

Parental Mental Health, Social Support, and Child Development in Nebraska

Kidsights Data is a groundbreaking initiative designed to generate population-level insights into how children develop from birth to age five using the Kidsights Measurement Tool, the first population-based tool in the nation to measure a core set of early child development skills throughout the early childhood years. Nebraska is home to Kidsights Data, located at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and has served as the pilot site for three statewide rounds of parent surveys, creating a unique and powerful dataset.

Through direct input from families with young children, Nebraska now holds one of the most innovative sources of early childhood data in the country, offering new opportunities to uncover what supports children's development and to share meaningful learnings with parents, early childhood educators, funders, and policymakers. Beyond developing the tool and leading data collection and analysis, Kidsights Data is committed to making these insights accessible to the public, and this brief is one way those learnings are being shared.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parents' mental and emotional well-being is central to healthy child development. Raising young children is rewarding and brings daily pressures that can affect parents' mental health. One of the most important factors that helps parents navigate these challenges is social support—having people or community resources they can turn to for guidance, encouragement, or practical help. This brief shares insights on parental mental health, emotional support, and early child development across Nebraska communities derived from the most recent data gathered from parents in fall 2025.

Findings from a statewide survey of Nebraska parents of young children, birth through age five, show that while most parents report good mental health, a meaningful number shared they experience symptoms of depression or anxiety. While many parents have social support, access to social support varies across families. Symptoms of anxiety and depression were more common in rural communities and among families with fewer educational and economic resources, but parents living in rural areas also reported more social support.

Importantly, the data show that social support is strongly associated with both parent and child flourishing, a measure of positive development and well-being of children and parents. Conversely, children whose parents reported experiencing depressive symptoms were also described as having more behavioral problems and dysregulation.

Social support plays a critical role in helping parents navigate daily pressures, strengthening both parent well-being and healthy child development outcomes.

Children thrive when parents are supported.

Supporting policies and programs that strengthen parents' access to emotional support through family networks, community resources, or parenting and mental health services is an important investment to ensure all children and families in Nebraska are thriving.

AT-A-GLANCE: KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR DECISION-MAKERS

State and local policymakers, and community partners

Why It Matters:

- Poor parental mental health can affect children’s development, but access to emotional support can help protect children and promote more equitable outcomes.

How It Works:

- Parents who feel supported and emotionally well are better positioned to engage positively with their children, manage stress, and foster healthy early development.

Call to Action:

- Expand access to early screening and mental health services for parents of young children.
- Strengthen community-based social support networks, particularly in rural communities and among families with lower educational attainment.
- Integrate parent well-being supports into early childhood systems, pediatric care, and community programs.

SUMMARY OF THE CONTEXT, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Study Overview & Population Context

These findings reflect the voices of over 2,500 Nebraska parents of young children, birth to 5 years, who participated in Kidsights Data in 2025. Families represent urban and rural communities across income levels.

Data are drawn from Kidsights Data and parent interviews, reflecting population-level patterns in early childhood development.

Why Population-Level Data Matters

Population-level child development data helps communities and decision makers see patterns that individual stories or smaller studies alone cannot, guiding policy decisions that strengthen systems for all families.

Key Findings: Mental Health & Social Support

In the survey, parents were asked about their perceived physical and mental well-being as well as about the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms. Social support refers to whether parents report having someone they can turn to for day-to-day emotional support with parenting or raising children. Child and parent flourishing assess the positive development and well-being of children and parents. Child development was measured using a psychosocial score, which is a validated measure of children’s behavioral problems and dysregulation, with a higher score representing adverse outcomes.

What the data shows:



Parental Depression is associated with child development and well-being.

Our analyses show that parental depressive symptoms are significantly associated with children's adverse psychosocial outcomes¹.



Many parents in Nebraska are doing well, but a meaningful number of parents shared they experience symptoms of less than excellent or very good mental and physical health.

57% of parents rated their mental or emotional health as very good or excellent, and **43%** reported poor, fair or good mental or emotional health.

61% of parents rated their physical health as very good or excellent, and **39%** said it was poor, fair or good.

43% said they were handling the demands of parenting not very well or somewhat well. **57%** of the parents reported that they were handling the day-to-day demands of raising children "very well."

9% of parents reported moderate to severe depressive symptoms, and **13%** reported moderate to severe anxiety symptoms.



Most parents report having emotional support—but not all.

Nearly **78%** of respondents felt they knew where to go for help in their community when difficulties arise.

84% reported having someone they could turn to for day-to-day emotional support.

Spouses or domestic partners (**68%**) and other family members or close friends (**65%**) were the most common sources of emotional support. Fewer parents reported receiving support from health care providers (**12%**), religious leaders (**15%**), peer support groups (**9%**), or mental health professionals (**9%**).

¹These analyses were conducted using multivariate models that account for statistical controls, such as child age, gender, and method of contacting parents.



