



# 2026 Children's Behavioral Health Priorities Survey



*Amplifying the voices of Maryland Families since 1999*

# Your Voice. Our Voice. One Voice.

As the voice of Maryland families, the Maryland Coalition of Families (MCF) is committed to gathering the stories and the data behind them to advocate in Annapolis for policies and legislation that are crucial to children with behavioral health challenges and their families. Since 1999, Maryland families have trusted MCF to represent their voice authentically.

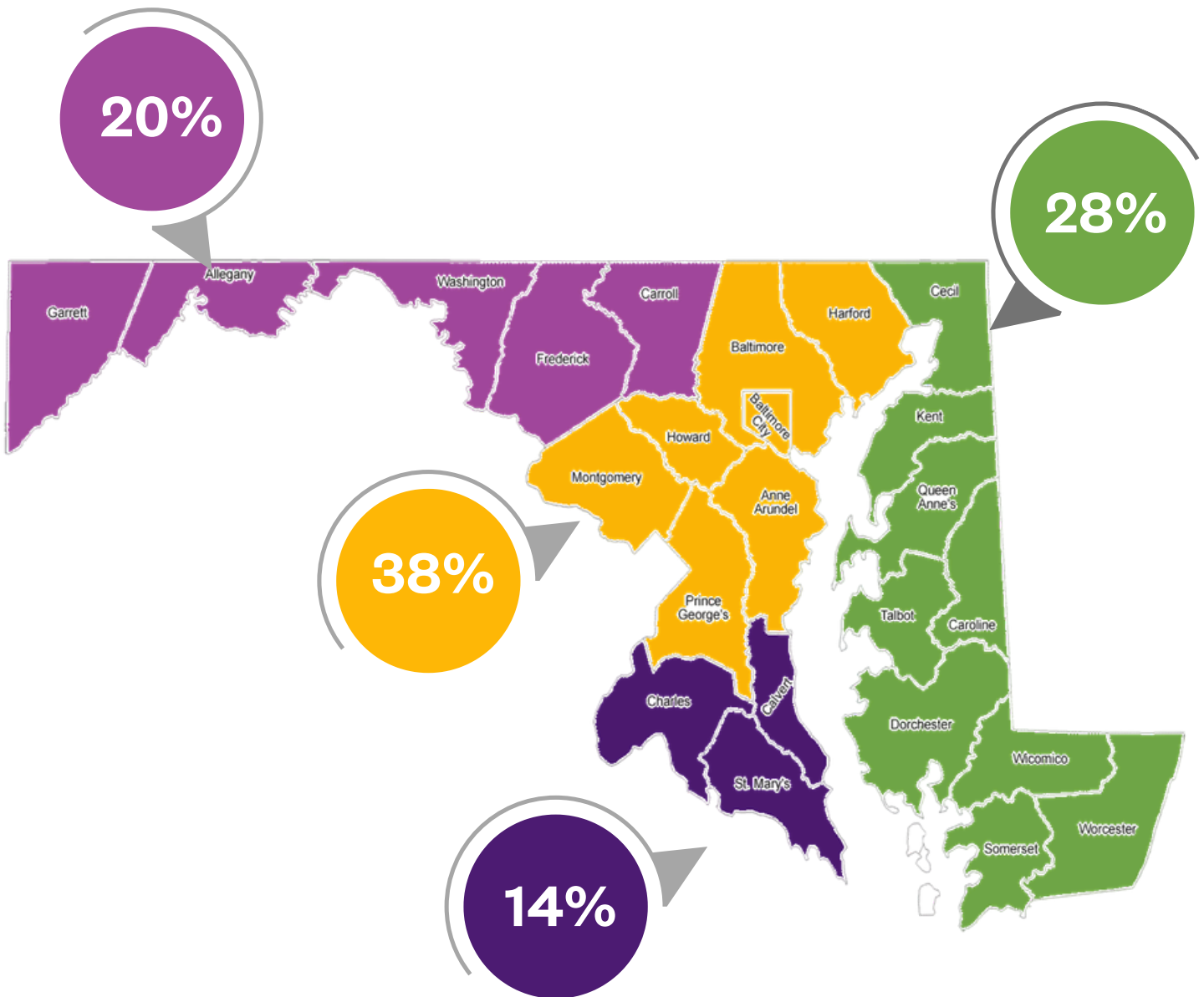


**It's a responsibility we take seriously.** As parents and caregivers of children with behavioral health challenges, we understand the barriers families have to overcome to ensure their child is getting the community and school-based services they need.

