Parenting Gen Z

Navigating Boundaries, Complex Emotions and Tough Conversations

METHODOLOGY

Results are based on a Gallup Panel™ web survey conducted March 13-20, 2024, with 1,675 parents aged 18 and older, and their 10- to 18-year-old children. The Gallup Panel is a probability-based panel of U.S. adults, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, who are randomly selected using address-based sampling methodology. Gallup also recruits using random-digit-dial phone interviews that cover landlines and cellphones.

Parents were eligible to complete the survey if they indicated they had at least one child living in their household between the ages of 10 and 18. If there were multiple children between the ages of 10 and 18 in the household, parents were asked to answer questions about the child who would have the next birthday. After completing their section of the survey, parents were asked to pass the survey to that child, who then completed their section of the survey.

For results based on the total sample of adult parents, the margin of sampling error is ±3.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For results based on the total sample of 10- to 18-year-old children, the margin of sampling error is ±3.3 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

All reported margins of sampling error include computed design effects for weighting. In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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Introduction

Since May 2023, the Walton Family Foundation and Gallup have partnered to conduct the **Voices of Gen Z Study**, a multiyear, longitudinal survey research effort dedicated to improving understanding of Generation Z's lives and experiences.

In partnership with clinical psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour, the latest survey provides greater insight into parents' experiences raising Gen Z, how parents and children contend with their emotions, and the coping mechanisms and parenting support Gen Z children prefer when they are struggling. Survey responses were collected March 13-20, 2024, from 1,675 10- to 18-year-old children and one of their parents or guardians. The results reveal that the emotional lives and parent-child dynamics of Gen Z are complicated.

> **More than 90% of Gen Z children felt a lot of happiness and enjoyment** the prior day — but sizeable segments also felt stress, anxiety, sadness or loneliness.
>
> **Parents find it difficult to talk about some of the topics they worry most about**, such as their child's mental health, feelings and experiences on social media — but their children overwhelmingly find those conversations to be helpful.
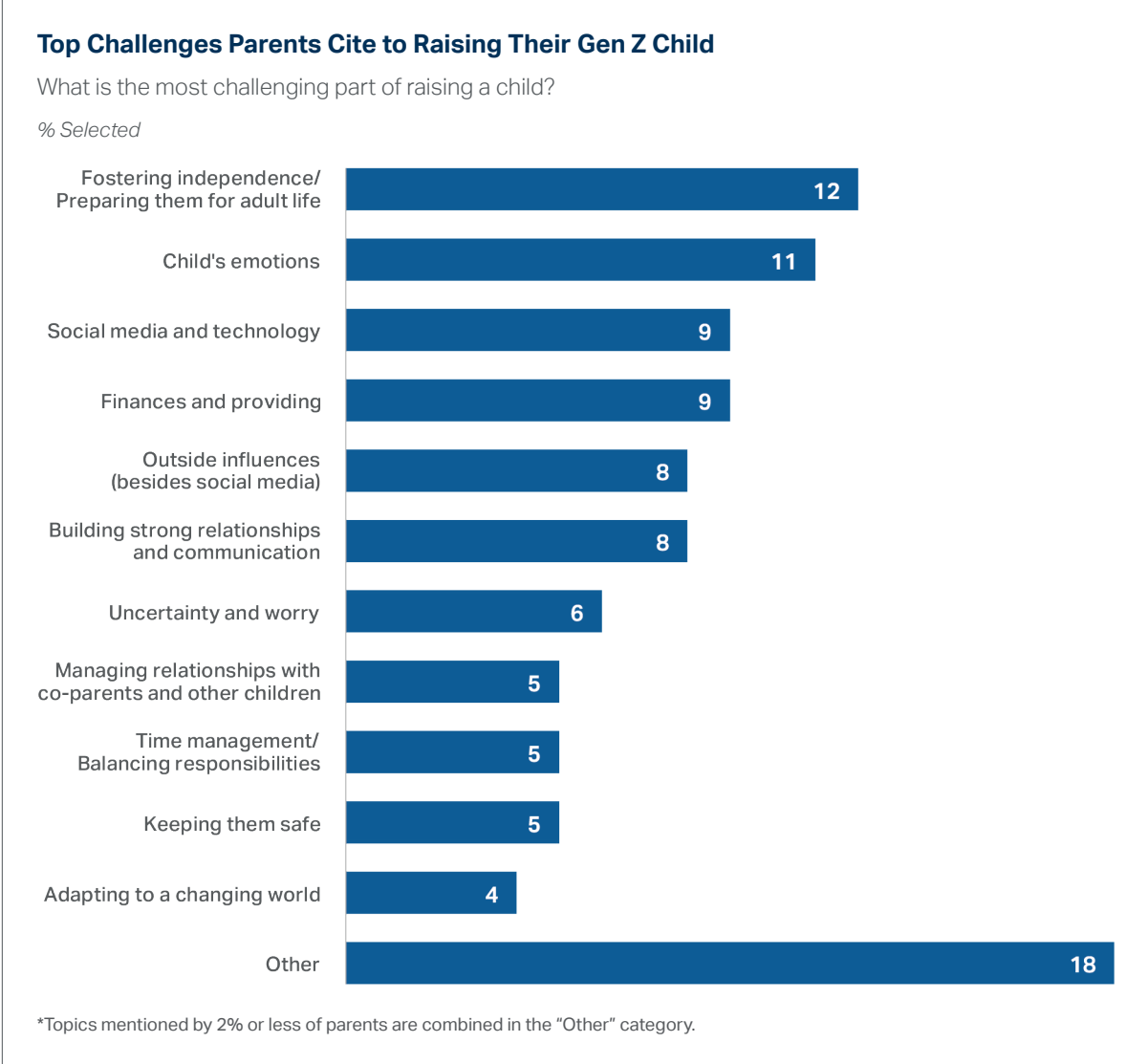>
> **Parents struggle to balance guiding their children with giving them independence** — but Gen Z children crave greater freedom and space to chart their own path.

