



Healthy Childhoods

IPPR and Public First

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PUBLIC FIRST

A SHGH Company





Executive summary

- This pack summarises the findings from a nationally representative survey of parents in England (England, n=1,523), conducted 19-26 September 2025.
- The survey results tell the story of parents' struggles to manage their children's health and wellbeing in Britain today.
- Parents feel health and wellbeing should be a top national priority – above education and the economy – but show some concern about the state of children's health. **Half feel children's health today is worse than when they were growing up, and 7 in 10 think mental ill-health has become more common over the past decade.**



Executive summary

- Parents see themselves as primarily responsible for their children's health and feel they have a significant amount of agency – compared to other aspects of childhood (e.g their child's education or financial future) - to improve it.
- However, they feel hampered by structural forces: **the cost of healthy food and activities, and the influence of the tech and food industry.** Parents saw these market forces as **more influential on their child's health than the NHS or national government.**
- The survey also highlights significant disparities: **families who were struggling financially were more likely to have unwell children,** but less likely to **access services, report positive experiences** of those services or **feel confident and prepared** to meet their children's health needs.



Executive summary

- The contrast between parents' feelings of responsibility for children's health and the lack of structured guidance on parenting is also striking. **One in three** did not feel prepared to care for their child's health before they became a parent. **One in three** did not attend any antenatal classes, rising to **two in five** amongst the least financially secure groups.
- Parents showed remarkable consensus on what a healthy childhood involves: **good nutrition, physical activity** and time outdoors, and **safe and loving relationships** with family members.
- What was more challenging was putting this knowledge into practice. While over 90% of parents felt confident they knew what their children needed across various health domains – from nutrition and sleep to oral hygiene – fewer found it easier to deliver. **One in five found it difficult to get their child the professional help** they needed, while the **ease of meeting children's nutritional needs halved between the most (87%) and least (43%) financially secure groups.**



Executive summary

- When asked how government should help, **6 in 10** parents preferred education and practical support for parents to raise children healthily themselves over more services for professionals to treat children.
- Across policy areas, parents showed a clear preference for structural action to make healthy choices easier. The most popular proposals were **making healthy food more affordable and accessible, expanding free or low-cost local activities, supporting family-friendly work policies** and **reducing harmful content online**.
- Overall, the findings suggest **parents see themselves as central to improving children's health but want a more enabling environment in which to do so**. They favour government action on systemic barriers – costs, time pressures and commercial influences - to create the conditions in which families can then do the lion's share of the work to create healthy, active and happy childhoods.



Methodology



Methodology

- Nationally representative survey of parents in England
- Fieldwork conducted 19th - 26th September 2025
- Sample size: 1523 parents
- All results weighted using Iterative Proportional Fitting, or 'Raking'.



The state of children's health today

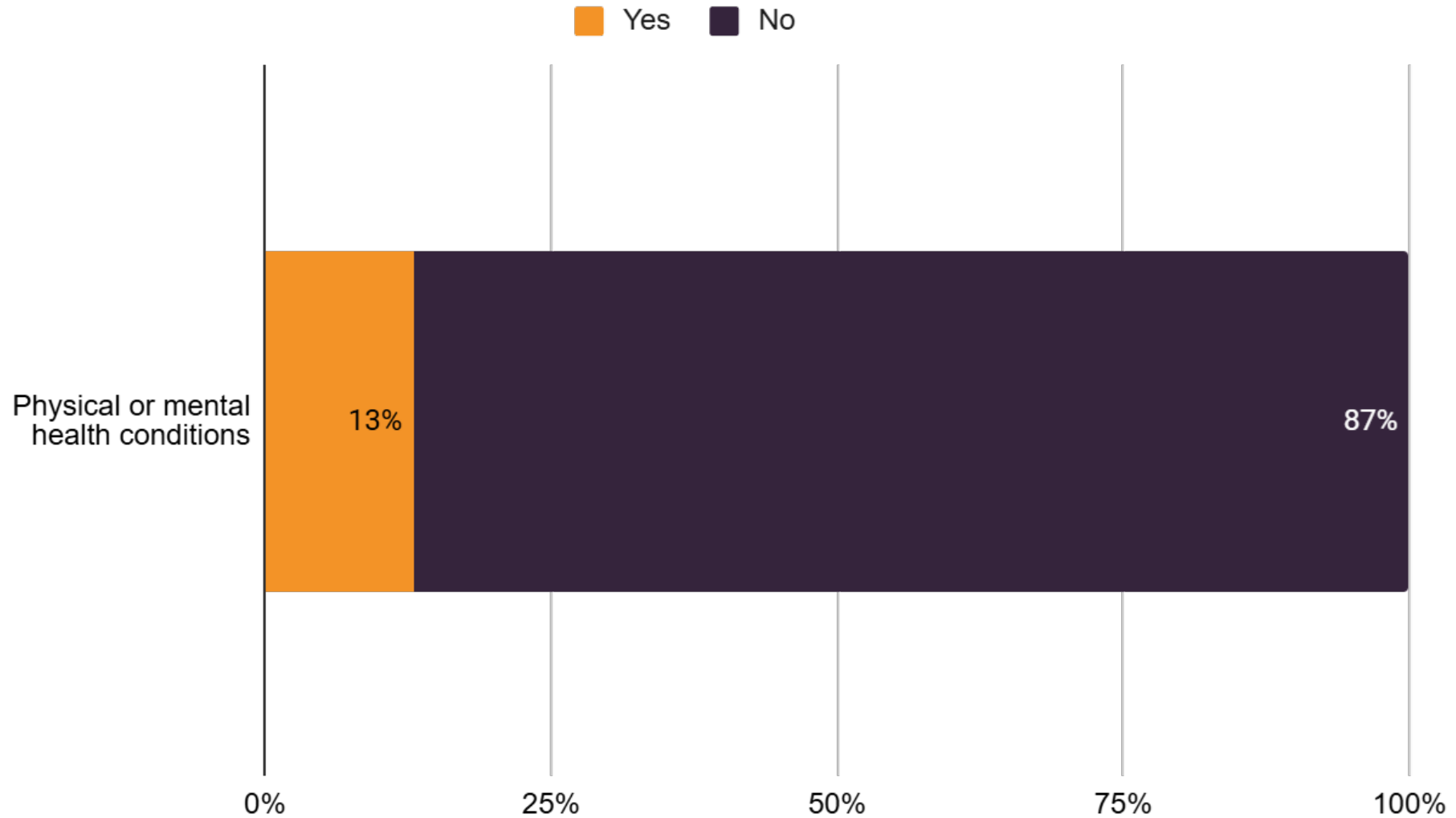


Section summary:

According to parents in England, a significant share of children are experiencing physical or mental health conditions and disabilities.

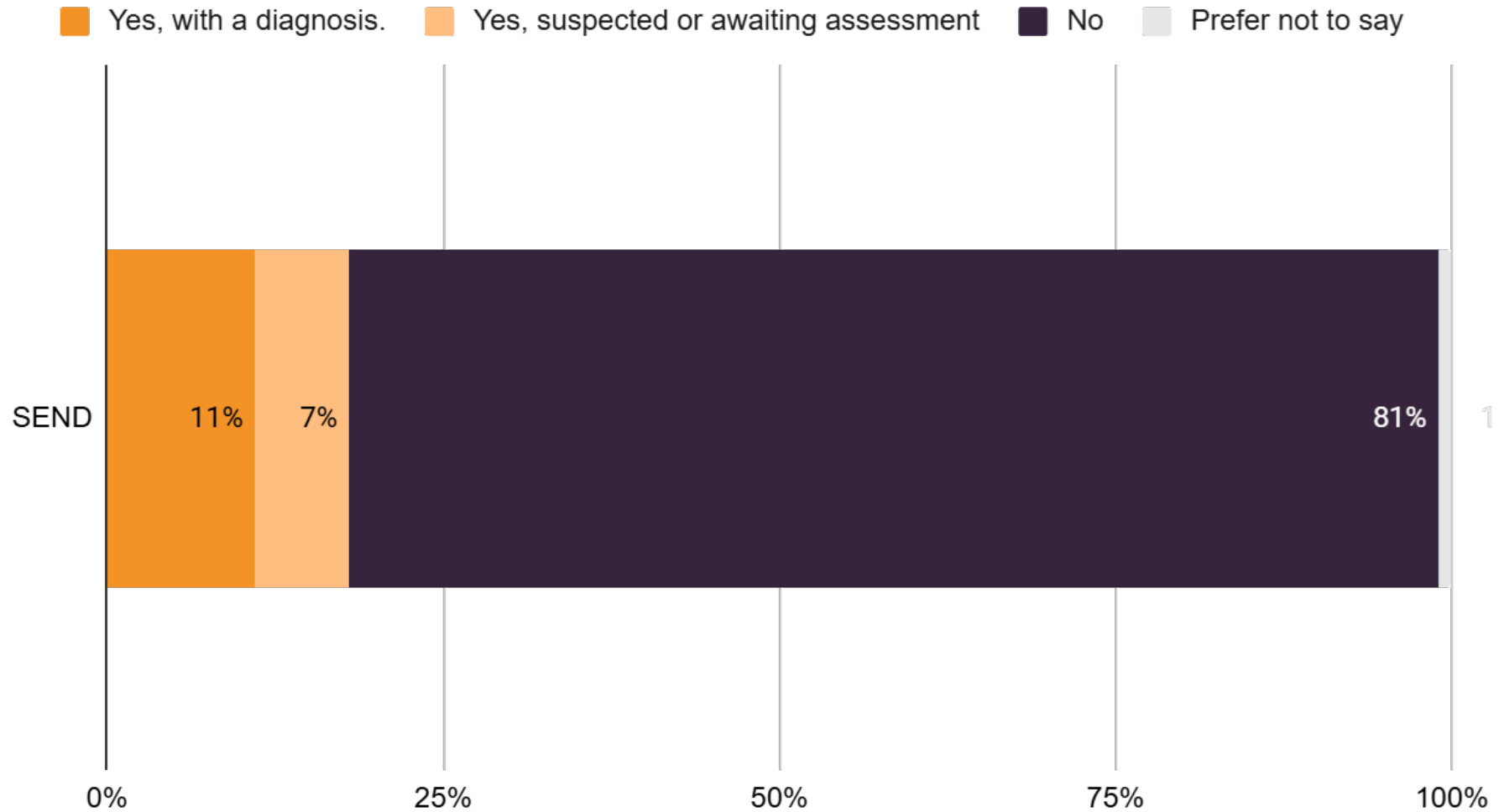
Moreover, health concerns were patterned by families' levels of financial comfort and education. Families who were struggling financially were more likely to have unwell children.

13% of parents report having a child with physical or mental health conditions



Do any of your children have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?

