

# The Ties That Bind and Nurture

Results of the North Carolina Social Solidarity Survey

capita



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# Introduction

The first years of a child's life are a critical time during which the nature and quality of children's relationships have long-term impacts on their development and well-being . Parents are the center of a child's relationships, so their health and well-being are vitally important. One key determinant of parents' own flourishing is the nature and strength of social connections, which are a bulwark against parental mental health problems and an avenue for material and emotional support. The important role played by social connections in supporting parents, families, and children underscores the old adage that it takes a village to raise a child.

Though community and social connection have always been a part of human society, recent developments like the growth of social media have fundamentally transformed the ways we create, experience, and rely upon social connections. As we move into the third year of the COVID-19 pandemic, families and communities are trying to rebuild social ties that were fraying even before the pandemic, and the "village" that parents knew and trusted before may look very different in the future. In short, now is a critical time to focus on and improve our understanding of the relationship between social connectedness and parent and child well-being.

# Study Design

## NOTE 01

When comparing across age cohorts in a single cross-sectional study such as this, one must be cautious in attributing differences to cohort effects (such as Gen Z vs. millennials) rather than age effects (young adults vs. older adults). Studies conducted at a single point in time are not able to distinguish between the two.

This report presents the findings of a survey, commissioned by Capita in March 2022, that focused on social connection, trust, civic and community engagement, and the well-being of North Carolina families with children aged 0-5 years. The approximately 800 respondents were identified via an online voluntary panel of North Carolina residents between the ages of 18 and 50 split about evenly between those who were parents of young children and the wider public (including parents with older children and nonparents). Though a survey of such breadth presents the opportunity to explore numerous relationships, analysis of the survey data was focused on the following:

- The social connectedness of parents of young children as it impacts their parenting (and vice versa);
- Differences in social connectedness between parents of young children and the wider population;
- The experiences of parents of young children in the Gen Z (18-24) and millennial and Gen X cohorts;<sup>1</sup>
- Experiences of parents of young children in different racial and ethnic groups.



# Key Takeaways

The key takeaways below are those that emerged from initial rounds of analysis that focused on identifying larger patterns and differences rather than more complex multivariate relationships. **Findings labeled as “significant” were found to have a p value of less than .05, indicating a high degree of confidence.**

## 01 —

### Loneliness, Family Structure, and Age

- Parents of young children were significantly less likely (36%) to report being lonely than the rest of the survey respondents (45%).
- Loneliness was more common for Gen Z parents of young children than for older parents. Almost half (46%) of Gen Z parents of young children said they are lonely in comparison with just over a third (34%) of older parents.
- Nearly half (48%) of all Gen Z parents of young children who took the survey are single parents (unmarried and unpartnered), compared with only 26% of older parents.
- 44% of single (unmarried and unpartnered) parents with young children reported being lonely, a significantly higher proportion than the 33% of married and partnered parents who said they are lonely.

## 02 —

### Social Support and Advice for Parents

- Over a quarter of parents of young children did not have any trusted source for advice on raising their children. For those who did, the most frequently cited sources were family members and health care providers.
- Only 27% of parents of young children reported using paid child care providers.
- For families who paid for child care, child care providers were a very common source of advice.

## 03 —

### Participation in Social Activities

- 65% of parents of young children are involved in at least one community activity or social group. This is significantly more than the 56% of survey takers who are not parents of young children. However, participation was not a strong buffer against feelings of loneliness and social isolation.
- Gen Z parents of young children are more likely than older parents to participate in community activities with the notable exception of religious organizations.

# Main Findings

## 01 —

### **36% of parents struggle with loneliness, and certain groups struggle more than others**

Though over a third (36%) of parents of young children are lonely, they are on the whole less lonely than the rest of the population (45%). When looking at parents with young children by age, race, and marital status, certain groups are struggling more than others.