To better understand the most important challenges of being a Gen Z child or their parent, Walton Family Foundation and Gallup asked both groups to share what was most difficult or important to understand about their experiences.

Given the opportunity to share the aspect of parenthood they find most challenging in an open-ended question format, parents' responses varied widely. Eleven topics were mentioned by at least 4% of parents of Gen Zers, underscoring the broad array of hurdles they face. The challenges parents cite most frequently are 1) balancing the role of providing structure and guidelines with the need to give their child independence and opportunities to learn from mistakes (12%) and 2) understanding and helping manage their child's emotions (11%). Social media and the financial costs of raising a child (each at 9%) are also among the most common challenges parents say they face.

CHART 1

Top Challenges Parents Cite to Raising Their Gen Z Child

What is the most challenging part of raising a child?

% Selected

Challenge	%
Fostering independence/Preparing them for adult life	12
Child's emotions	11
Social media and technology	9
Finances and providing	9
Outside influences (besides social media)	8
Building strong relationships and communication	8
Uncertainty and worry	6
Managing relationships with co-parents and other children	5
Time management/Balancing responsibilities	5
Keeping them safe	5
Adapting to a changing world	4
Other	18

*Topics mentioned by 2% or less of parents are combined in the "Other" category.

The list of things Gen Z children wish their parents understood about them generally aligns with the challenges cited most often by their parents. About one in five children (19%) say they most wish their parents better understood their feelings, emotions and opinions. A further 16% wish their parents better understood their desire for more independence and freedom (10%) or space (6%). Encouragingly, 17% of Gen Z children had nothing to share because they felt their parents already understood them well.
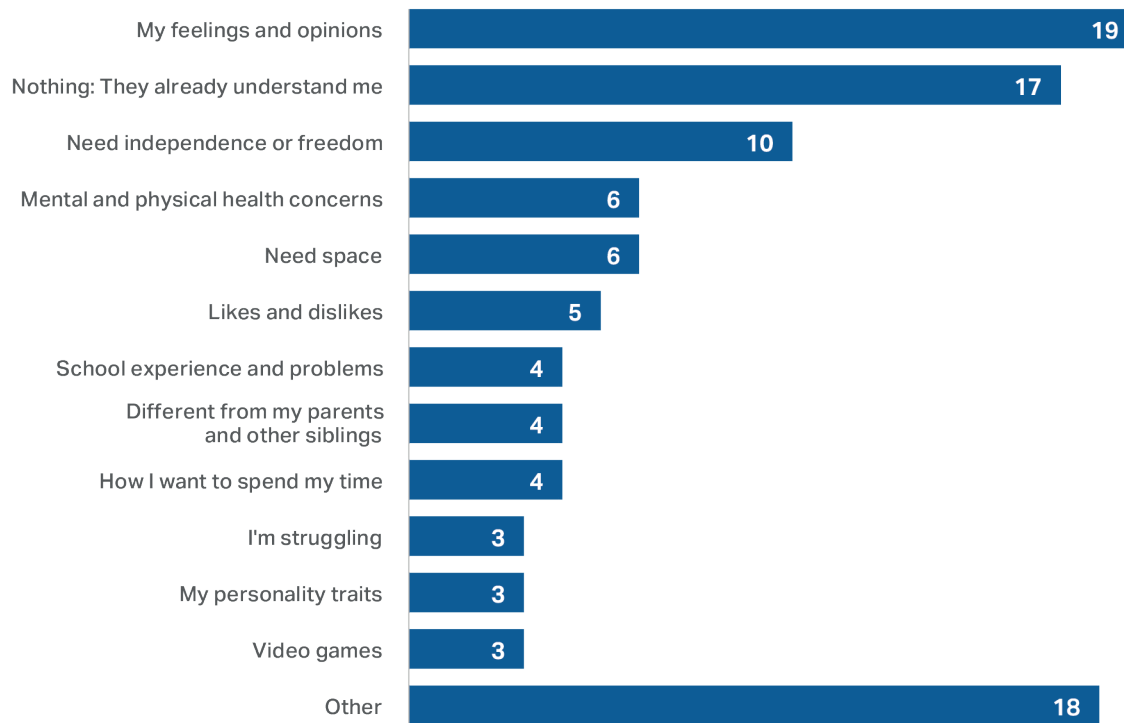
I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD …

"I feel that they understand me very well. If there was anything else I'd want them to understand more about me, [it] is that I love them, which I think they already do."

CHART 2

Top Things Gen Z Wishes Their Parents Better Understood About Them

What is the most important thing you wish your parents understood about you?

% Selected

My feelings and opinions	19
Nothing: They already understand me	17
Need independence or freedom	10
Mental and physical health concerns	6
Need space	6
Likes and dislikes	5
School experience and problems	4
Different from my parents and other siblings	4
How I want to spend my time	4
I'm struggling	3
My personality traits	3
Video games	3
Other	18

*Topics mentioned by 2% or less of Gen Z children are combined in the "Other" category. Due to rounding, totals may not sum to 100%.

These qualitative responses coupled with quantitative data from the survey suggest that Gen Z and their parents mutually acknowledge the most challenging areas of the parent-child relationship. While these areas may be difficult to contend with, the results reveal several key dynamics that may help Gen Z children and their parents come to an understanding about how best to navigate children's emotions, their desire for independence and the uncertainty that comes with being a parent.