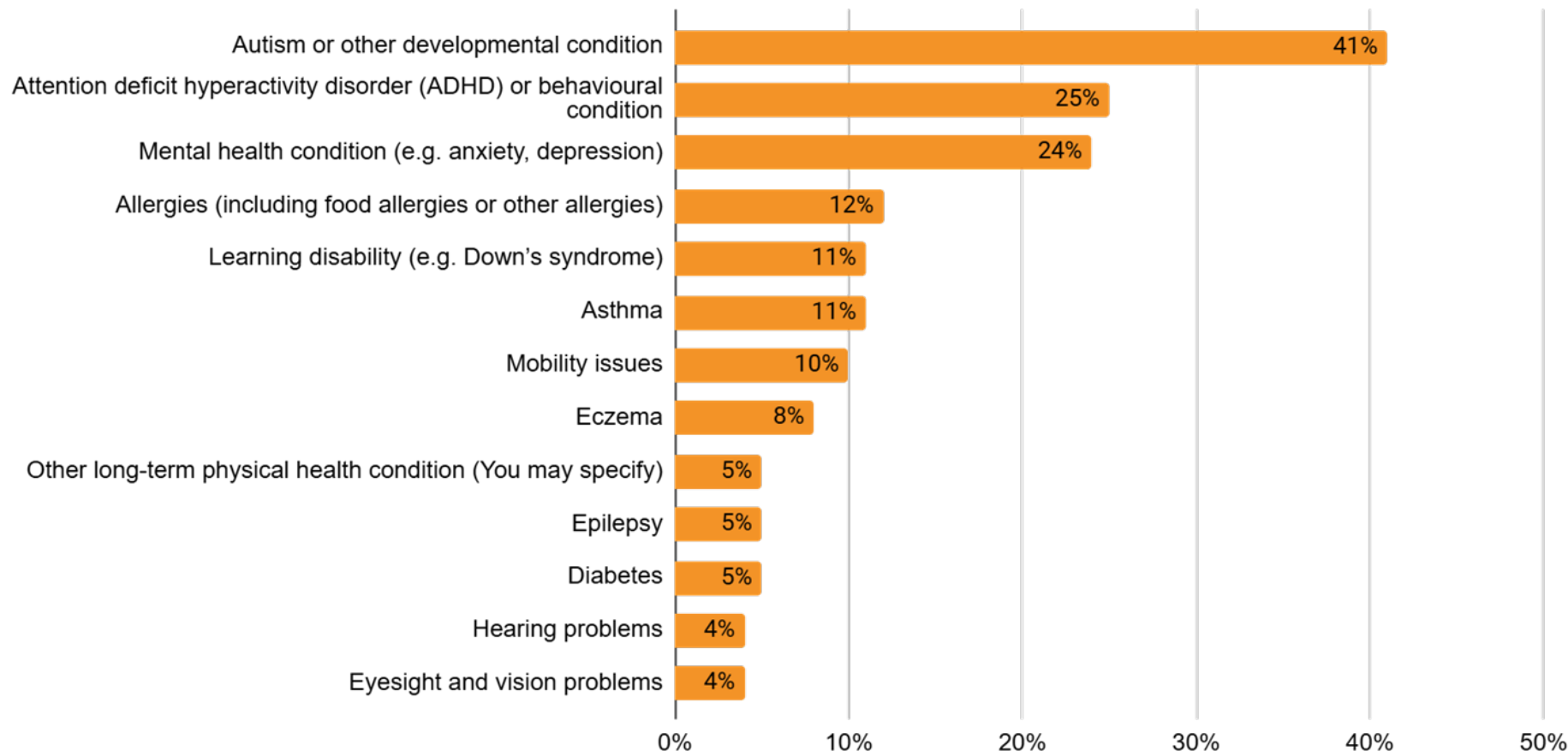
Nearly 1 in 5 parents report having a child with SEND



Do any of your children have any special education needs or disabilities (SEND)?

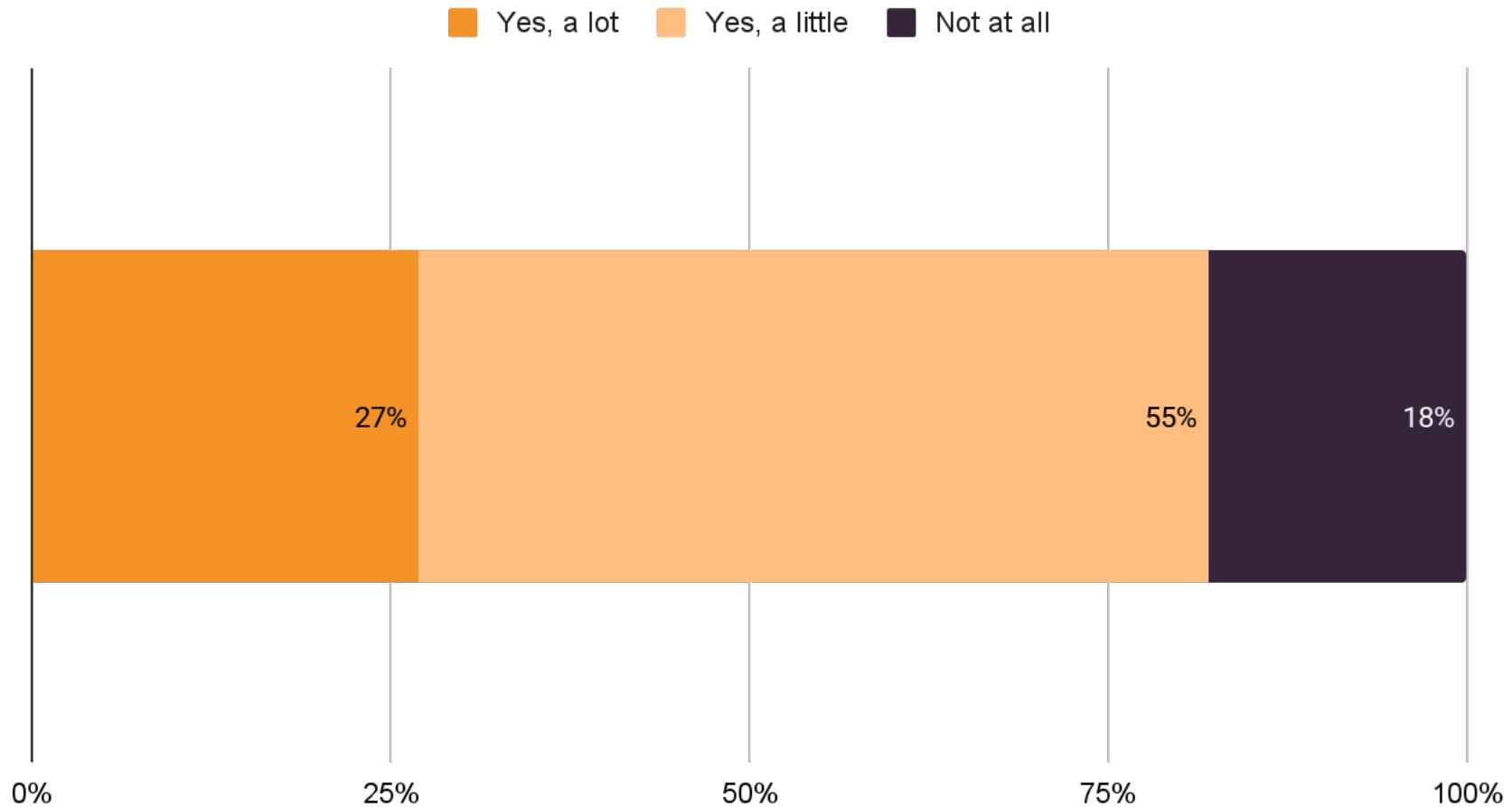


The most commonly cited condition was autism, followed by ADHD and mental health



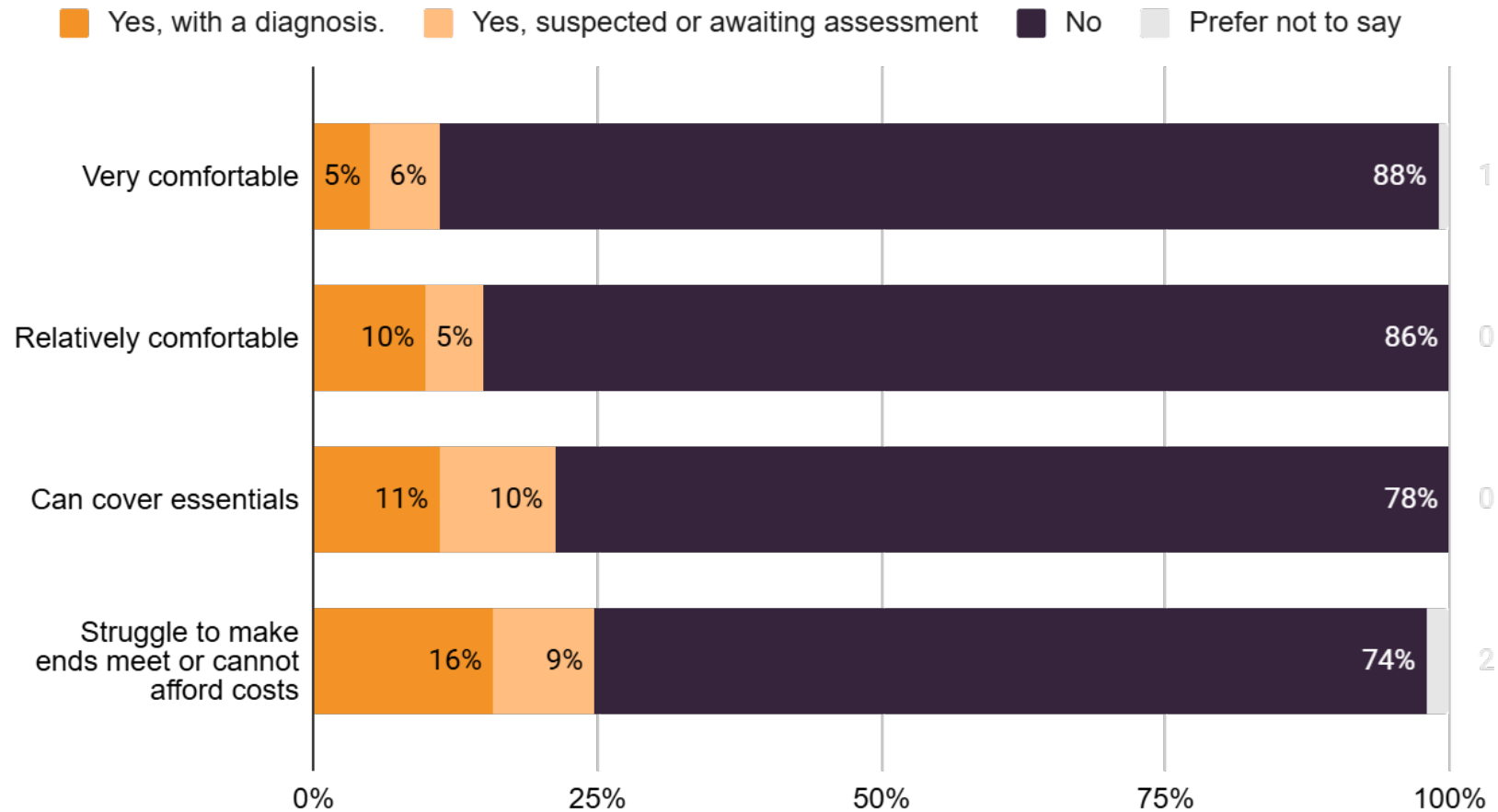
Thinking about this child, which of the following categories best describes their condition or illness?
You may select as many as apply