**46% of Gen Z parents of young children said they are lonely, about 12 percentage points more than older parents.** Compared with older parents of young children, younger parents may have fewer social connections on which to rely. Younger parents are more likely to be new parents (i.e., to not have additional older children), and so may have a smaller social network with whom they can share experiences. In addition, the multiyear lockdowns brought on by COVID made it difficult to form new bonds. Furthermore, older parents of young children are likely to have lived in one place for longer than most Gen Z parents, giving them more time to build and strengthen their networks and relationships.

**Parents of young children without a spouse or partner are lonelier than married parents.** Compared with single parents of young children, married and partnered parents were less likely to report being lonely (44% and 33%, respectively). With the decline of marriage rates and increase in single parent households across the US, it is increasingly important to consider the types of communities, neighborhoods, and platforms for social connection we are building, and whether or not they accommodate families who may not fit the nuclear family mold.

## 02 —

### **28% of parents feel they do not have resources for getting advice on raising children**

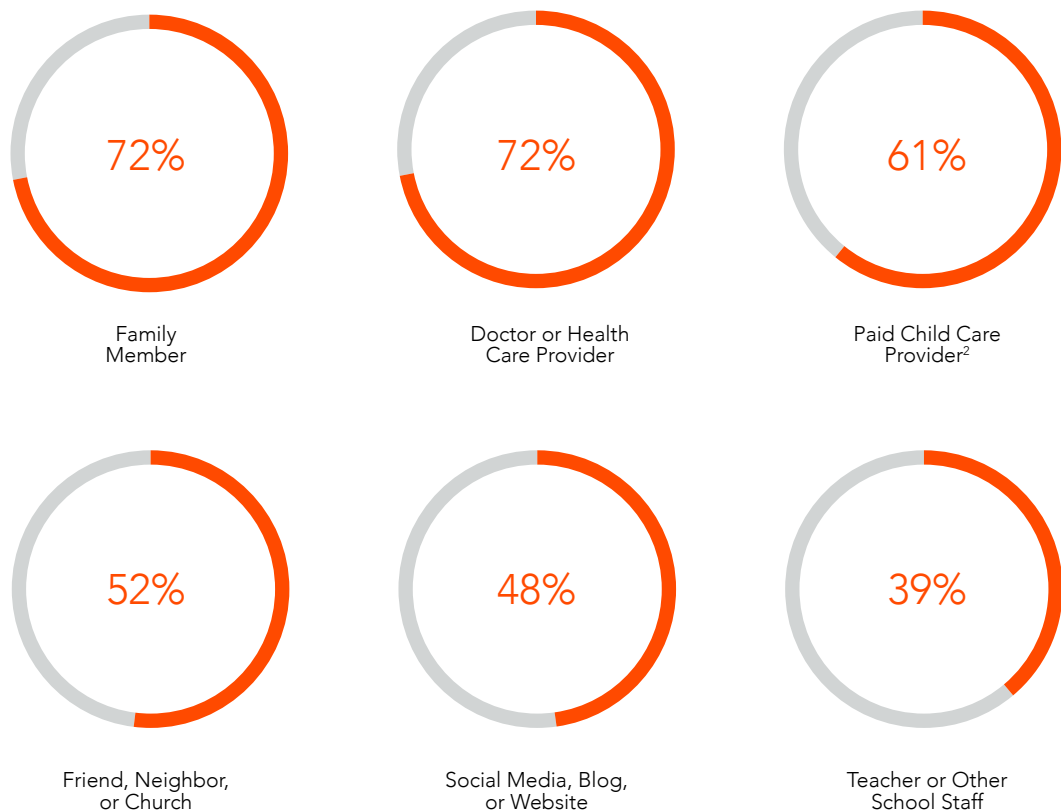
While most parents feel they have sources of advice on raising children, more than a quarter are slipping through the cracks. **More than one in four parents of young children felt they did not have anyone they could look to for parenting advice during their child's critical developmental years**, indicating a degree of isolation with potential negative implications for parents and their children. Parents with young children, particularly new parents, are likely to experience uncertainty and seek guidance as they navigate their child's critical development period between birth and five years of age. Furthermore, COVID-19's negative impact on social connection broadly is likely to exacerbate feelings of isolation among parents with young children.