Coping With Feelings and Emotions

Gen Z children most wish their parents understood how they are feeling, which is often a mix of positive and negative emotions: Nearly two-thirds (63%) of children say they felt both kinds of emotions a lot of the prior day. One in three say they felt only positive emotions, and just 4% say they only felt negative emotions.
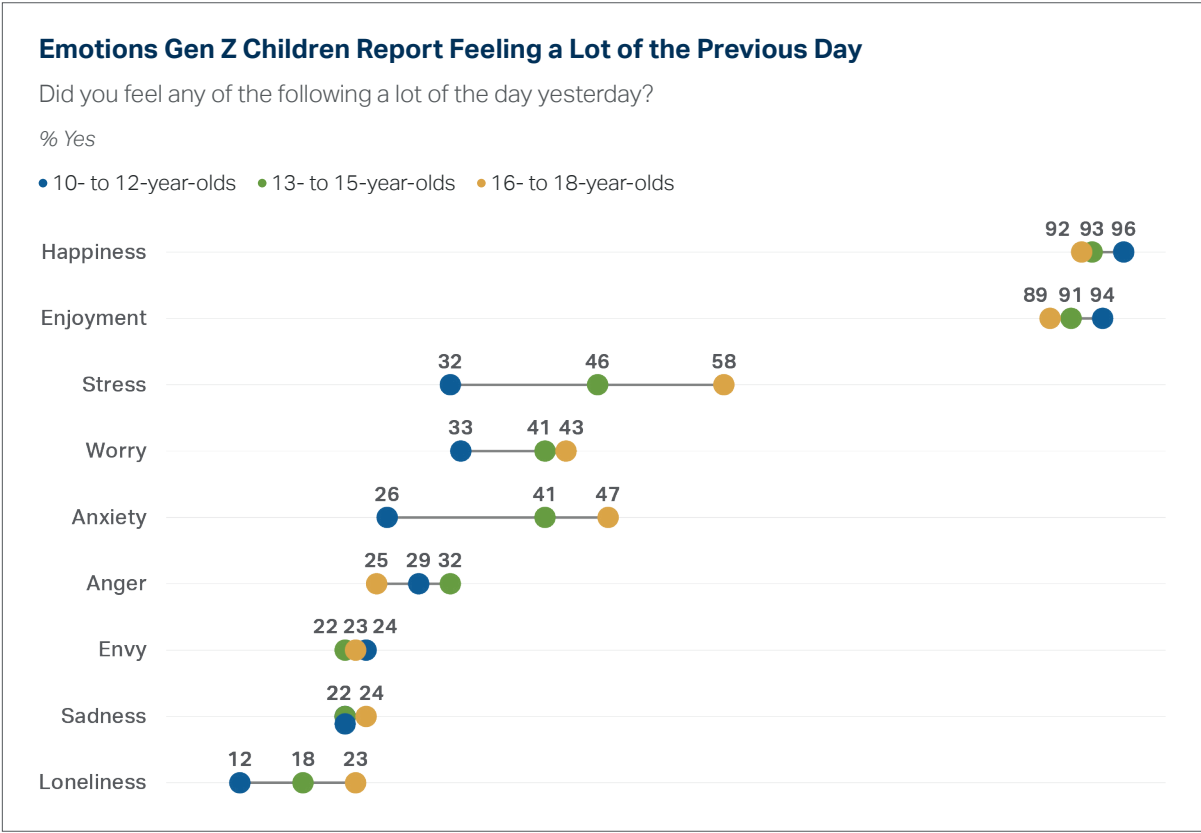
More than nine in 10 children say they felt a lot of happiness (94%) and enjoyment (91%) the prior day. However, notable percentages also say they felt a lot of stress (45%), anxiety (38%), anger (29%) and loneliness (17%) alongside those positive emotions.

> **I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD …**
>
> "That my feelings may not be logical, but they're still real and important."

CHART 3

Emotions Gen Z Children Report Feeling a Lot of the Previous Day

Did you feel any of the following a lot of the day yesterday?

% Yes

● 10- to 12-year-olds   ● 13- to 15-year-olds   ● 16- to 18-year-olds

Emotion	10-12	13-15	16-18
Happiness	96	93	92
Enjoyment	94	91	89
Stress	32	46	58
Worry	33	41	43
Anxiety	26	41	47
Anger	32	29	25
Envy	24	23	22
Sadness	22	22	24
Loneliness	12	18	23

These emotions — particularly stress, worry and anxiety — generally vary by age group, with 16- to 18-year-old Gen Zers reporting higher levels of negative emotions and 10- to 12-year-olds reporting slightly higher levels of happiness and enjoyment.