82% of parents with children with physical or mental conditions or illnesses say it reduces their ability to do day-to-day activities



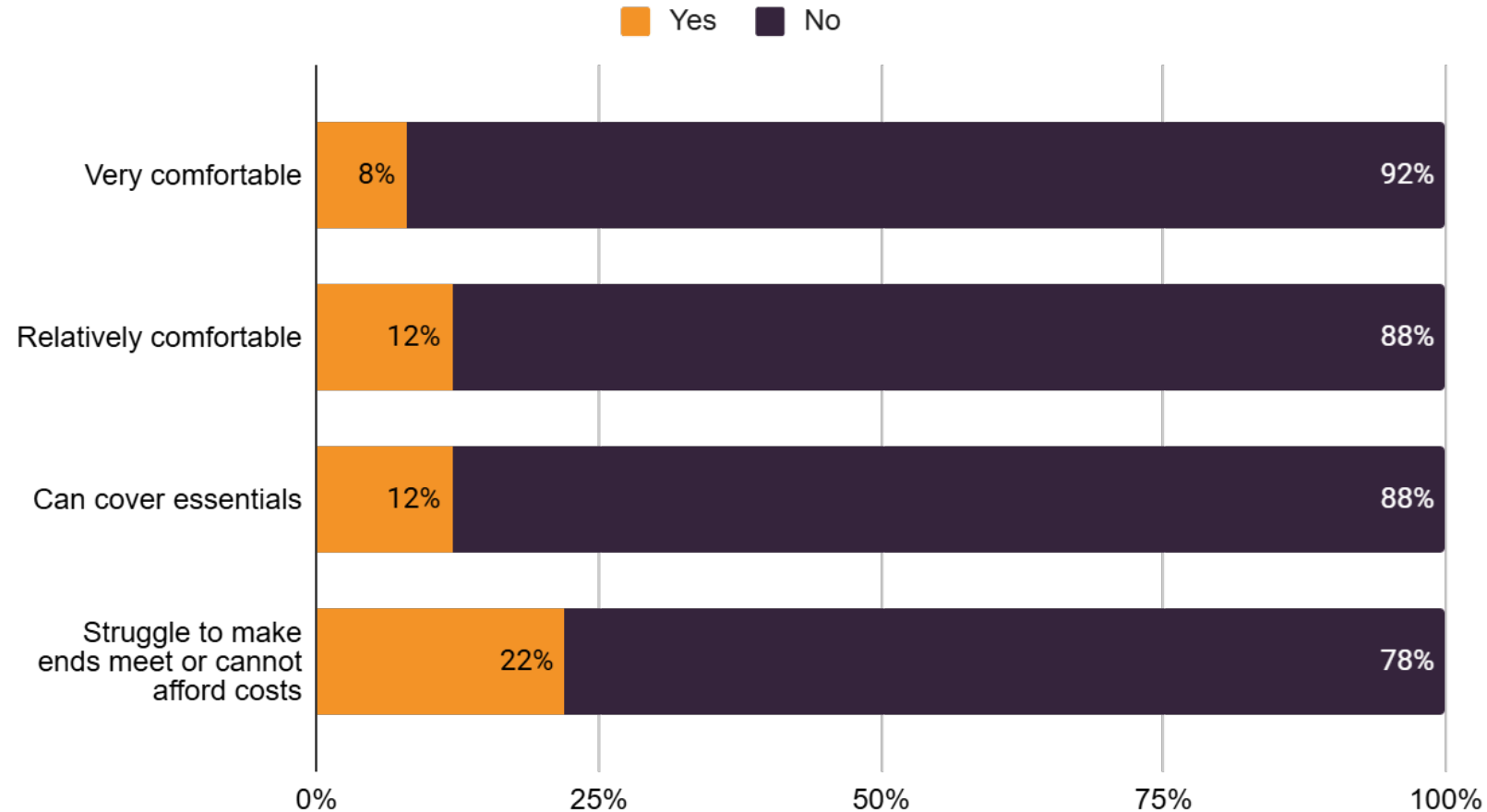
Do any of these conditions or illnesses reduce their ability to carry out day-to-day activities? If you have multiple children with conditions or illnesses, please think about the child whose condition you became aware of earliest

Parents who were less financially comfortable were more likely to report their children had physical or mental conditions or illnesses



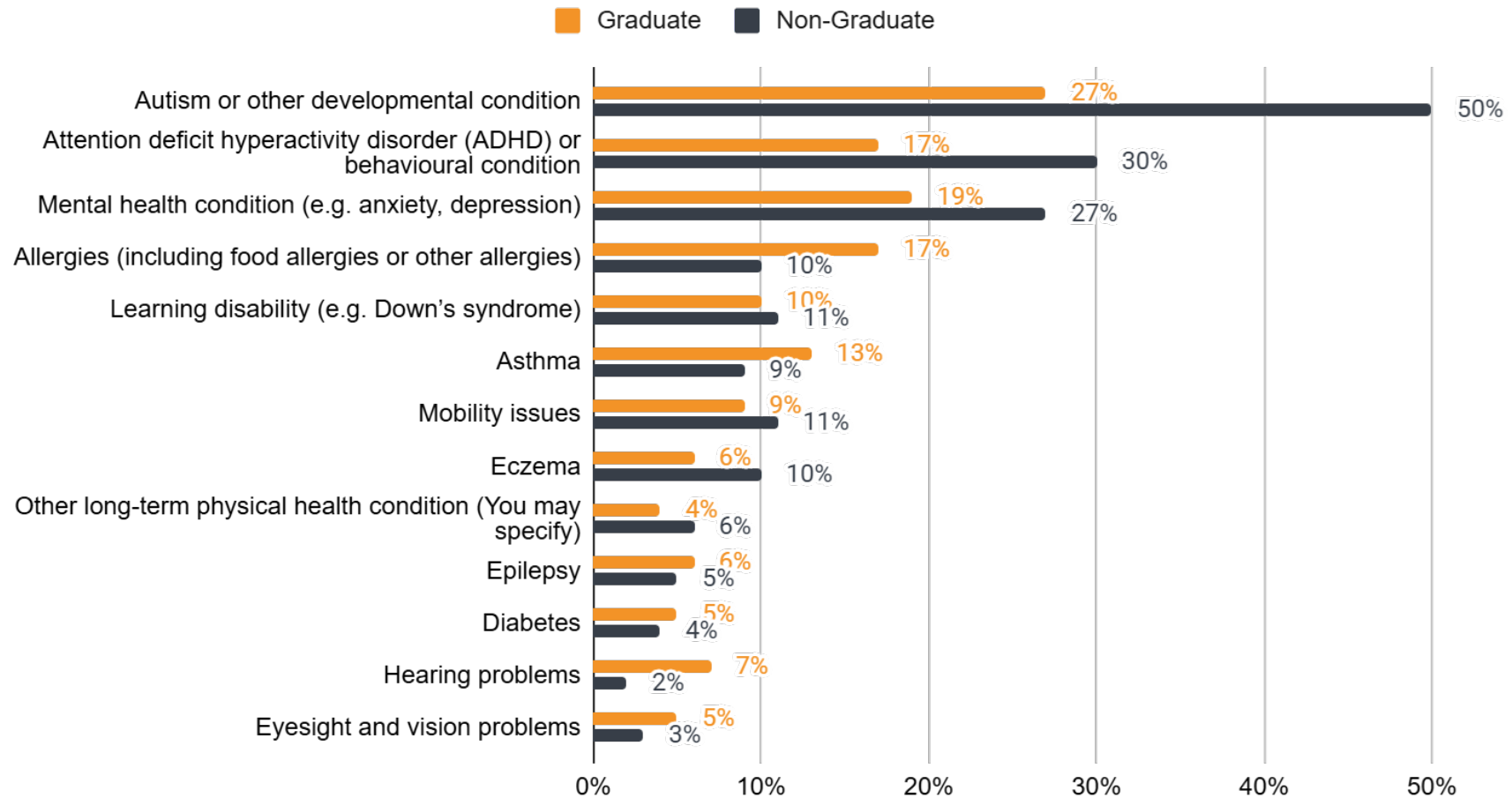
Do any of your children have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?

Parents who were less financially comfortable were also more likely to report their children had SEND



Do any of your children have any special education needs or disabilities (SEND)?

Broken down by education level, non-graduates were nearly twice as likely to report having children with autism and ADHD



Thinking about this child, which of the following categories best describes their condition or illness?
You may select as many as apply