## Parents are most likely to get advice from family and professional providers

The sources of parenting advice on which parents of young children rely provide insight into the people, networks, and resources they trust and provide some indication of the resources available to them during their children's critical development years. The percentage of parents with young children who received "some" or "quite a lot" of useful parenting advice varied between the different sources, as shown in the figure below.

**FIGURE 01**

Percentage of Parents with Young Children Who Received Useful Parenting Advice from the Following Sources (in the last 6 months)



**NOTE 02**

Of those that relied on paid child care to take care of their children

**Parents with young children were much more likely to have received useful advice from a family member or health care providers than any other source.** Seventy-two percent of respondents answered they had received helpful advice from their health care provider and a similar share said they had received it from family members. This high percentage likely indicates that most parents have a high degree of trust in their health care provider and that they view them as a credible source for raising their child during this critical period. Additionally, among the 27% of parents who relied on paid child care, 61% stated they received useful advice from their provider, establishing providers as the third most highly regarded source of advice.

## 04

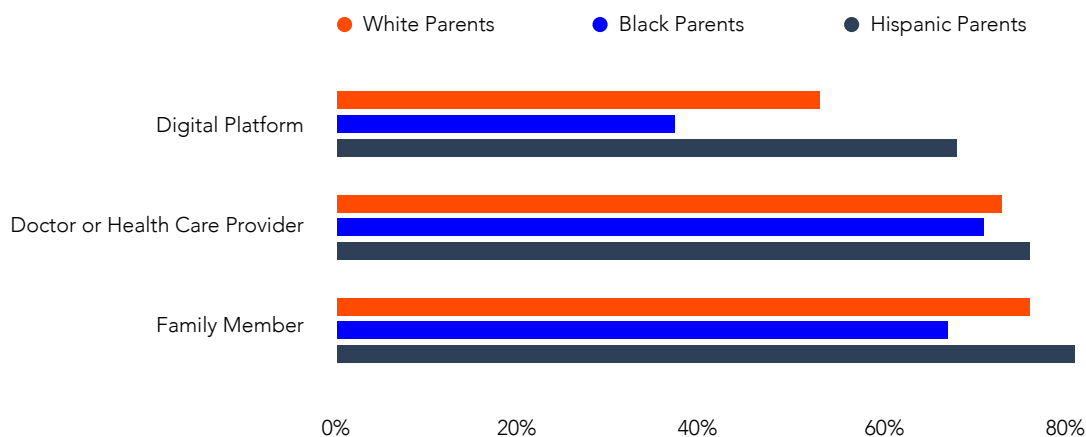
## Parents across different racial and ethnic groups place similar value on sources of parenting advice

When looking at the sources of useful advice by parents' race/ethnicity, there were more similarities than differences. The most represented racial/ethnic groups captured by the survey were White (non-Hispanic), Black, and Hispanic parents of young children with samples of 174, 86, and 34, respectively. While there were small differences among the groups, the small sample sizes of non-White respondents made it difficult to find statistically significant differences. The differences and similarities are shown on the following page.

- **Hispanic parents were significantly more likely to have received useful advice from digital platforms (68%)** compared to White (53%) and Black (37%) parents.
- There was no disparity by race or ethnicity for parents receiving useful advice from their health care provider, as over 70% of White, Black, and Hispanic parents all felt they had received useful parenting advice from their health care provider.
- There was also not a significant disparity by race or ethnicity for parents receiving useful parenting advice from family. While a smaller percentage of Black parents (67%) answered that they had received useful advice from family in comparison to White (76%) and Hispanic (81%) parents, the high percentage rates across all three groups indicate a high degree of trust among parents and their families, even when broken down by race/ethnicity.