Parents recognize the complexity of their children's feelings, and navigating those emotions is one of the top challenges parents grapple with. About one in three parents (35%) agree their child's emotions are "very intense," and 22% say they feel like nothing they say or do is right when their child struggles with their emotions.
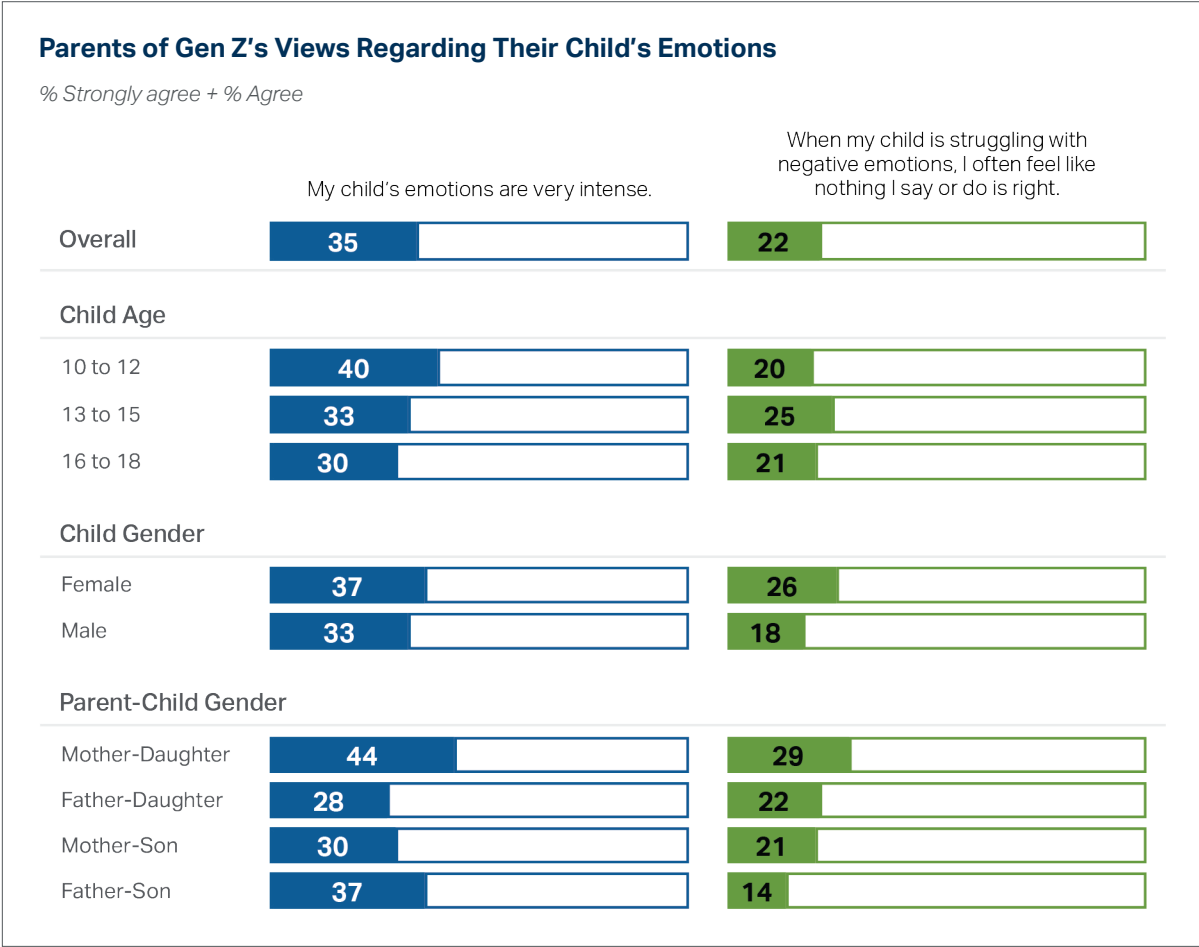
Parents of 10- to 12-year-olds are especially likely to say their child's emotions are very intense (40%), as are parents who are the same gender as their children — i.e., mothers of daughters (44%) and fathers of sons (37%). Parents of daughters — especially the mothers of daughters — are most likely to say they struggle to communicate when their child is dealing with negative emotions.

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS …

"Letting them live through their feelings instead of 'fixing' everything."

I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD …

"That when I yell at them, I'm not trying to hurt them. I just have strong emotions sometimes."

CHART 4

Parents of Gen Z's Views Regarding Their Child's Emotions

% Strongly agree + % Agree

	My child's emotions are very intense.	When my child is struggling with negative emotions, I often feel like nothing I say or do is right.
Overall	35	22
Child Age		
10 to 12	40	20
13 to 15	33	25
16 to 18	30	21
Child Gender		
Female	37	26
Male	33	18
Parent-Child Gender		
Mother-Daughter	44	29
Father-Daughter	28	22
Mother-Son	30	21
Father-Son	37	14

Many parents are also dealing with negative emotions themselves. Nearly six in 10 parents (59%) report feeling stressed a lot the previous day, and nearly half (48%) felt worried. About one in four (26%) felt sad, and one in five (20%) felt angry.

The incidence of negative emotions among parents appears to be interrelated with their child's emotions. Children whose parents report feeling stressed, anxious, angry or sad the prior day are notably more likely to report feeling those emotions themselves.

> **THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS …**
>
> "Regulating your own emotions so you can create a safe environment where they can express themselves."

CHART 5

Percentage of Gen Z Children Who Experienced Negative Emotions a Lot of the Previous Day

Did you feel any of the following a lot of the day yesterday?

% Yes, among children whose parent reports experiencing/not experiencing the same emotion the previous day

- Parent felt this emotion
- Parent did not feel this emotion

Emotion	Parent felt this emotion	Parent did not feel this emotion
Stress	53	34
Anxiety	50	31
Anger	49	24
Sadness	30	21
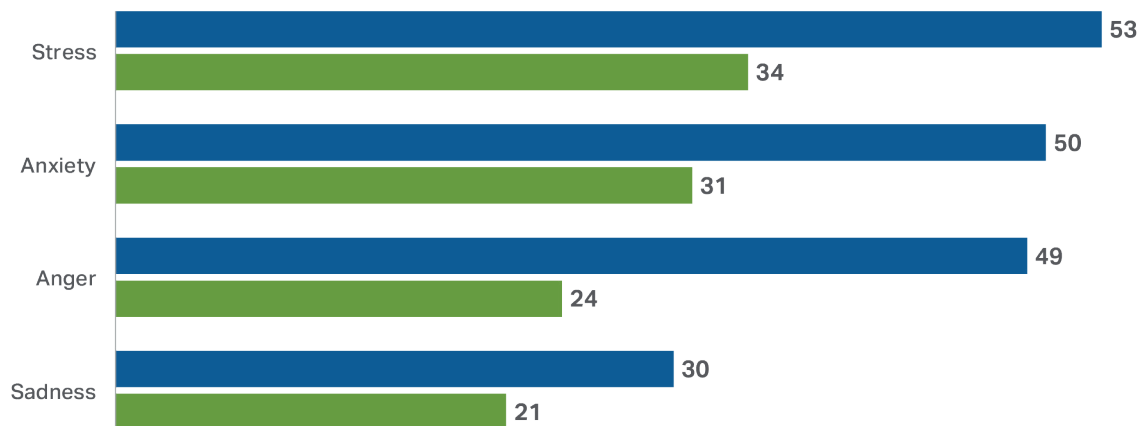
Overcoming Uncertainty and Worry