Concern about children's health



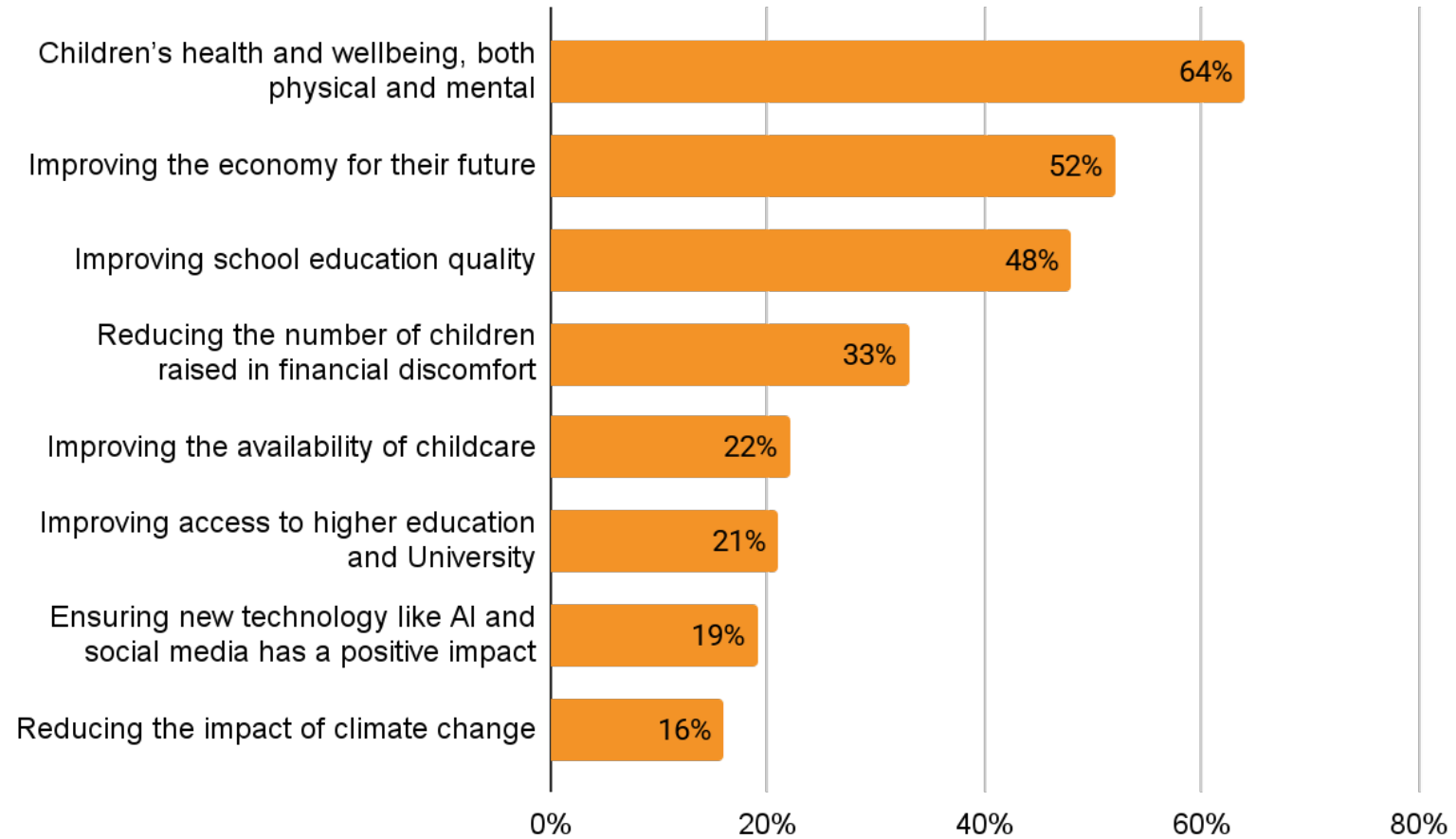
Section summary:

Children's health and wellbeing registers as a top priority for parents, above education and the economy.

Today's parents show a fair amount of concern about the state of children's health: fewer than half think children in the UK are healthy. 1 in 2 believe health has worsened since their own childhood.

Of all health issues in childhood, parents were most concerned about mental ill-health, followed by obesity and neurodevelopmental disorders.

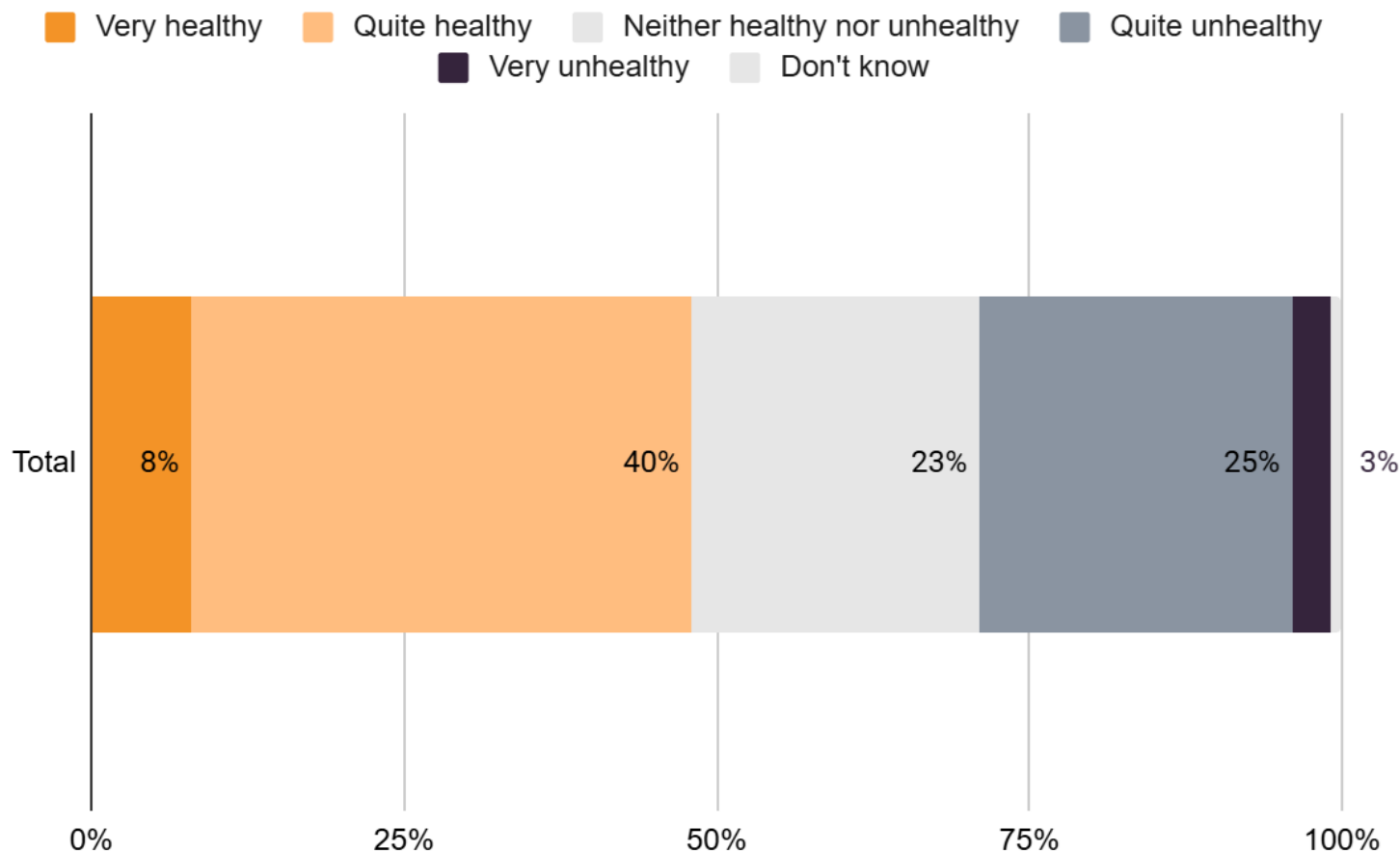
Two-thirds of English parents think health and well-being should be a top priority, above education and the economy



Which of the following would you say should be the main priorities when it comes to children in the UK? Select up to three of the following



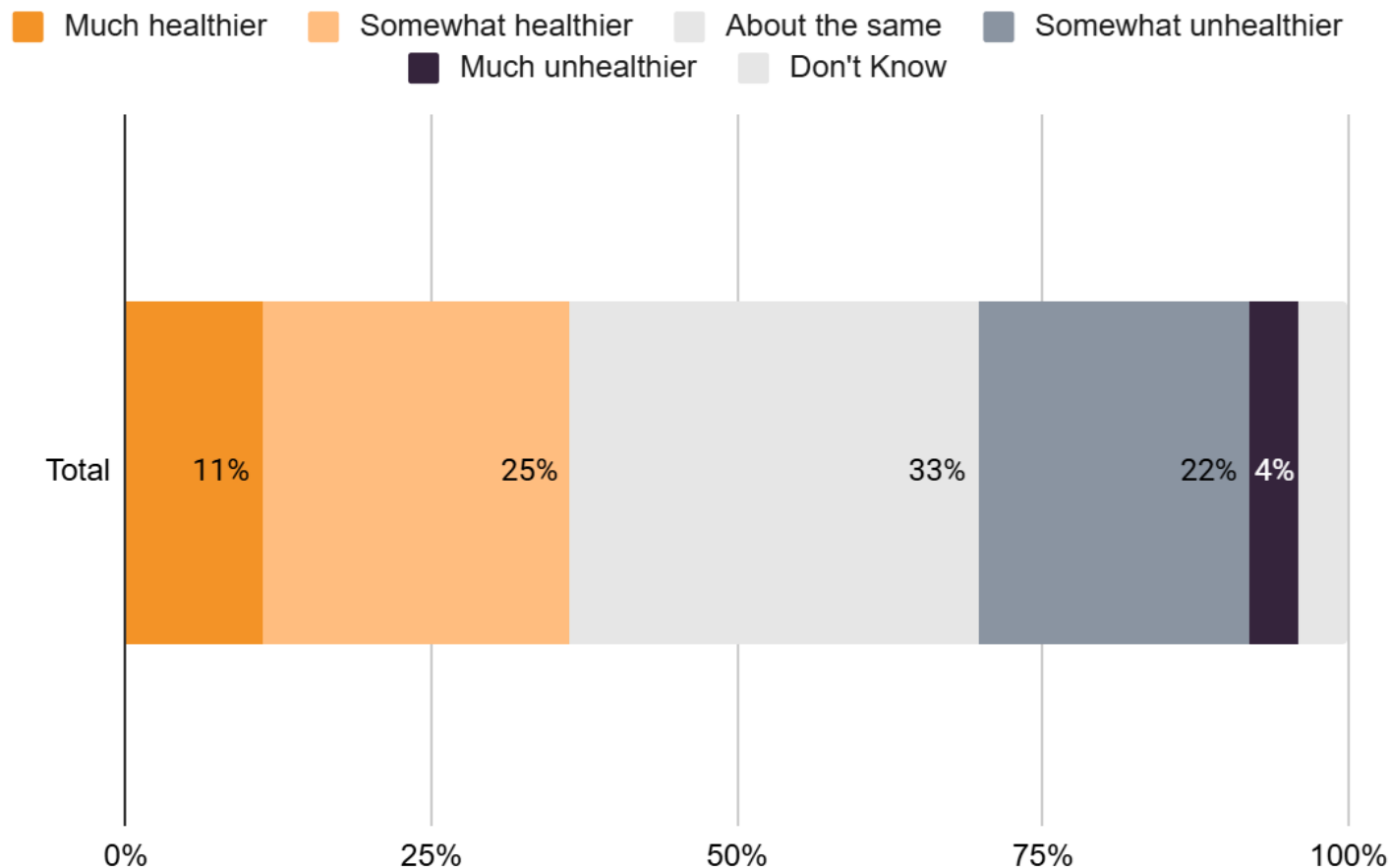
Just under half of parents (48%) felt children in the UK were healthy, while over a quarter (28%) felt they were unhealthy.



Thinking about children's lives in the UK today... Overall, how healthy do you think children in the UK are today?

