

Children's Behavioral Health Priorities Survey

FALL 2026



On behalf of the Maryland Coalition of Families' Board of Directors, staff, and the families we serve, I am pleased to share the results of this year's Children's Behavioral Health Priorities Survey. With responses from more than 200 parents and caregivers representing every region of Maryland, the survey provides valuable insight into the challenges families face in accessing affordable, timely, and appropriate behavioral health services for their children.

These findings offer a powerful snapshot of families' experiences and priorities and will help shape MCF's advocacy efforts in the year ahead. As legislators convene in Annapolis to consider policies affecting Maryland's children and families, we will use these voices and perspectives to highlight critical needs and advance solutions that improve access to behavioral health care and support across our state.

The challenges highlighted in this Survey closely reflect the concerns of the 2,414 families who turned to MCF for support last year. Through nearly 9,000 hours of family peer support services, 136 support groups, and more than 70 educational workshops, parents and caregivers sought help accessing services and resources, improving communication with their child's school, better understanding their child's needs, and strengthening their own well-being.

It is our privilege to walk alongside these families as they navigate complex systems and difficult circumstances. We are proud to provide the support, guidance, and hope they deserve during some of the most challenging moments in their lives. At the heart of this work are MCF's Family Peer Support Specialists, whose lived experience as parents and caregivers drives their commitment to helping others. Guided by the understanding of how important support can be, they strive to be the trusted partner they once needed for their own families.

Our path forward is clear: Maryland families need systems that work and decision-makers who listen and respond to their needs. At MCF, we take our responsibility to amplify the voices of families seriously. We know that their experiences, challenges, and successes have the power to drive lasting and meaningful change across our state.

As we move forward, we invite you to join us in this important work in whatever way is most meaningful to you, whether by sharing your expertise, supporting our mission through a financial contribution, or answering critical calls to action. Together, we can build a brighter future for Maryland families, strengthen the systems that serve them, and ensure that every child has the opportunity to thrive.

With gratitude,

Karen

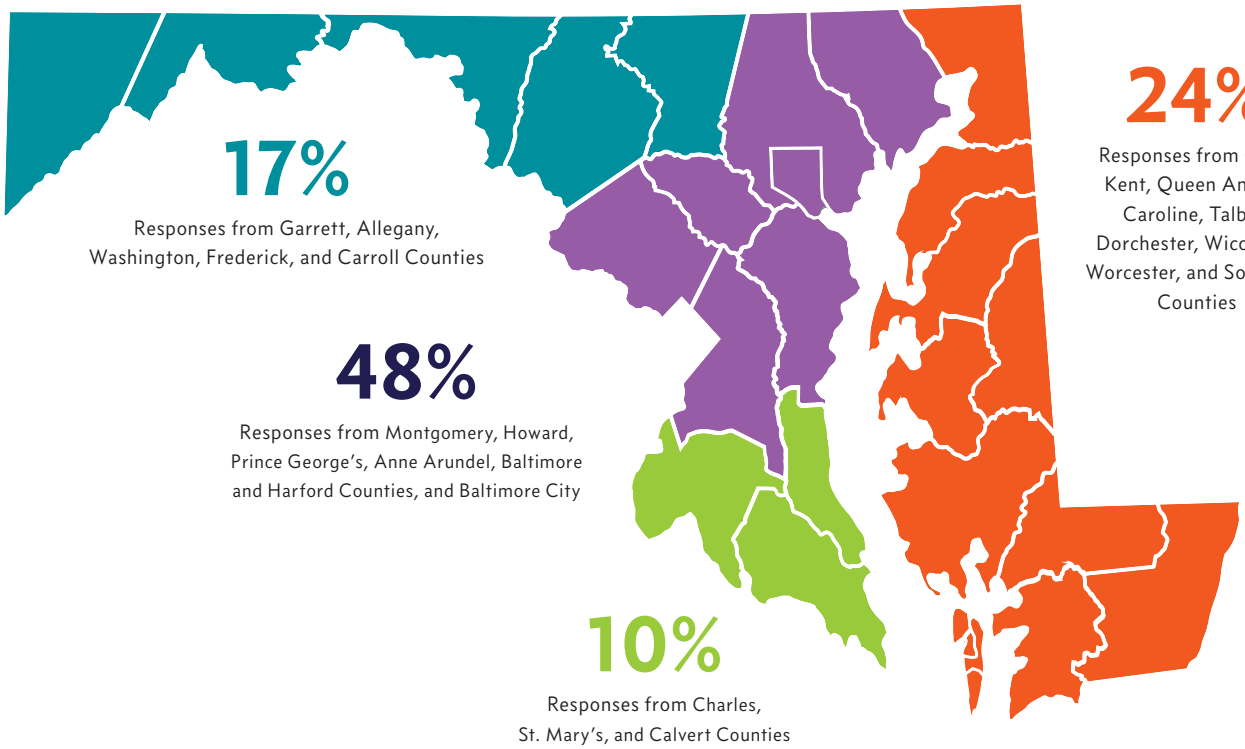
Karen L. Duffy
Executive Director



Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Voices from Across the State

Survey responses and personal stories came from parents and caregivers across Maryland who have lived experience caring for a child with behavioral health challenges. Their experiences reflect a wide variety of communities and highlight both shared concerns and unique challenges families face.