One experience most parents share is worrying about their children. The leading sources of parents' worry include their child's plans for the future (42%), mental health (40%), experiences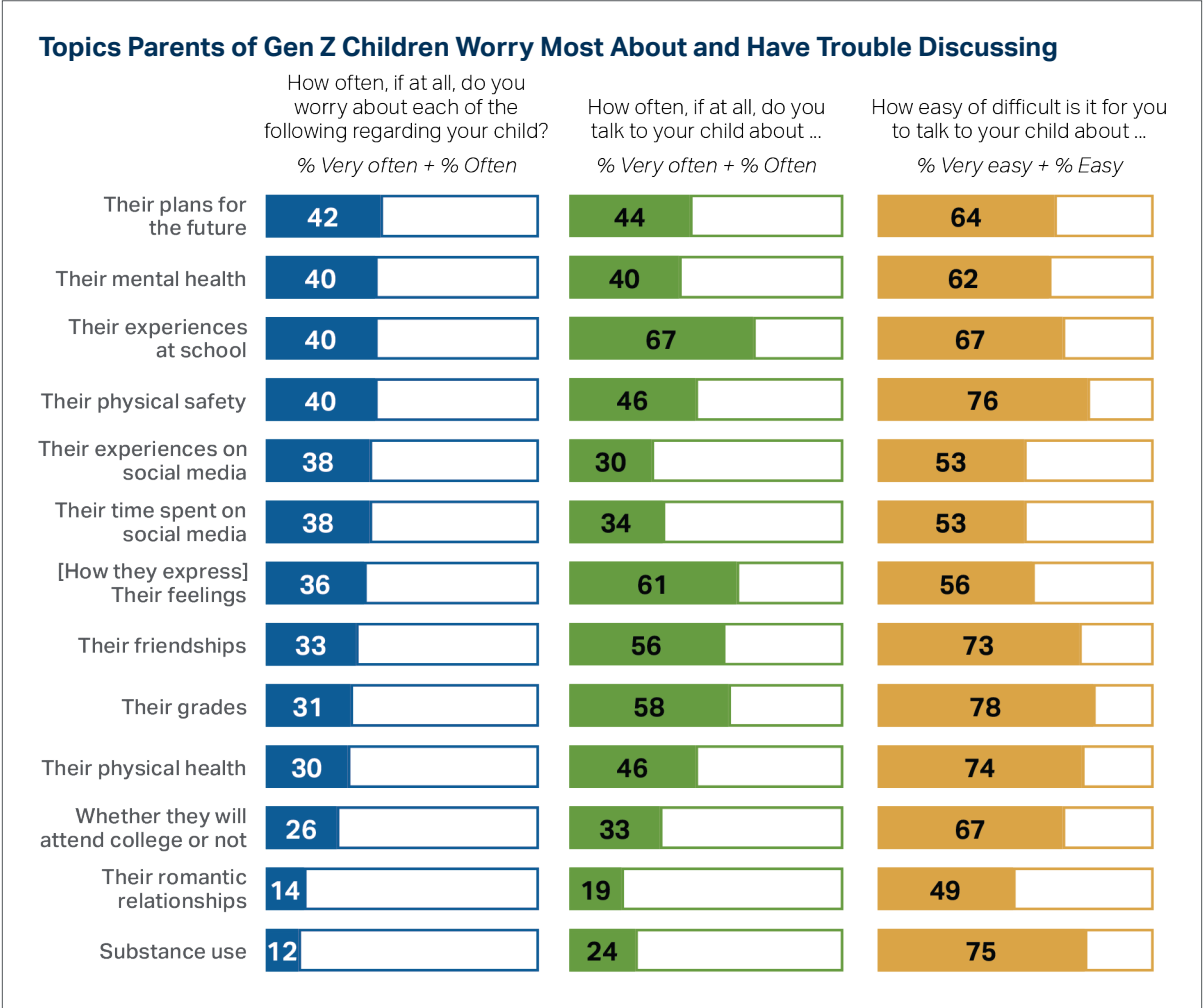 at school (40%), physical safety (40%) and experiences on social media (38%). However, several of these issues — their child's future plans, mental health and social media use — are among the subjects they discuss least or find most difficult to talk about.

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS …

"Worrying about their wellbeing, their safety, and making sure they will make the right decisions in life."

CHART 6

Topics Parents of Gen Z Children Worry Most About and Have Trouble Discussing

	How often, if at all, do you worry about each of the following regarding your child? *% Very often + % Often*	How often, if at all, do you talk to your child about … *% Very often + % Often*	How easy of difficult is it for you to talk to your child about … *% Very easy + % Easy*
Their plans for the future	42	44	64
Their mental health	40	40	62
Their experiences at school	40	67	67
Their physical safety	40	46	76
Their experiences on social media	38	30	53
Their time spent on social media	38	34	53
[How they express] Their feelings	36	61	56
Their friendships	33	56	73
Their grades	31	58	78
Their physical health	30	46	74
Whether they will attend college or not	26	33	67
Their romantic relationships	14	19	49
Substance use	12	24	75

Eight in 10 parents of Gen Zers say they "often" or "very often" worry about at least one of 13 aspects of their child's life, and 42% say they often worry about five or more of those topics. Just 2% of parents say they "rarely" or "never" worry about all 13 facets.

Although many parents are hesitant to discuss sensitive subjects with their children, Gen Z kids generally find talking with their parents to be beneficial. Between 80% and 93% of children say talking with their parents about these 13 topics is helpful.