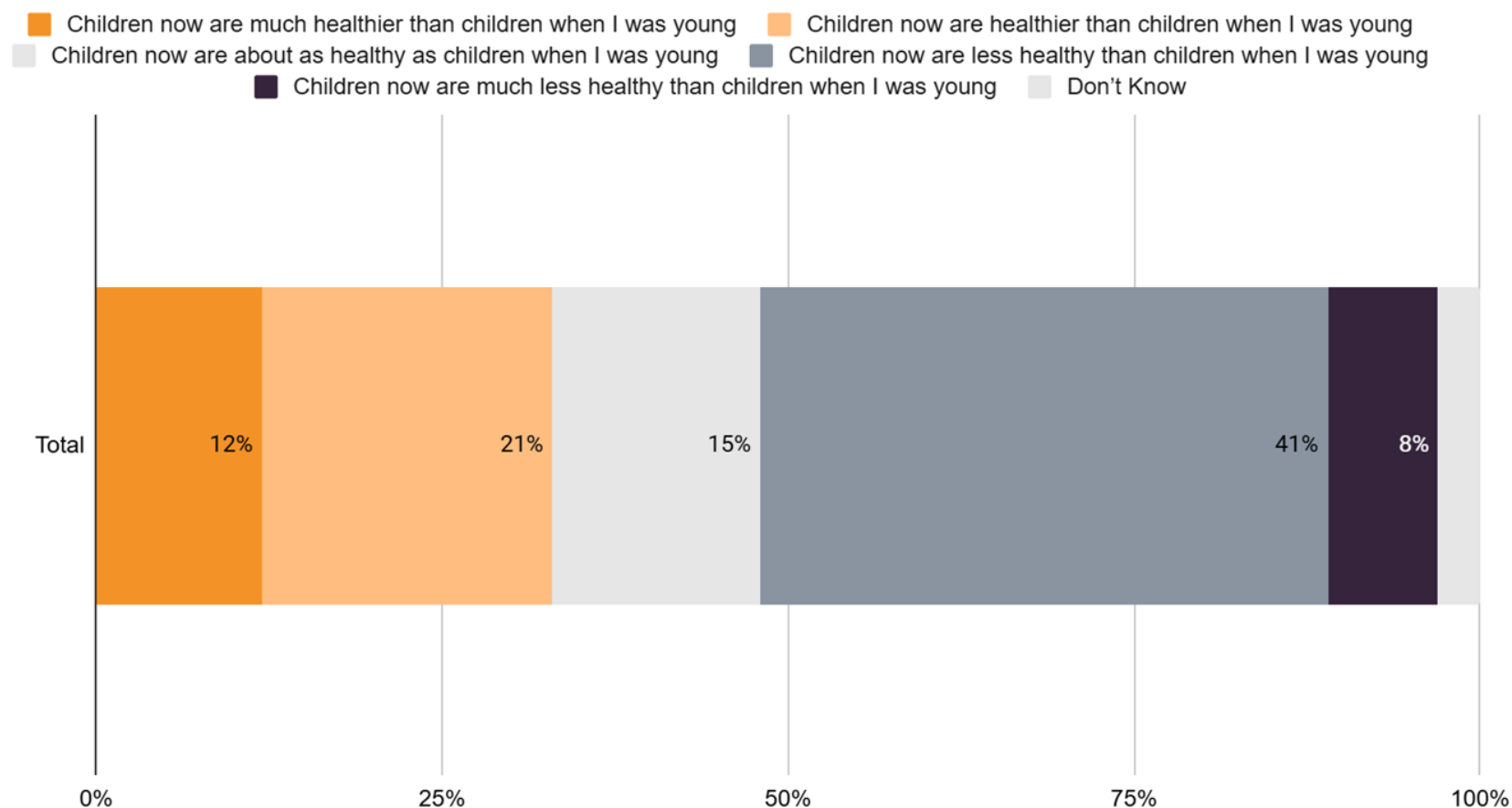


Meanwhile, just over a third (37%) of parents think children in the UK are healthier than children in other wealthy countries.



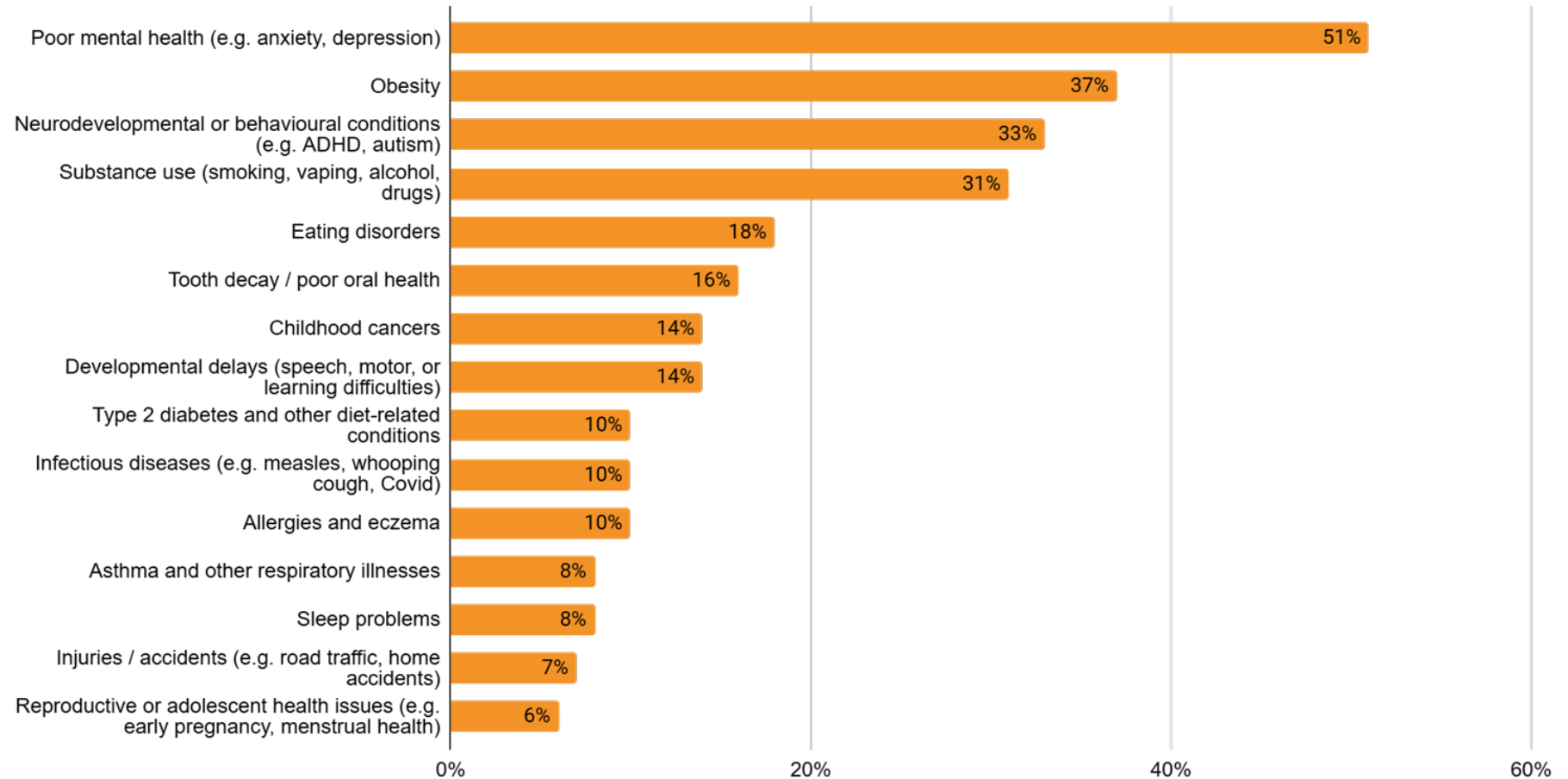
And compared to children in other rich countries, how would you describe the health of children in the UK?

And nearly half of parents (49%) think children now are less healthy than when they were young.



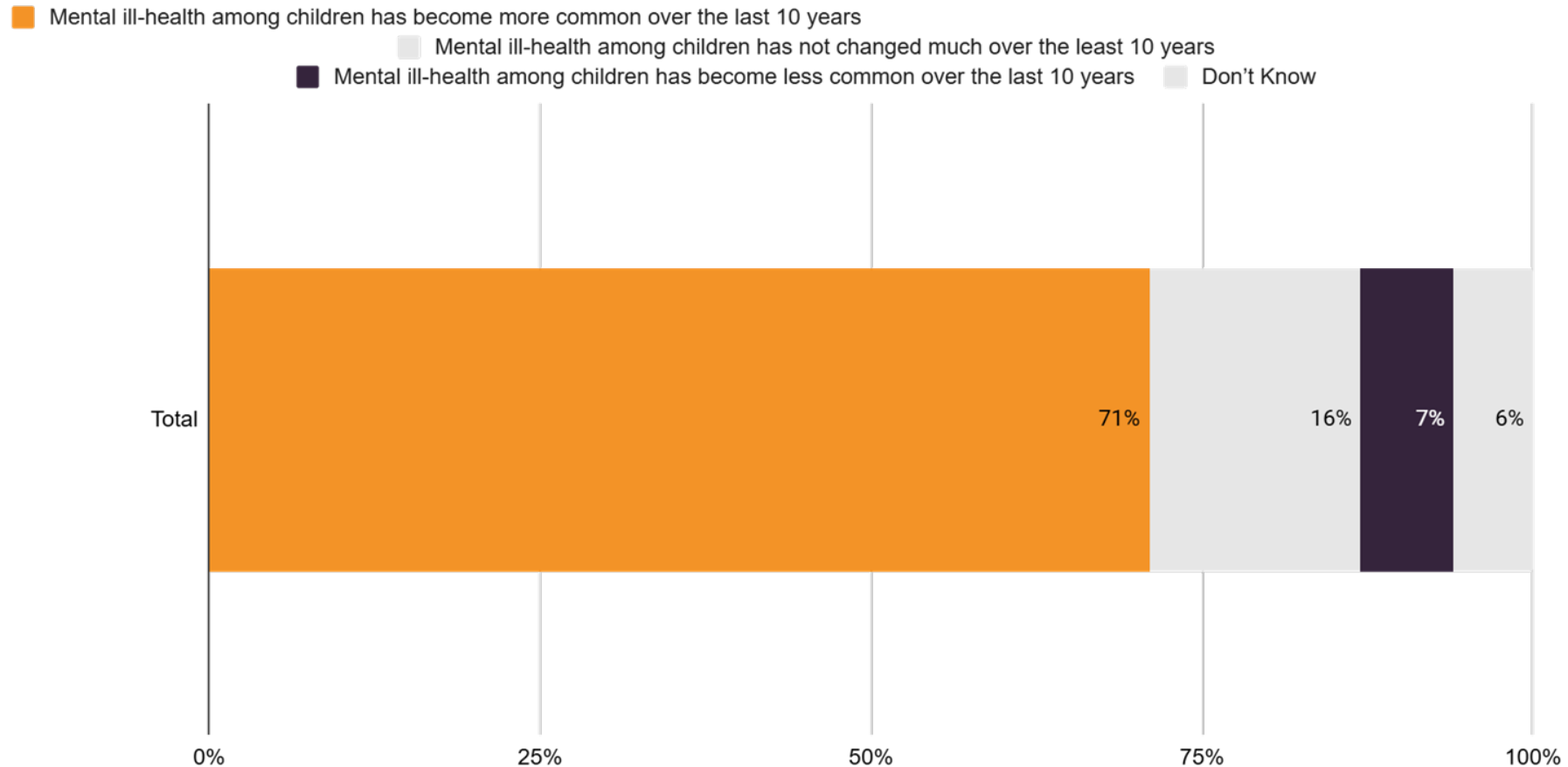
And thinking back to your own childhood, how would you describe the lives of children in the UK today?