17%

Responses from Garrett, Allegany, Washington, Frederick, and Carroll Counties

24%

Responses from Cecil, Kent, Queen Anne's, Caroline, Talbot, Dorchester, Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties

48%

Responses from Montgomery, Howard, Prince George's, Anne Arundel, Baltimore and Harford Counties, and Baltimore City

10%

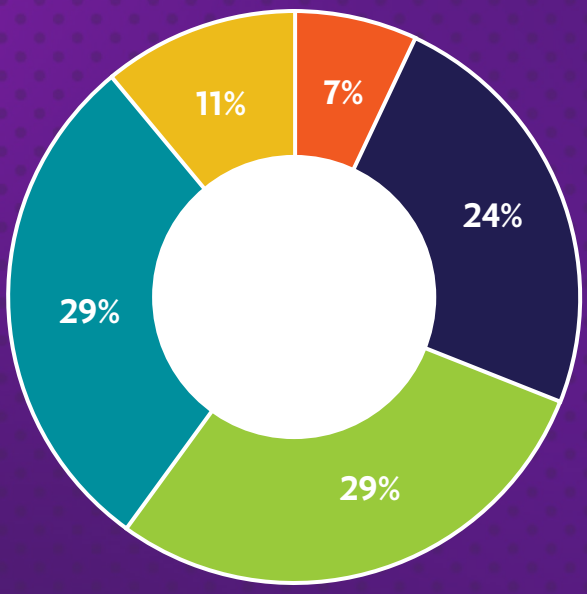
Responses from Charles, St. Mary's, and Calvert Counties

Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Our Children

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.

Age of Our Children
(At the Time of Survey)



Challenges Our Children Experience

77%
Anxiety or Worry

76%
Attention or
Focus Challenges

73%
Social Skills or
Peer Relationships

63%
Impulse Control Concerns

54%
Learning Differences

47%
Depression or Persistent Sadness

47%
School Performance

46%
Trauma or Major Life Changes

Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Access & Affordability

Access to mental and behavioral health care is an important part of supporting children's well-being and helping them thrive. When families can access timely, appropriate, and affordable services, children are more likely to receive the support they need. However, access to care can vary widely across the state, shaped by differences in service availability, local resources, and families' financial circumstances.

"Getting a formal diagnosis needs to be much easier, and families desperately need better access to respite care. Right now, trying to get an appointment with a specialist just to figure out what's going on with your kid takes way too long. Sitting on waiting lists for months leaves parents stranded without answers, and that uncertainty puts a massive strain on the whole home."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

73%

of parents and caregivers report that long wait lists prevent their children from accessing needed mental and behavioral health services.

45%

of parents and caregivers report that their child's insurance does not cover all needed mental and behavioral health services.

51%

of parents and caregivers report that the cost of their child's mental and behavioral health services is a financial burden for their family.

"Those of us with private health insurance face high copays or no coverage for certain services. As a result, we access fewer services than those covered by Medicaid because we cannot afford them. ALL CHILDREN should have access to Medicaid coverage for mental health needs!"

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent



Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

School

Schools play an important role in children's mental and behavioral health, shaping their daily experiences, access to support, and overall well-being. For children with mental and behavioral health needs, appropriate accommodations, consistent support, and strong communication between families and school personnel can be essential to their success. Survey responses highlight families' experiences with school-based supports and the broader concerns shaping their confidence in the systems designed to meet their children's needs.

"Better communication with the school and more accessible mental health, academic, and emotional support would help our family the most right now."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

48%
of parents and caregivers reported that their child's mental and behavioral health needs are not being met at school.

39%
of parents and caregivers reported that school personnel do not consistently implement their child's IEP strategies or 504 accommodations as designed.

34%
of parents and caregivers reported that school personnel do not regularly communicate with them about their child's needs and challenges.

68%
of parents and caregivers expressed concern that federal or state legislative actions could negatively impact their child's special education services.