In response to the open-ended question about the greatest challenge of raising a child, 6% of parents mention the uncertainty and worry involved, especially about whether they are "doing it right." One factor that may be contributing to this is the relative difficulty of finding guidance on what "doing it right" looks like: About one in three parents (35%) say it's "easy" or "very easy" to find helpful parenting advice. Nearly half (46%) say it is neither easy nor difficult, and 18% find it "difficult" or "very difficult" to find good parenting advice.
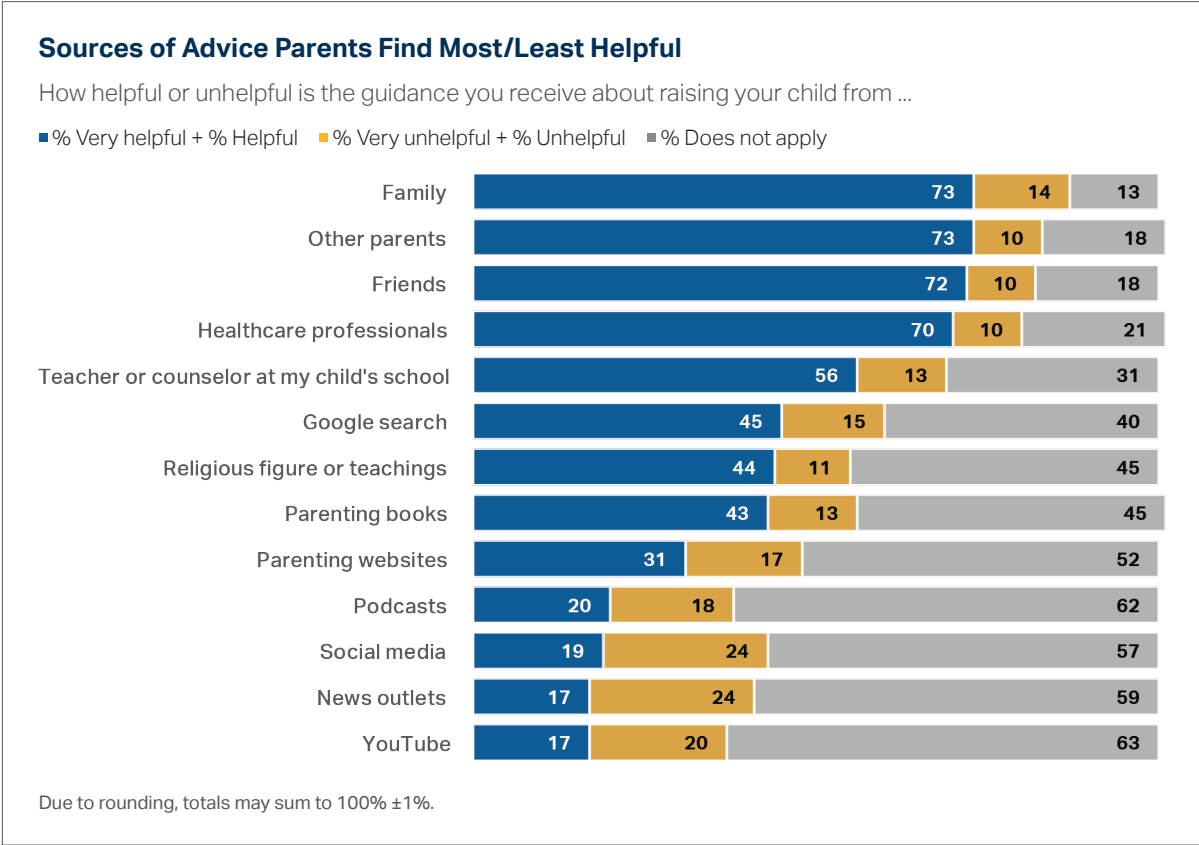
> **THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS …**
>
> "Not knowing if I'm doing right by them. I'm the person that's supposed to have all the answers, but I don't."

According to parents, advice they get from other people is more helpful than what they get from research sources or the media. Parents are most likely to find family, friends and other parents (all at 72%) and healthcare professionals (70%) helpful. Meanwhile, parents say the advice they receive from media sources like YouTube, news outlets and social media is more likely to be unhelpful than helpful.

CHART 7

Sources of Advice Parents Find Most/Least Helpful

How helpful or unhelpful is the guidance you receive about raising your child from …

■ % Very helpful + % Helpful   ■ % Very unhelpful + % Unhelpful   ■ % Does not apply

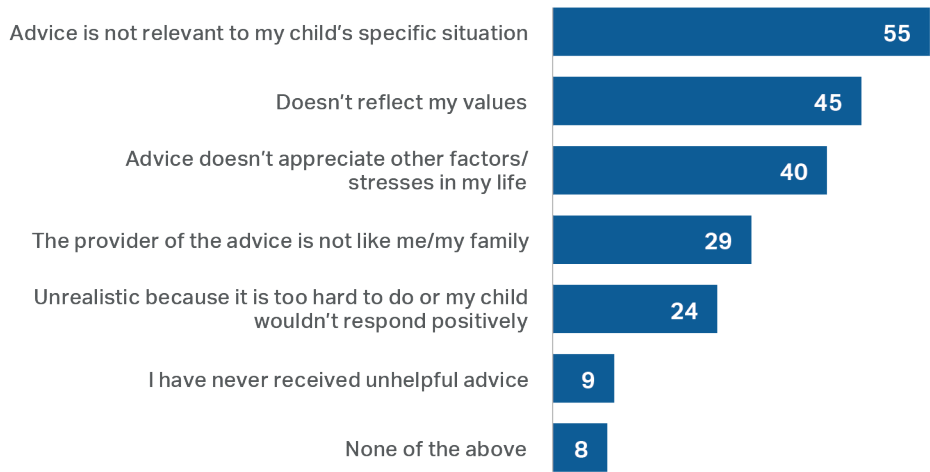| Source	Very helpful + Helpful	Very unhelpful + Unhelpful	Does not apply
Family	73	14	13
Other parents	73	10	18
Friends	72	10	18
Healthcare professionals	70	10	21
Teacher or counselor at my child's school	56	13	31
Google search	45	15	40
Religious figure or teachings	44	11	45
Parenting books	43	13	45
Parenting websites	31	17	52
Podcasts	20	18	62
Social media	19	24	57
News outlets	17	24	59
YouTube	17	20	63

Due to rounding, totals may sum to 100% ±1%.