Of all health issues amongst today's young people, parents are most concerned about poor mental health.



Which health issues concern you most about children in the UK today?
Please select up to three of the following

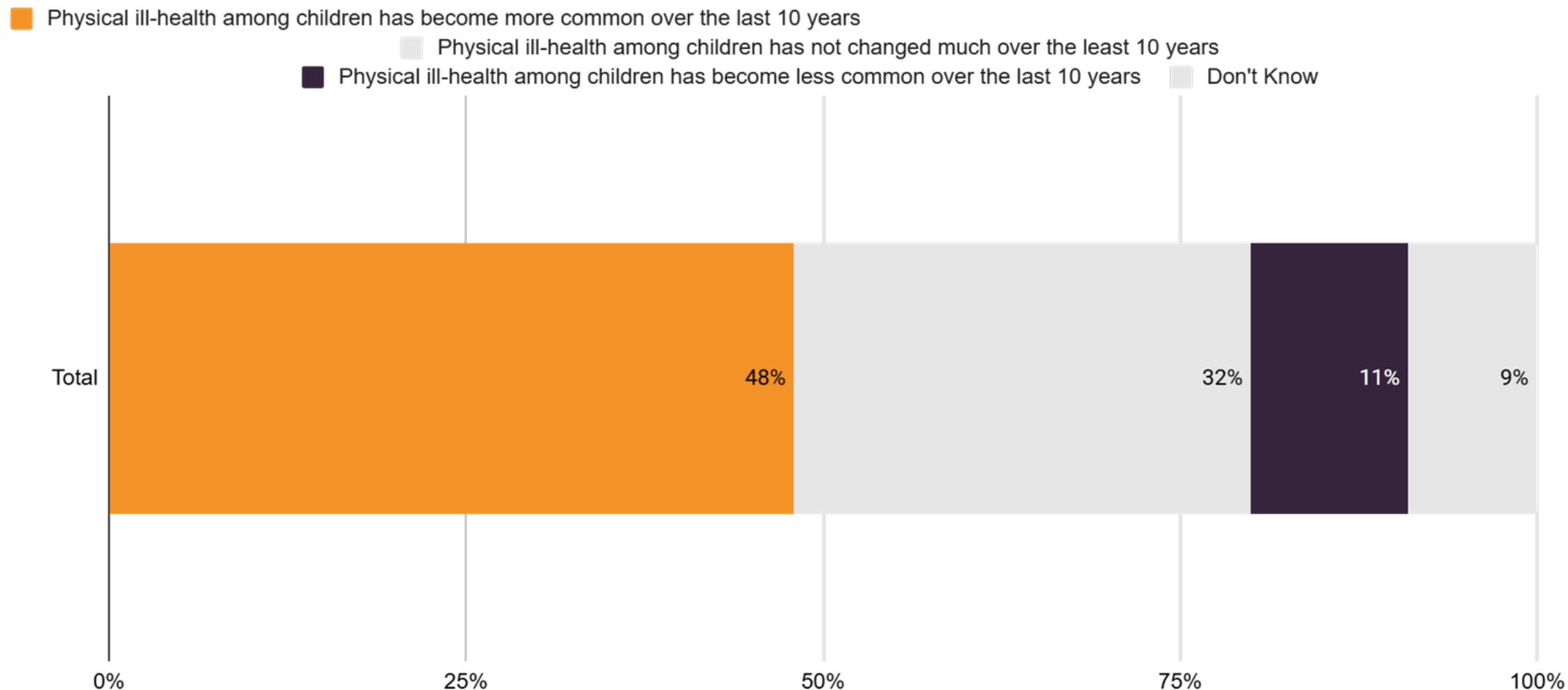
The vast majority (71%) think mental ill-health among children is becoming more common.



Which of the following comes closest to your view on mental ill-health among children over the last 10 years?



While a slightly smaller proportion (48%) think physical ill-health among children is becoming more common.



Which of the following comes closest to your view on physical ill-health among children over the last 10 years?



Concern about children's health - by different groups



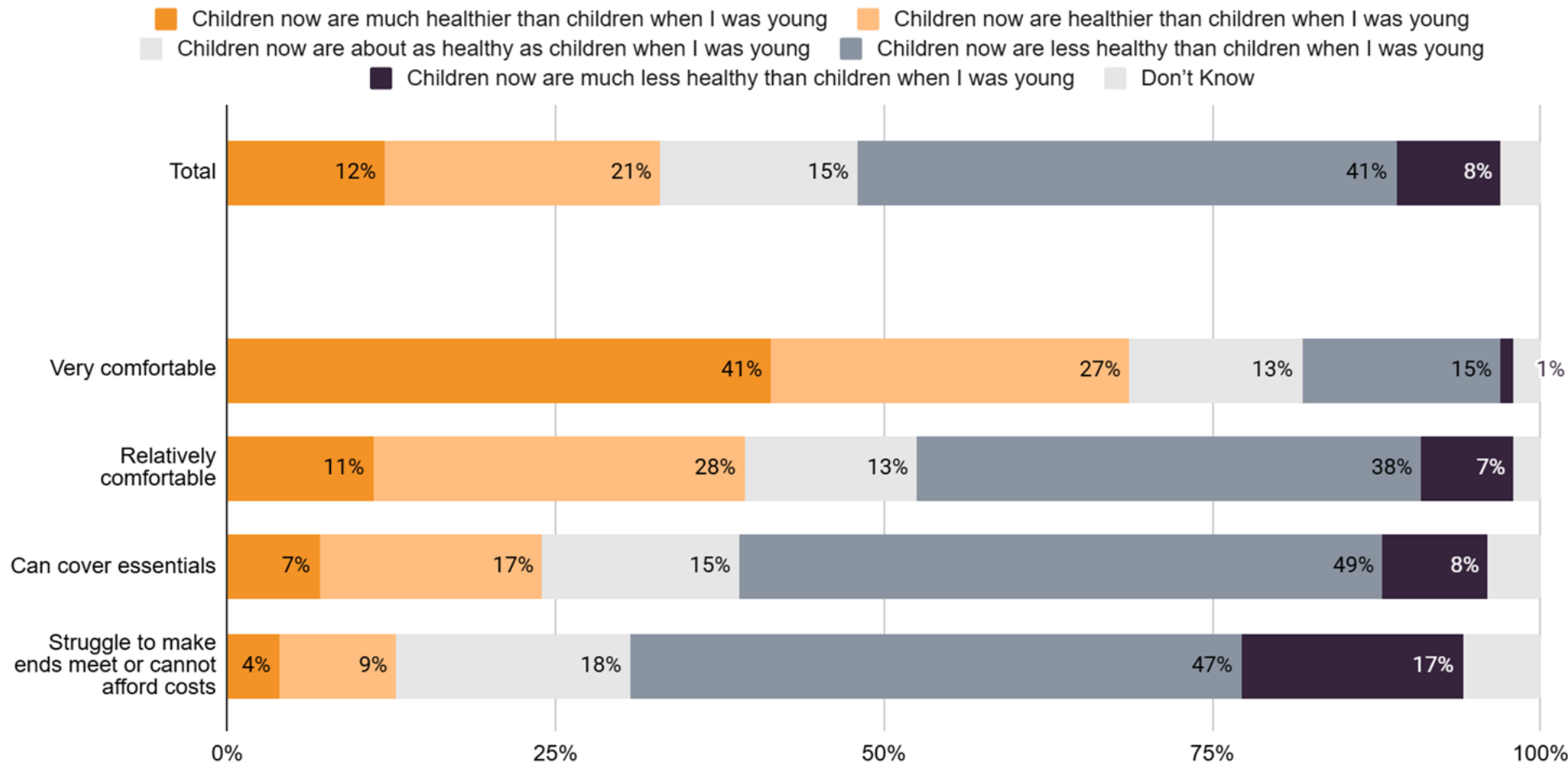
Section summary:

Views on children's health vary by circumstances: wealthier and younger parents tend to be more positive, while older parents or those under financial strain are more likely to see decline.

Political differences also emerge, with Labour and Conservative voters more positive than those intending to vote Reform or Green.



Perceptions varied significantly by financial comfort, with more well-off parents more optimistic about children's health today.