### FIGURE 02

Share of Parents with Young Children Who Received Useful Parenting Advice from Selected Sources, Broken Down by Race/Ethnicity of Parents





## Gen Z parents overall are more involved than older parents, with a few exceptions

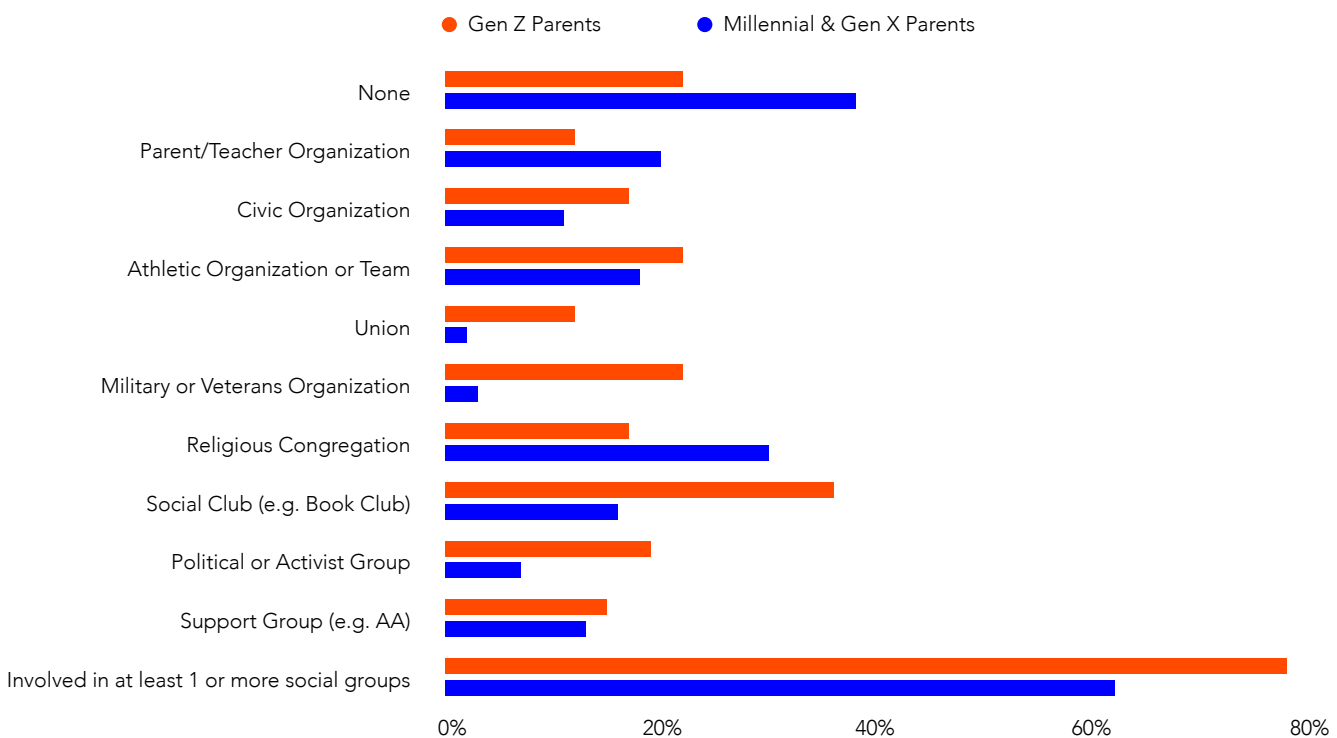
While 35% of parents with young children responded that they are not involved in any social groups listed in the survey, **most (65%) parents of young children are involved in at least one group.** They also are significantly more involved than survey takers who don't have young children, of whom almost half (44%) said they are not involved in any social group.