Social support and parent health outcomes aren't the same for all parents in all places.

Rural parents reported higher rates of depression (**15%**) and anxiety (**17%**) than urban parents (**7% and 11%, respectively**).

Parents from urban areas reported lower rates of social support compared to rural areas (**83% vs 87%**). Parents without a college degree reported lower rates of very good or excellent perceived mental health (**47%**) and physical health (**52%**) compared with college-educated parents (**69% and 72%, respectively**).

Parents with lower annual household income (under \$100K annually) reported lower rates of social support compared to higher income households (over \$100K annually) (**80% vs 88%**).



Social support is strongly associated with parent and child well-being.

Parents without emotional support were found to be at a higher risk of experiencing depression symptoms (**17.5% vs. 7%**) and anxiety symptoms (**18% vs. 12%**) compared to those with support.

Parents with social/emotional support report significantly higher rates of child flourishing (**77.6% vs. 67.1%**) and parent flourishing (**82.1% vs. 63.7%**) compared to those without support. They are also more likely to report handling the demands of raising children “very well” (**58.4% vs. 47.1%**).

Taken together, these findings suggest that parental mental health and social support are closely connected to children’s early development. Strengthening parental well-being and ensuring parents have reliable support networks may promote healthier developmental trajectories for all children.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Through follow-up with Nebraska parents who participated in the survey, Kidsights gathered additional insights that bring the data to life, illustrating how families experience mental health, support, and parenting in their daily lives.

Parenting Strain: Mental and Emotional Health

While many parents report doing well, a meaningful number are navigating stress, competing demands, and challenges balancing work and parenting responsibilities.

“I am proud that I am still working and providing for my family. One thing I am struggling with is spending time with my family. I am working and don’t have time to play with my baby.”

–Urban Warehouse Employee

“[I am] struggling with not having enough time with my kids. I feel like the time I do have with them is GOOD time spent though.”

–Urban Accounting Employee

“I keep going when it’s hard.”

–Urban Medical Laboratory Employee

Social Support: Access and Gaps

Most parents report having support, but access to reliable and consistent support varies. Some parents are navigating raising young children with limited networks or resources to rely on.

“[I am] proud of the amount of quality time we devote and spend with our kids. [I am] struggling with lack of a support system and rising cost of living.”

–Urban Government Worker

Systems Challenges: School, Child Care, and Inclusion

Parents often rely on external systems like schools and child care, but some report needing to advocate for resources, support, and acceptance for their children.

“Hard fighting for acceptance of my children at school and daycare about their differences.”

–Rural Medical Records Employee

“I’m proud my children are becoming individuals. I struggle with school systems and the ever-decreasing supports within them, externally and internally.”

–Urban Parent, Unemployed

Differences Across Families and Communities

Experiences of parenting, stress, and support are not the same for all families. Factors like geography, income, and access to resources shape how parents experience raising young children.

“I’m proud of trying to become a more connected parent with a gentle parenting style that allows my children to have autonomy and independence.”

–Urban Parent, Unemployed

Parenting Values, Growth, and Breaking Cycles

Parents shared reflections on their approach to raising their children, including efforts to build strong relationships, support their children’s development, and create positive experiences for the next generation.

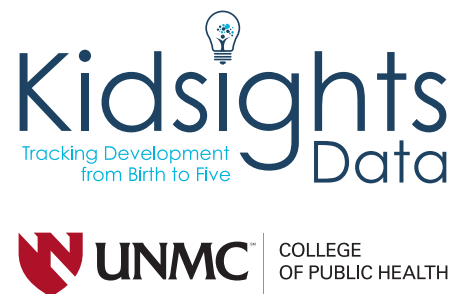
“One thing I’m struggling with is keeping generational trauma and cycles from repeating itself... I don’t want that for my child.”

–Rural Long-Term Care Nursing Facility Employee

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

Emotional support is important for healthy children and parents across all types of communities. While more than half of all parents report good mental health and access to some form of emotional support, a meaningful number, particularly those without emotional support, remain vulnerable. The data suggest that social support may act as a protective factor that helps parents maintain their mental well-being, which in turn can influence children's development. We find that parents often rely on informal support such as partners, family, and friends, while formal and community-based supports are used far less frequently.

Policies that expand access to emotional support through family-centered services, community-based programs, peer support models, and integration of support referrals into health and early childhood systems can help strengthen protective factors for both parents and children. Targeting outreach to families who lack reliable support networks, particularly in rural communities and among families with lower educational attainment, may be especially important for promoting more equitable child development outcomes.



About Kidsights Data

Kidsights Data is an initiative to build demand for and generate population-level data that tracks the development of children from birth to five in the United States using the Kidsights Measurement Tool. This tool is the first population-based measurement tool of a core set of child development skills for children from birth to age five in the United States. For more information about Kidsights Data, located in the College of Public Health at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, visit www.kidsightsdata.org.