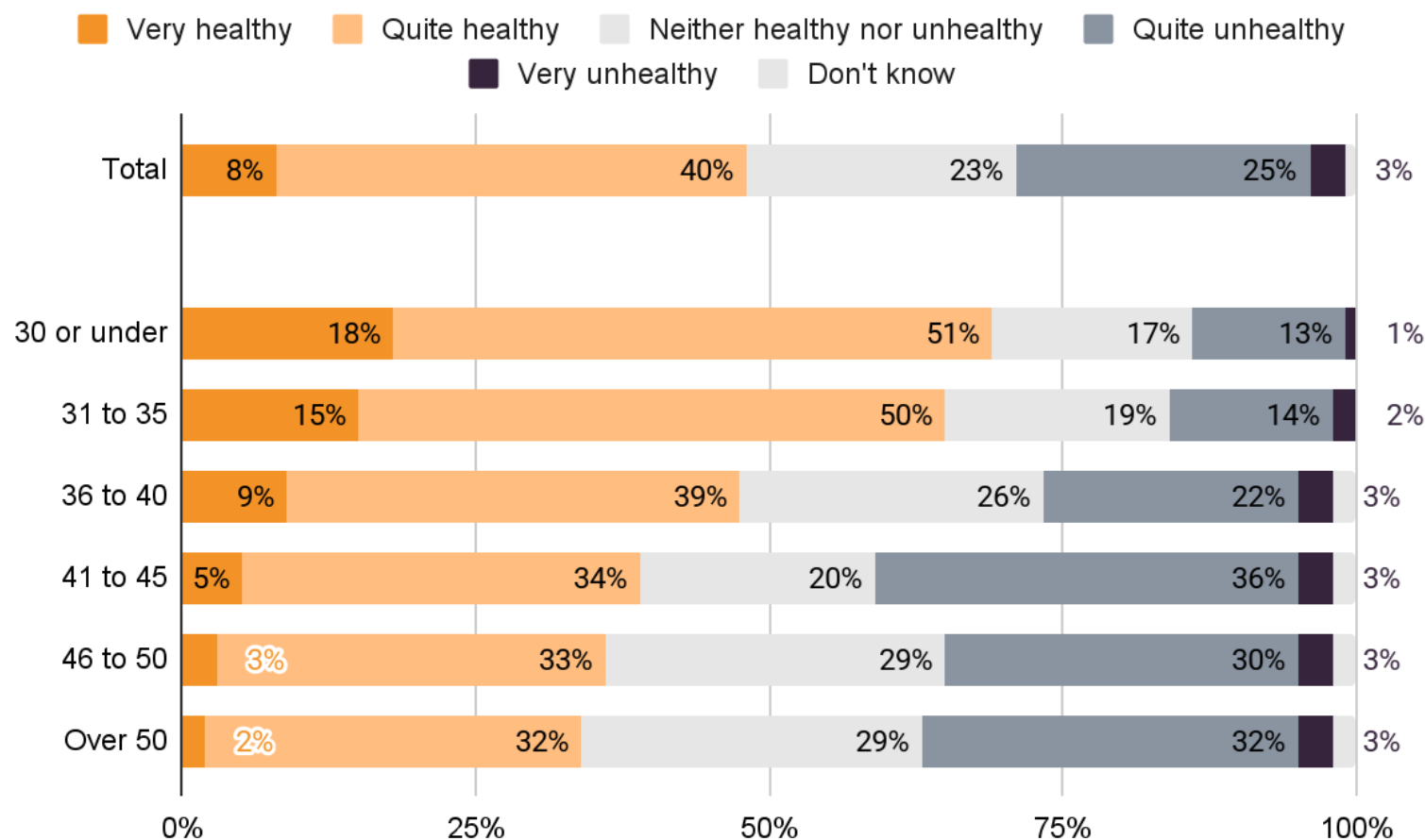


And thinking back to your own childhood, how would you describe the lives of children in the UK today?



And it also varied by age of parent, with older parents more likely to feel children were unhealthy*.

*This persisted across questions about children's health today (i.e. in comparison to other rich countries and previous generations).

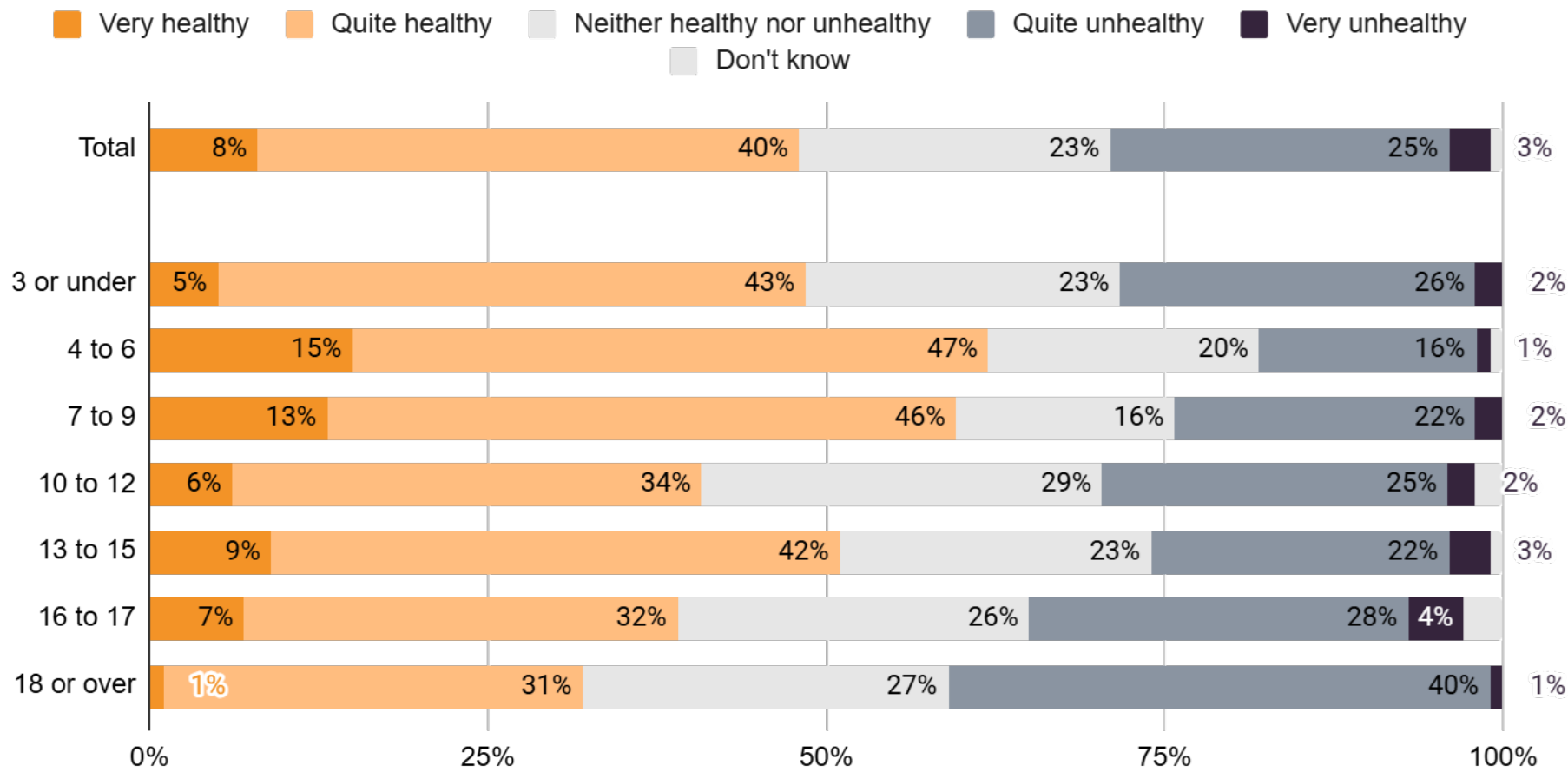


Thinking about children's lives in the UK today... Overall, how healthy do you think children in the UK are today?



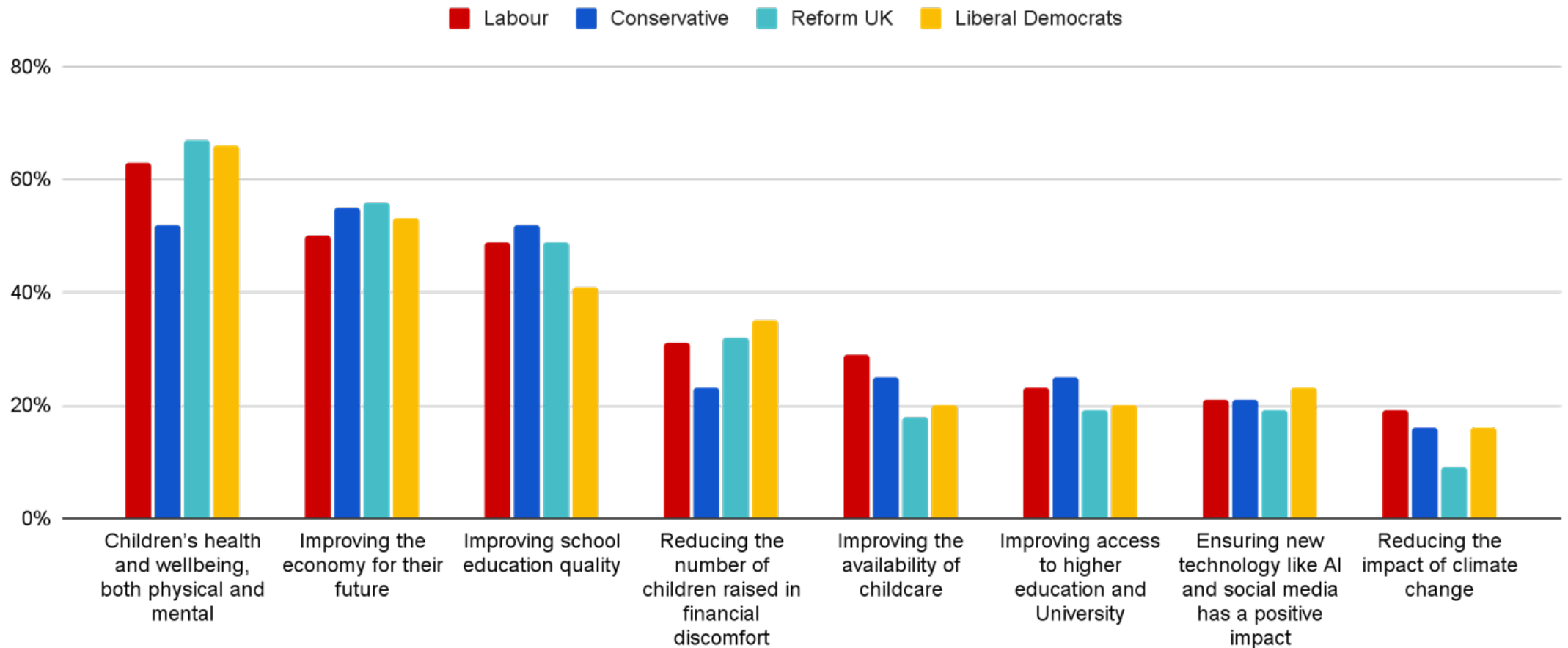
This could be driven by age of their children, with older parents more likely to have older children.*

*Given e.g mental ill-health often sets in during adolescence, making parents of older children more sensitive to rates of ill-health. However, the pattern is less pronounced in the chart below.



Thinking about children's lives in the UK today... Overall, how healthy do you think children in the UK are today?