The uniquely helpful nature of guidance from other people in their lives — and the general unhelpfulness of guidance from media sources — may be partly due to the intimate understanding these people have of an individual's circumstances. When parents think about the unhelpful advice they receive, it is most often due to the advice not being relevant to their specific child.

CHART 8

Reasons Parents Find Advice Unhelpful

Please think about the advice and guidance you typically receive about parenting. When it is unhelpful, why is it unhelpful? Select all that apply.

% Selected

Advice is not relevant to my child's specific situation	55
Doesn't reflect my values	45
Advice doesn't appreciate other factors/ stresses in my life	40
The provider of the advice is not like me/my family	29
Unrealistic because it is too hard to do or my child wouldn't respond positively	24
I have never received unhelpful advice	9
None of the above	8

Whether the parent is actually looking for advice also influences how helpful they find that advice to be. Among those who sometimes or often receive unsolicited parenting advice, just 2% of parents say that advice is "often" helpful; 70% say unsolicited advice is "rarely" or "never" helpful.

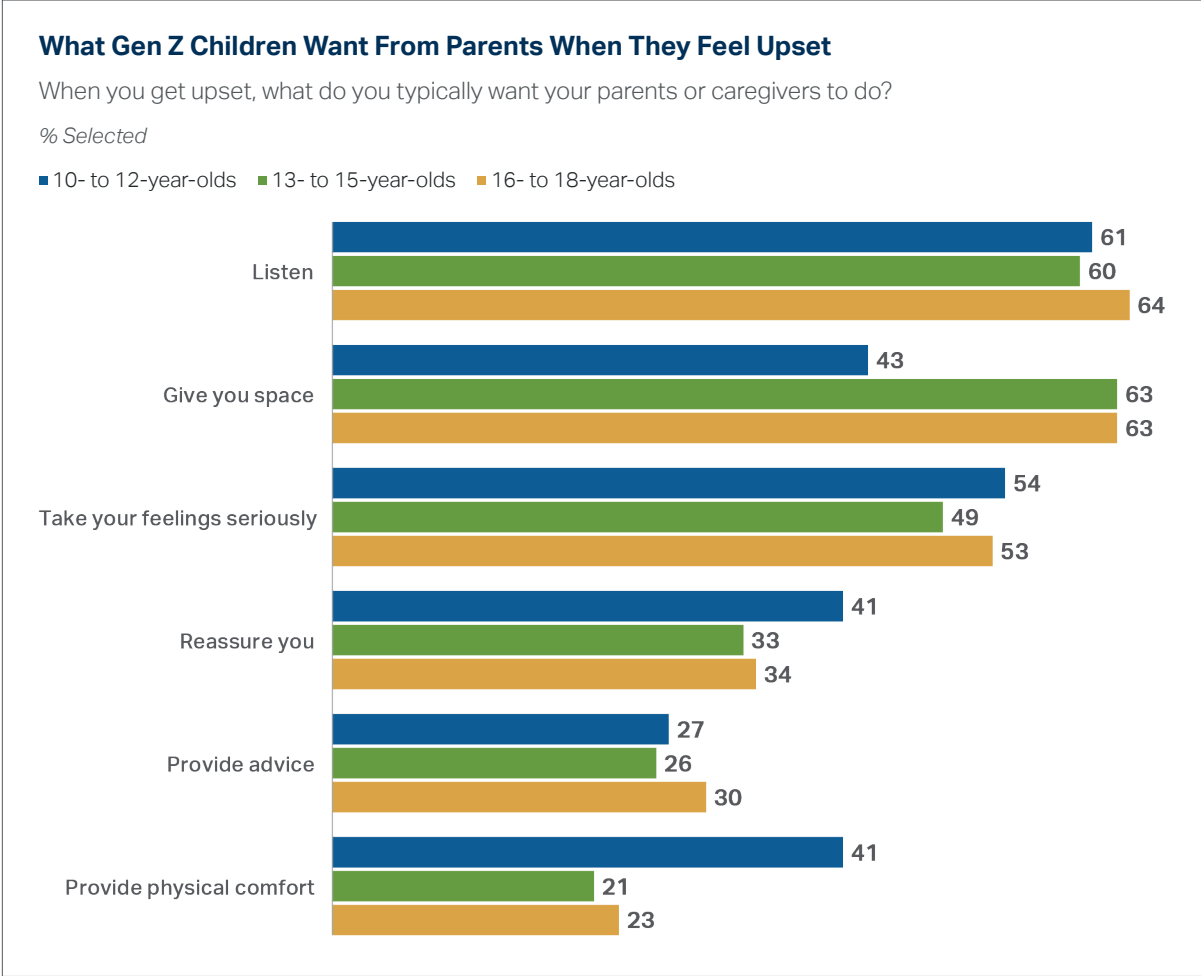# Providing Children With Space and Freedom

When asked what they most wish their parents understood about them, 6% of Gen Zers say they need more space — the fourth-most frequently mentioned topic. This desire for space appears to be especially relevant when Gen Zers are struggling with their emotions. Just over six in 10 Gen Z children (62%) want their parents to listen when they are upset, and 56% want their parents to give them space. Both percentages are at least twice as high as the percentage of children who want their parents to give them advice when they are upset, with Gen Z teenagers particularly likely to say they want space.

