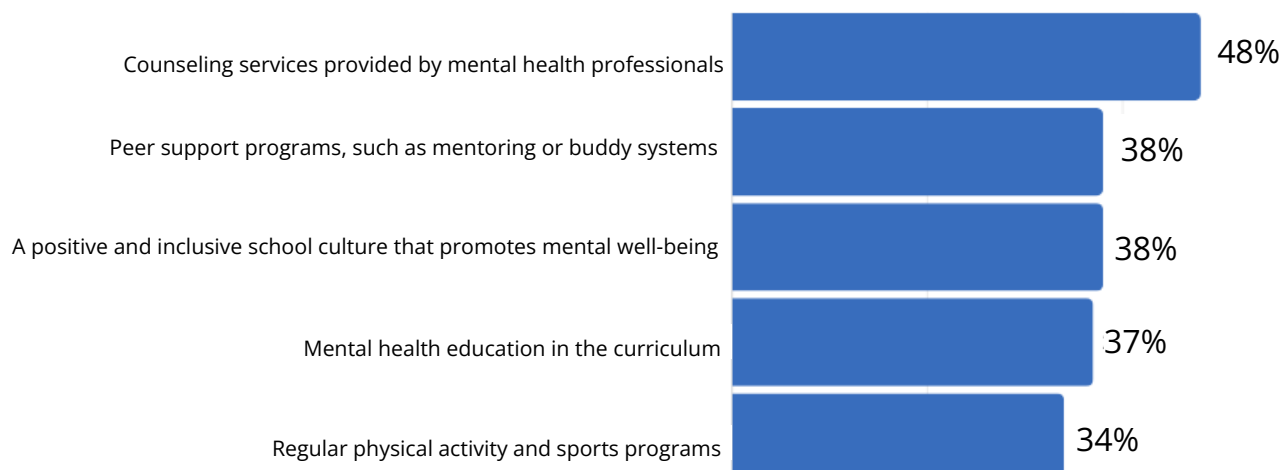


When asked if schools have adequate mental health tools and resources to support them and their children, one-third said no, while 21% were unsure. The same was true for stress—29% and 20% respectively.

With a [growing shortage](#) of mental health providers and care gaps, it's no surprise that parents are leaning on schools to fill the void. When parents were asked about the types of support and resources they want more of, nearly half (48%) cited counseling services by mental health professionals at school. For parents who observed anxiety in kids, that number jumped to 62%.

**60% of youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment—[Mental Health America](#)**

### Top 5 School Resources Parents Want





# HOW SCHOOLS CAN SUPPORT KIDS AND FAMILIES

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Kids' mental health concerns are complex, individual, and have been a growing challenge for years but there's no quick fix. That doesn't mean, however, that all hope is lost. With a greater understanding of mental health and well-being, strategies that support educators, staff, kids, and families, schools can respond and offer the resources and support kids need to thrive.

For school districts considering a mental health solution and tools, training and support, it's important to prioritize:

**Expertise:** solutions should be developed by clinical and educational experts who understand mental health and can help schools navigate current challenges.

**Tailored content:** relevant professional learning and grade-level student curriculum that equips teachers, empowers students, and increases student engagement.

**Flexibility:** easy implementation regardless of the learning environment. Plus, solutions should provide cost-effective scalability and seamless updates.

**Support:** a professional services team that supports classroom rollout logistics, leadership data analytics, and everything in between to ensure success.



## About RethinkFirst

RethinkFirst is a global health technology company providing cloud-based treatment tools, training, and clinical support to employers, educators, payors, and behavioral health professionals. Rethink's award-winning solutions serve thousands of clients globally, including nearly one-third of the Fortune 100 and many of the country's largest public school systems and health plans. Each of Rethink's award-winning solutions incorporates evidenced-based protocols, workflow automation, and advanced data analytics to drive meaningful clinical outcomes and improved performance for customers and their communities.