In January 2026, MCF conducted a survey with Maryland parents and caregivers who are caring for children with behavioral health challenges. The survey offered these families the chance to voice their concerns regarding the most pressing issues related to their child's behavioral health needs and the systems they rely on to support them.

The results from the survey shine a stark light on the challenges, gaps, and needs of Maryland families.

# Voices from Across the State



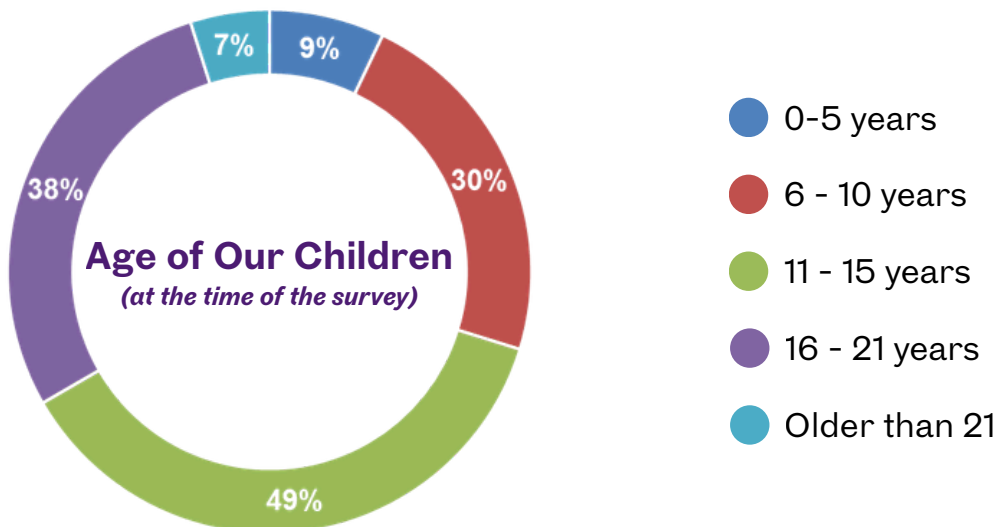
Stories and data collected from survey respondents represent every part of Maryland, from rural areas in Western Maryland and on the Eastern Shore, to the more densely populated southern and central regions. Responses to the survey revealed common themes across the state as well as challenges that are unique to different geographic regions.

# Our Children

- Attention & Focus Challenges
- Anxiety or Worry
- Social Skills & Peer Relationships
- Impulse Control Concerns
- Learning Differences
- School Performance
- Depression or Persistent Sadness
- Trauma or Major Life Change



Parents and caregivers who responded to the survey have children with a wide array of behavioral health challenges and almost all reported that their child struggled in more than one area. Respondents represented children from across the age spectrum with the largest share in middle and high school.



# Kids & Technology



Parents and caregivers ask this question all the time: How much is too much?

Access to technology to entertain us is almost always at our fingertips. For some, this has led to difficulty focusing, shortened attention spans, stunted social skills, and even addiction.

Parents and caregivers are understandably worried about their child's use of technology - from social media, to online and video gaming, to streaming services like YouTube.

Survey respondents reflect the growing concern that technology is having a negative impact on our children.

**60%**

Expressed concern over the time their child spends on social media and/or YouTube

**46%**

Said they are concerned that their child's video or online gaming behaviors are negatively impacting their mental health.

**43%**

Are concerned that their child's video or online gaming has become or is becoming an addiction.

# The Cost of Care

Every parent or caregiver wants to be sure their child is getting the best care possible. But health insurance, copays, and specialty services that require out-of-pocket payment can put services out of reach.

**43%**

of respondents said their child's health insurance benefits don't pay for all the mental health services their child needs.