> **I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD …**
>
> "When I'm venting, I just want to vent. I don't need someone to fix it. I just want someone to hear."

CHART 9

What Gen Z Children Want From Parents When They Feel Upset

When you get upset, what do you typically want your parents or caregivers to do?

% Selected

■ 10- to 12-year-olds ■ 13- to 15-year-olds ■ 16- to 18-year-olds

	10- to 12-year-olds	13- to 15-year-olds	16- to 18-year-olds
Listen	61	60	64
Give you space	43	63	63
Take your feelings seriously	54	49	53
Reassure you	41	33	34
Provide advice	27	26	30
Provide physical comfort	41	21	23

In addition to needing more space, one in 10 Gen Z children say they wish their parents understood that they want greater freedom and independence. However, parents do understand this preference to an extent: The most-cited challenge of raising children is balancing supervision with independence and allowing children the freedom to learn from their mistakes on their path to adulthood.

Despite this acknowledgment, many Gen Zers say they feel pressure not to make those mistakes. About one in three Gen Z children (33%) say they feel like they have to be perfect. That pressure is especially high among Gen Z girls (40%) and 13- to 15-year-olds (38%).
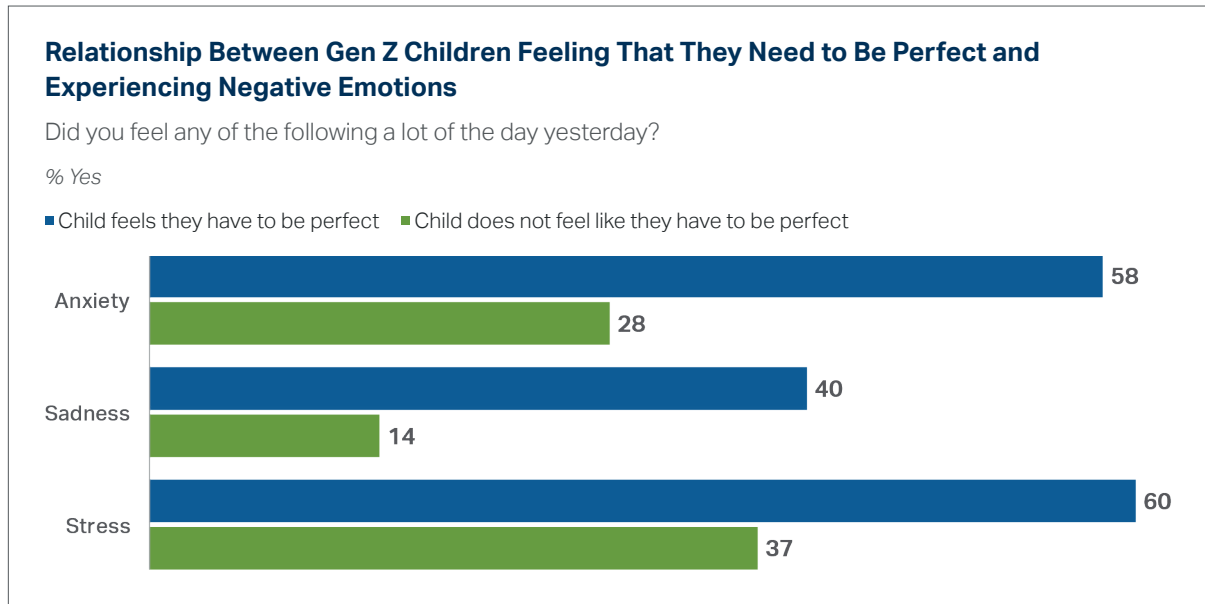
This pressure to be perfect is linked to higher levels of negative emotions among Gen Z children. Those who feel they need to be perfect are about two to three times as likely as those who do not feel that pressure to say they experienced a lot of anxiety, stress or sadness the prior day.

THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS …

"The reality that every day is a day she needs me less — which is how it should be."

I WISH MY PARENTS UNDERSTOOD …

"I'm a good kid. I know what not to do. Stop reminding me."

CHART 10

Relationship Between Gen Z Children Feeling That They Need to Be Perfect and Experiencing Negative Emotions

Did you feel any of the following a lot of the day yesterday?

% Yes

■ Child feels they have to be perfect　■ Child does not feel like they have to be perfect

	Child feels they have to be perfect	Child does not feel like they have to be perfect
Anxiety	58	28
Sadness	40	14
Stress	60	37

Still, while many Gen Zers may be asking their parents to provide them with space and independence to work through some of the challenges of being a preteen or teenager, they overwhelmingly value the time and opinions of their parents. More than nine in 10 Gen Z children enjoy spending time with their parents (93%) and care what their parents think of them (91%).

Conclusion

When asked about the challenges they each face in their relationships with one another, Gen Z children and their parents are broadly aligned. Children want their parents to acknowledge and appreciate their often-changing emotions and give them more space and freedom to "figure things out." Meanwhile, parents recognize that contending with their child's emotions and balancing freedom with authority and structure are among the most challenging aspects of raising a child.

> THE HARDEST PART ABOUT RAISING A CHILD IS ...
>
> "Reparenting myself because I was not coached through my big feelings as an adolescent."

Several parents even note that controlling their own emotions while their child is struggling poses a challenge. The importance of this is underscored when considering that parents' emotions appear to influence the emotions their children feel, and vice versa.

Parents and children may also be more aligned than they think regarding important conversations about preteen and teenage life. Some of the issues that worry parents most — including their child's mental health, social media use and feelings — are the topics that they find most difficult to discuss or talk about the least. But despite this hesitation among parents, more than 80% of children say conversations about these subjects are helpful. However, the style of conversation matters. According to kids, if parents approach conversations as "fixers" looking to give advice, they may find less success than if they simply provide their child with space to share and take their concerns seriously.

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