**Gen Z parents of young children are more involved in most types of social groups than older parents,** with social clubs having the biggest increase. While this may be notable, it's also important to consider that the difference in participation may be due to habits or rhythms common to each age group, not because of a true generational distinction (see Endnote 2). Gen Z survey takers overall, with or without young children, were significantly more involved in community activities than older survey takers, so when looking just at Gen Z parents, it's reasonable to expect a higher degree of involvement. Gen Z parents may be more involved than older parents because they are more likely to be in school, because they are part of social groups or organizations that have carried over from their (relatively more recent) high school or college years, or because they don't also have other older children who need to be driven to their own social activities. The figure below shows the rate of participation in different social organizations by parents of young children broken down by generation.

Lower participation in parent-teacher organizations by Gen Z parents can probably be explained by the fact that these parents are less likely than older parents to have school-aged children. However, the difference in participation in religious organizations between the two generations of parents is worth exploring.

**FIGURE 03**

Involvement by Group Type and Generation



## 06

## Gen Z parents are less religiously involved than older parents

**Only 17% of Gen Z parents are part of a religious congregation, 13 percentage points less than the 30% of older parents who answered that they are religious.** This close but not quite statistically significant finding lines up with current research that Gen Z is increasingly non-religious in comparison to older generations. ↔

This religious divide is plainer when looking at what groups Gen Z and older parents choose to be a part of if they are only part of a one social group. Forty percent of older parents involved in just one group are part of a religious congregation, while no Gen Z parents responded that they are involved religiously if they are part of just one group; they are more likely to be a part of a social club.

The difference in religious participation between Gen Z parents and older parents might be explained by the fact that younger people generally participate less in religious activities as they enter college and adulthood and then participate again once they age and start a family, especially if they grew up going to church (although this trend may be waning) ↔. A second possible reason is that in many religious communities there is a persistent stigma attached to unmarried parents. **Gen Z parents of young children are significantly more likely to be unmarried (78%) than older parents (42%)** and may be more commonly affected by this stigma than older parents. Finally, a third possible reason is that Gen Z parents do not have time to regularly participate in religious gatherings.

It is also important to note that the generational religious divide may be more or less stark in other states. A 2014 Pew Research study ↔ noted that 39% of adults in North Carolina said they attended religious services once a week, but other less religious states will most likely have fewer parents overall who are part of a religious congregation.

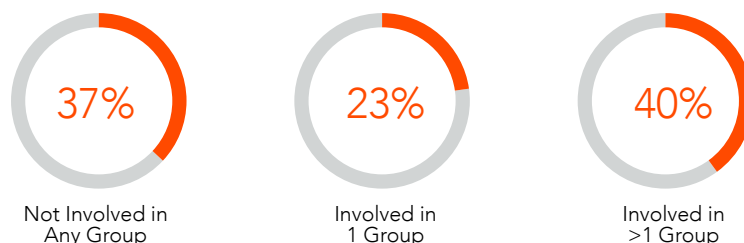
## 07

## Involvement does not necessarily indicate less loneliness among parents

Involvement in social groups is an indicator of how parents with young children are choosing to spend their free time outside of time with family and with whom they are deciding to spend it, but participation in social groups does not necessarily mean that parents feel less lonely. As mentioned earlier, 35% of parents with young children answered that they are not involved in any social groups, but the number of social groups in which a parent participated did not affect the likelihood that they were lonely, as shown in the figure below.

**FIGURE 04**

Share of Parents with Young Children Who are Lonely by Involvement





## Conclusions and Further Research


The survey of parents sheds light on several important issues facing parents of young children in North Carolina including loneliness, social isolation, and lack of parental support. While the findings suggest that many parents are doing all right, a large number are lonely and lack adequate sources of parenting advice.

Furthermore, the role played by participation in social activities is unclear. Further research ought to look more closely at the relationships between loneliness, time spent on social activities, and feelings of parental support. In addition, it would be useful to know more about the nature of the advice provided by paid providers in the health care and child care sectors since these were found to be the most important parental supports outside of immediate family. Lastly, we need to understand how our changing society is impacting parenting so that we can provide adequate support for parents and young children as they are and not as we imagine them to be.

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