"It is not just my family, but many others, who face the dilemma of choosing between working and caring for our children or finding the time to take them to therapy and medical appointments and address school-related issues. Because employers often lack empathy toward us, we sometimes find ourselves forced to quit our jobs."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Home & Work

Children's mental and behavioral health needs can have a significant impact on family life, extending beyond the child to affect caregivers' well-being, household routines, and overall family stability. Parents and caregivers often must balance the demands of supporting their child with responsibilities at work and at home, which can create additional challenges for the entire family.



93%

of parents and caregivers reported that their child's mental and behavioral health challenges affect the entire family.

64%

of parents and caregivers reported that their child's mental and behavioral health needs negatively impact their or their partner's employment.



Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Community

Although 66% of parents and caregivers report feeling heard by healthcare professionals when they express concerns about their children's mental and behavioral health, accessing appropriate and timely care remains a challenge. Even when families feel their concerns are understood, the services or level of care their children need may not be available in their communities. This creates additional challenges, requiring families to travel long distances to get their child the help they need.

"The biggest issue for rural families right now is how hard it is to get medical care, mental health services, and specialist appointments without waiting months or driving hours down state or across state lines. We desperately need better local access to doctors, diagnostic specialists, and respite care so parents aren't pushed to the absolute brink."

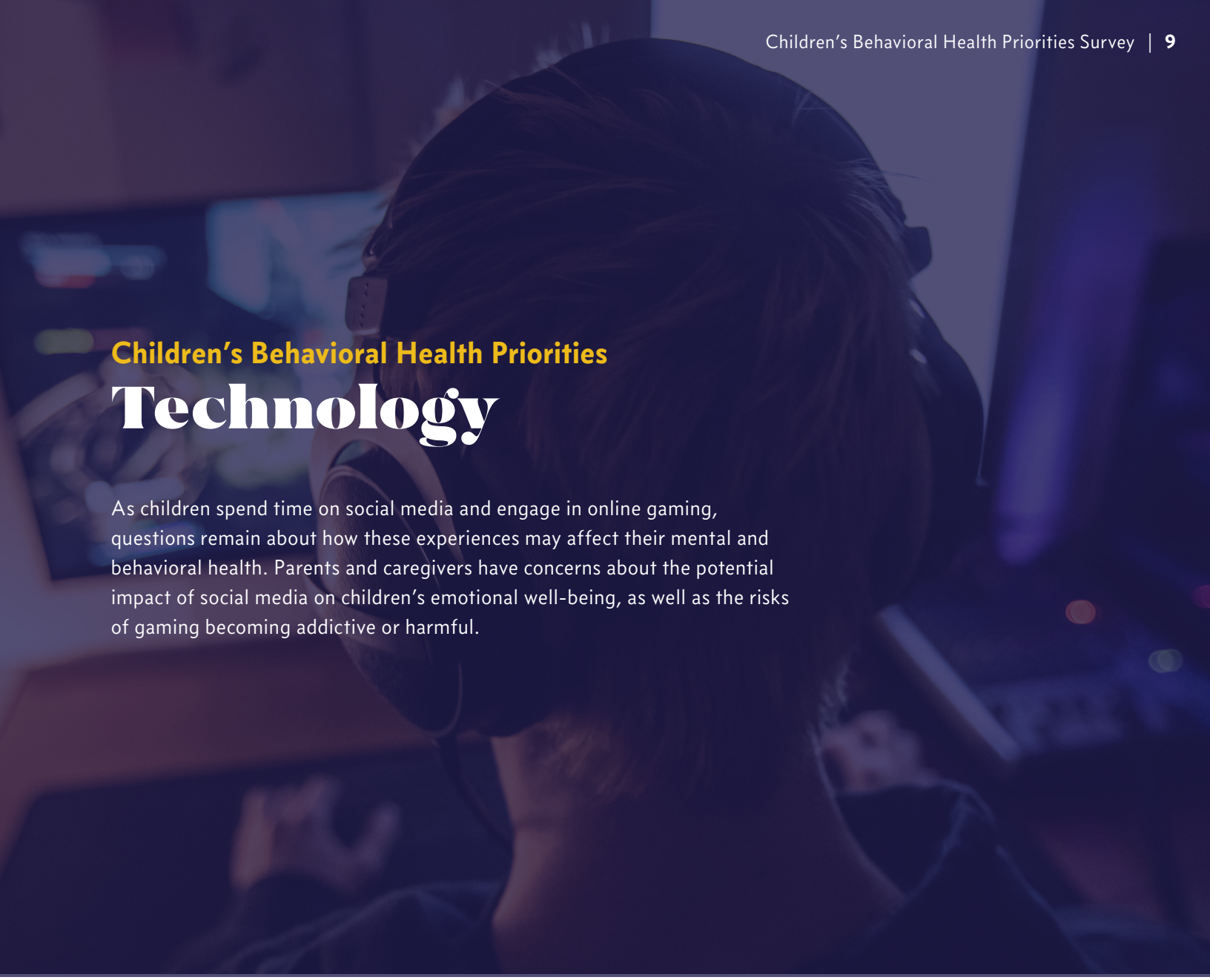
-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

51%

of parents and caregivers report that the mental and behavioral health services their child needs are not available in their community.