*The long wait lists and the time needed to take off of work, along with the gas it takes to get all of the children/grandchildren to their appointments, creates financial difficulties.*

*~2026 Survey Respondent*

**47%**

of respondents said the costs for the services their child needs put a strain on the family's finances

Many families struggle to find the right services within their communities. So, in addition to the cost of the services, they also have other expenses like time from work or gas to drive to the appointments located far from their home.

**63%**

of respondents said the services available in their community are insufficient to meet their child's needs.

**54%**

of respondents said the services their child needs are located too far away from their home.

# Services at School

Children spend a majority of their day in school so it seems like a logical place to access behavioral health services. We know school budgets, resources, and staff are stretched thin and unfortunately children who need extra support are impacted the most. Combined with uncertainty at the



Federal level and the state budget deficit, it's understandable that parents and caregivers are worried about the future of special education services their child needs.

**43%**

of respondents believe that their child's school has not implemented appropriate strategies to meet their child's needs.

**68%**

expressed concern that their child's special education services will be negatively impacted by Federal or state legislative action.

Several respondents shared additional comments regarding the difficulty they encountered accessing special education services like Individualized Education Plans or 504 Plans due to the complexity of the system or the school's reluctance to evaluate the child. Parents and caregivers whose children are receiving special education services expressed concern regarding whether the services are being implemented appropriately and consistently.

# Biggest Barriers Identified

1. Lack of mental or behavioral health services and providers in my community.
2. Long waiting lists for services.
3. Lack of appropriate school-based interventions.
4. Long waiting lists to get my child tested.
5. Inability or difficulty of taking time off from work to attend appointments and/or school meetings.
6. Lack of support from family members or difference in caregiver opinions about mental health needs or treatment.
7. Lack of information to help me understand what services my child needs.
8. The financial impact of copays or other costs for services.
9. Obtaining an accurate diagnosis for my child.
10. Stigma about mental and behavioral health disorders (within family, friends, or community).
11. Lack of or costs associated with transportation to and from service locations.

*The time, energy, and stress levels that families of children with mental health illnesses is extremely exhausting, expensive, and overwhelming to manage appointments, advocating for care, and searching for providers that are available to meet specific needs.*

*~2026 Survey Respondent*

# Parents' & Caregivers' Priorities

We asked parents and caregivers to rank their priorities for addressing challenges within the children's behavioral health system. The message was clear that investment in behavioral health services to increase availability and make them more affordable would result in children and families receiving the support they need.

- 79%** Want to see improved access to mental and behavioral health services (reduced waiting lists, help navigating the behavioral health system, etc. )
- 71%** Believe an expansion of available mental and behavioral health services (more services available in my community) should be a priority
- 63%** Stressed the importance of protecting special education services for children with mental and behavioral health challenges
- 49%** Want the focus to be on making mental and behavioral health care affordable
- 48%** Want to see an increased focus on prevention and early intervention services

Other's pointed to the need to invest in alternate forms of treatments and services and to improve safeguards for children on social media and online gaming platforms as priorities. Others mentioned the need to address stigma, support for single parent/caregiver, and the need for high quality transition services from school to life afterschool.



## In Their Own Words...

*Families like ours are doing everything we can, but the systems meant to support us are hard to access and slow to respond. Long wait times, limited school-based supports, and lack of coordination between services leave families carrying the burden alone. We need timely, coordinated, and family-centered support—not just referrals.*

*I think where the confusion lies for families is that people think that families with children with special needs are looking for special treatment. We don't want special treatment—we want systems that work, listen, and respond before things reach a breaking point. When leaders invest in mental health services, they're not just supporting children with disabilities; they're changing families and communities for the better.*

*The system expects parents to be full-time case managers, therapists, and educators while working jobs and caring for a household. That is not equity. I've had to learn the law, write letters, challenge IEP decisions, manage therapy appointments, and chase after missed assignments—just so my child can access what is legally mandated. We don't need more policies—we need accountability and meaningful implementation. When the system fails to act early, our children are pushed further behind and blamed for their struggles.*

*The emotional toll is heavy, parents are exhausted, siblings are affected, and families are stretched to the breaking point. Without meaningful changes, families continue to feel invisible, unsupported, and left behind by the very systems meant to protect and serve them.*