77%

of parents and caregivers report that better early childhood screening tools would have helped their child access needed mental and behavioral health services.



Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Technology

As children spend time on social media and engage in online gaming, questions remain about how these experiences may affect their mental and behavioral health. Parents and caregivers have concerns about the potential impact of social media on children's emotional well-being, as well as the risks of gaming becoming addictive or harmful.

Social Media

74%

of parents and caregivers are concerned that social media is negatively impacting their child's mental and behavioral health.

Online Gaming

53%

of parents and caregivers are concerned that their child's online gaming behaviors are negatively impacting their mental and behavioral health.

Problem Gaming

42%

of parents and caregivers are concerned that their child's online gaming is becoming an addiction.

Accountability

69%

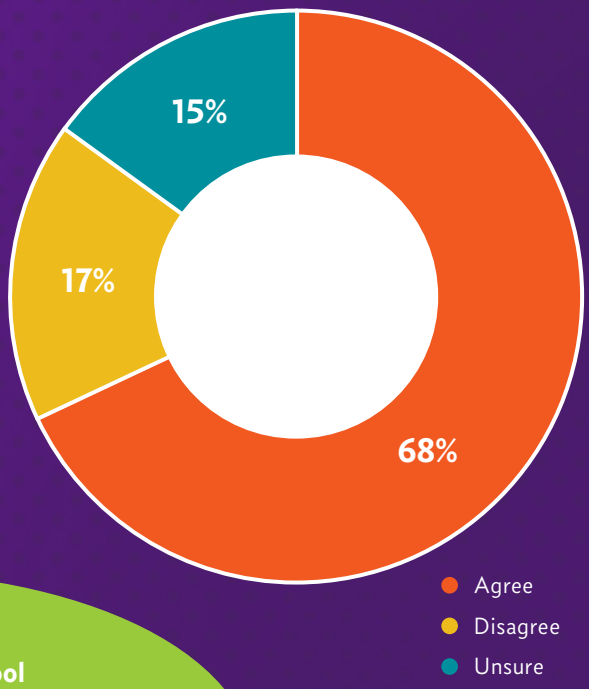
of parents and caregivers believe social media companies and online gaming platforms should be held responsible for the mental and behavioral health challenges children experience as a result of using these services.

Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Statewide Cell Phone Ban

As Maryland prepares to implement its statewide school cell phone ban in the 2027–2028 school year, some parents and caregivers support the restrictions, while others express concerns about their potential impact on students. Families of children with mental and behavioral health challenges may be particularly concerned about how the ban could affect their children's emotional regulation, safety, and access to support during the school day.

I support the new statewide policy of not allowing my child access to their cellphone or other electronic devices during the school day if their use is not part of my child's IEP strategies or 504 accommodations.



"Having cell phones in school is not only disruptive to the learning environment and social interaction/development, it creates a breakdown in community and trust in the school, teachers, responsible adults, community emergency plans, etc., by enabling and expecting independent responsibility for communication."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

"Limiting access for students who require a phone for legitimate self-management needs could stigmatize youth who are allowed to have one, labeling them as having 'special needs' or receiving a special privilege."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent



Children's Behavioral Health Priorities

Caregiver Self-Care



Caring for a child with mental and behavioral health challenges can affect the entire family. Caregivers need access to resources, support, and opportunities for self-care to protect their own well-being while supporting their children.

"Parents are struggling because our children are struggling and parents don't get the necessary help needed from all providers."

-Parent/Caregiver Survey Respondent

80%

of parents and caregivers reported that their child's mental and behavioral health needs negatively impact their own mental health and well-being.

41%

of parents and caregivers were unsure or disagreed that they have the tools and resources needed to address their own mental health and well-being.



"Families like mine know firsthand where systems are falling short and what needs to change. We should not have to fight to be heard while working to get our children the support they need. My family's experience should help shape the decisions Maryland makes for children.

At MCF, we are committed to bringing their experiences and priorities to the center of Maryland's decisions about children's behavioral health. Listening to families is where meaningful change begins."

-Laura Kimmel, Vice President, Board of Directors

MCF
maryland coalition of families

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Methodology: Survey results collected from September 1 through October 26, 2026 represent feedback from 213 parents and caregivers raising a combined 374 children with behavioral health challenges. Responses were solicited from families who are receiving or have received family peer support services within the last 3 years as well as through other youth and family-serving organizations.