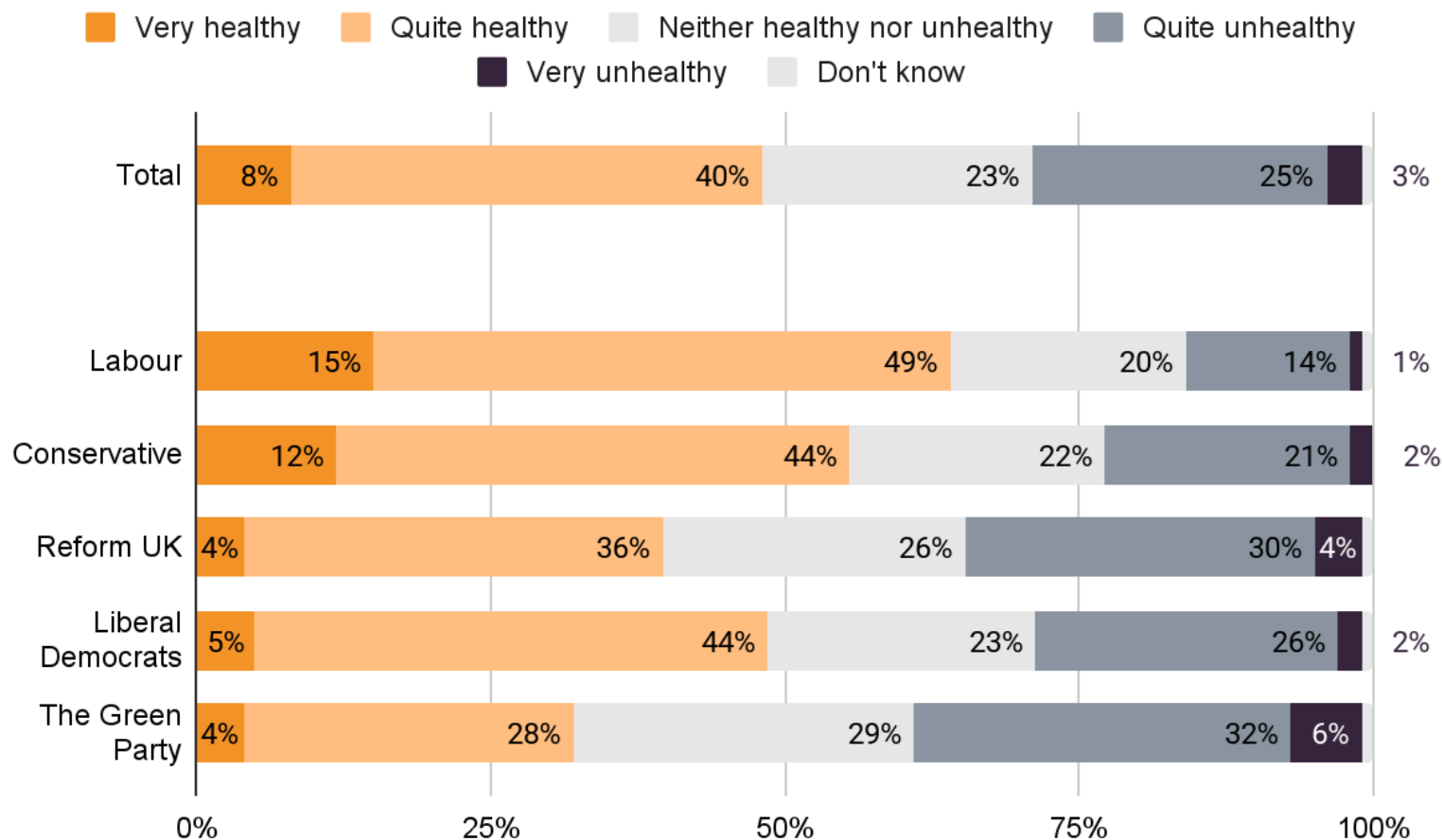
Children's health was slightly more of a concern for certain voter groups: Reform and LibDem voters were more likely to prioritise this than Labour and Conservative voters.



Which of the following would you say should be the main priorities when it comes to children in the UK? Select up to three of the following

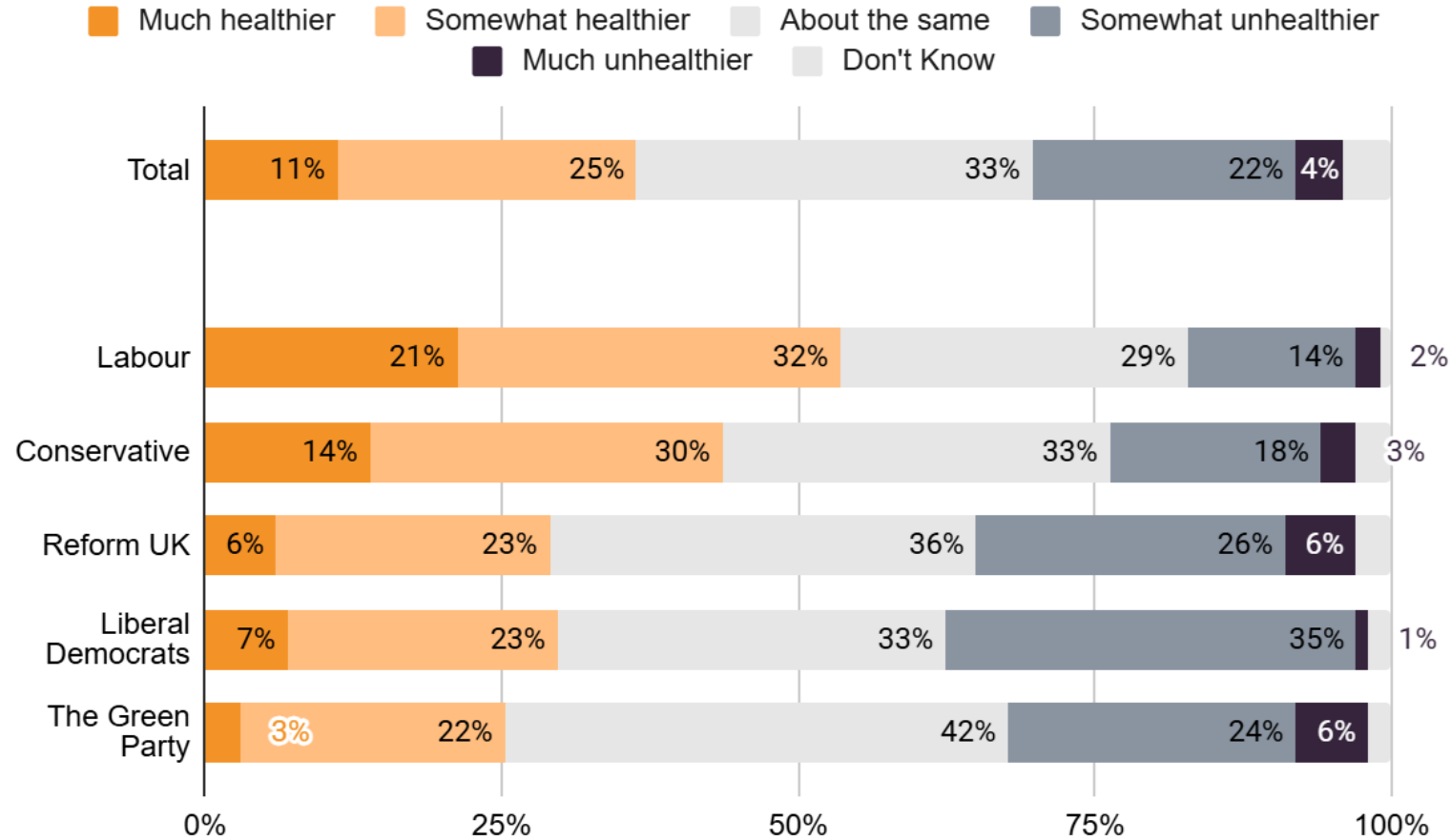


Meanwhile, Labour and Conservative voters were more optimistic about children's health in the UK today.



Thinking about children's lives in the UK today... Overall, how healthy do you think children in the UK are today?

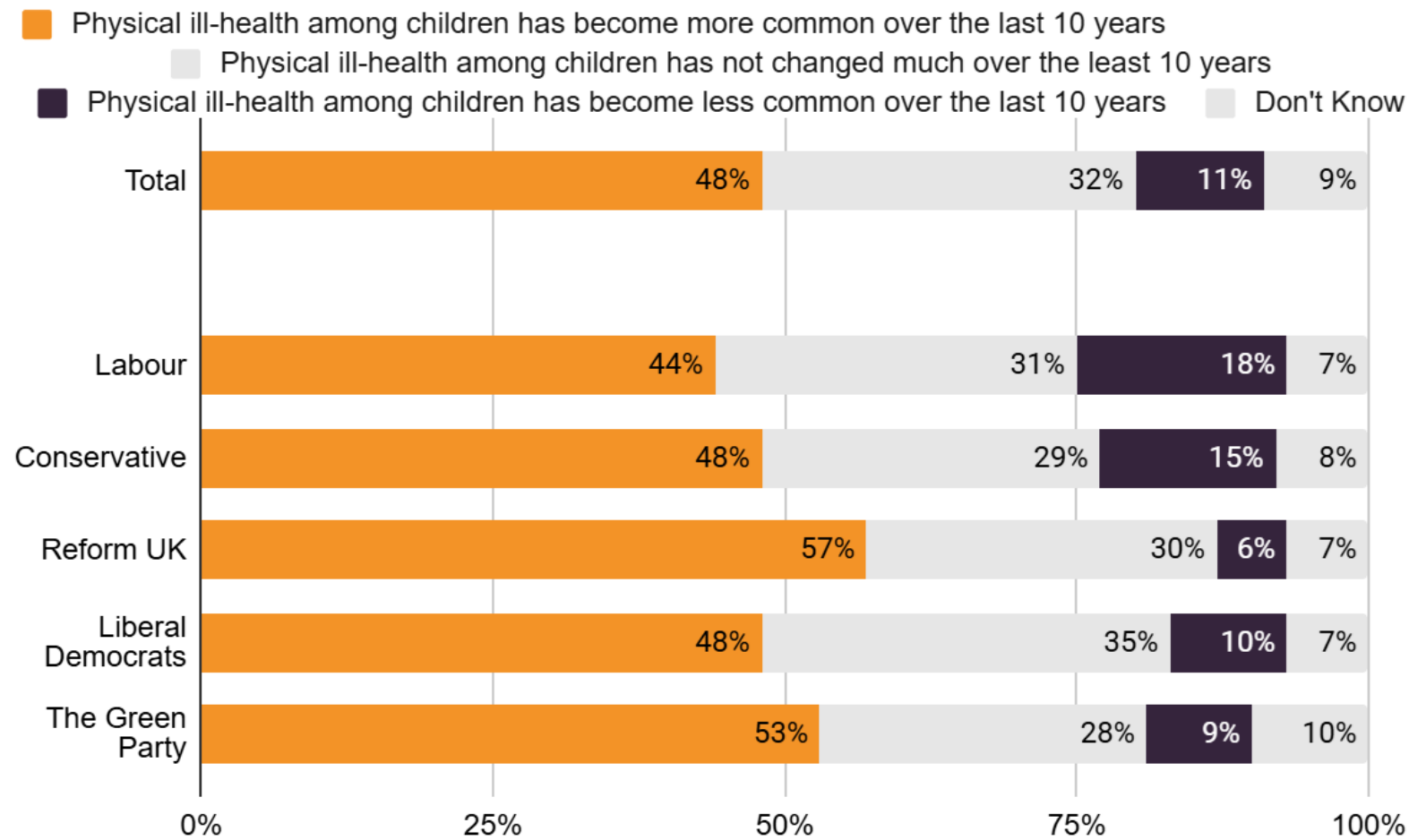
Including in comparison to other rich nations.



And compared to children in other rich countries, how would you describe the health of children in the UK?



While Reform and Green voters exhibited more pessimism, for example believing that physical ill-health is becoming more common amongst UK children.



Which of the following comes closest to your view on physical ill-health among children over the last 10 years?



Contributors to a healthy childhood

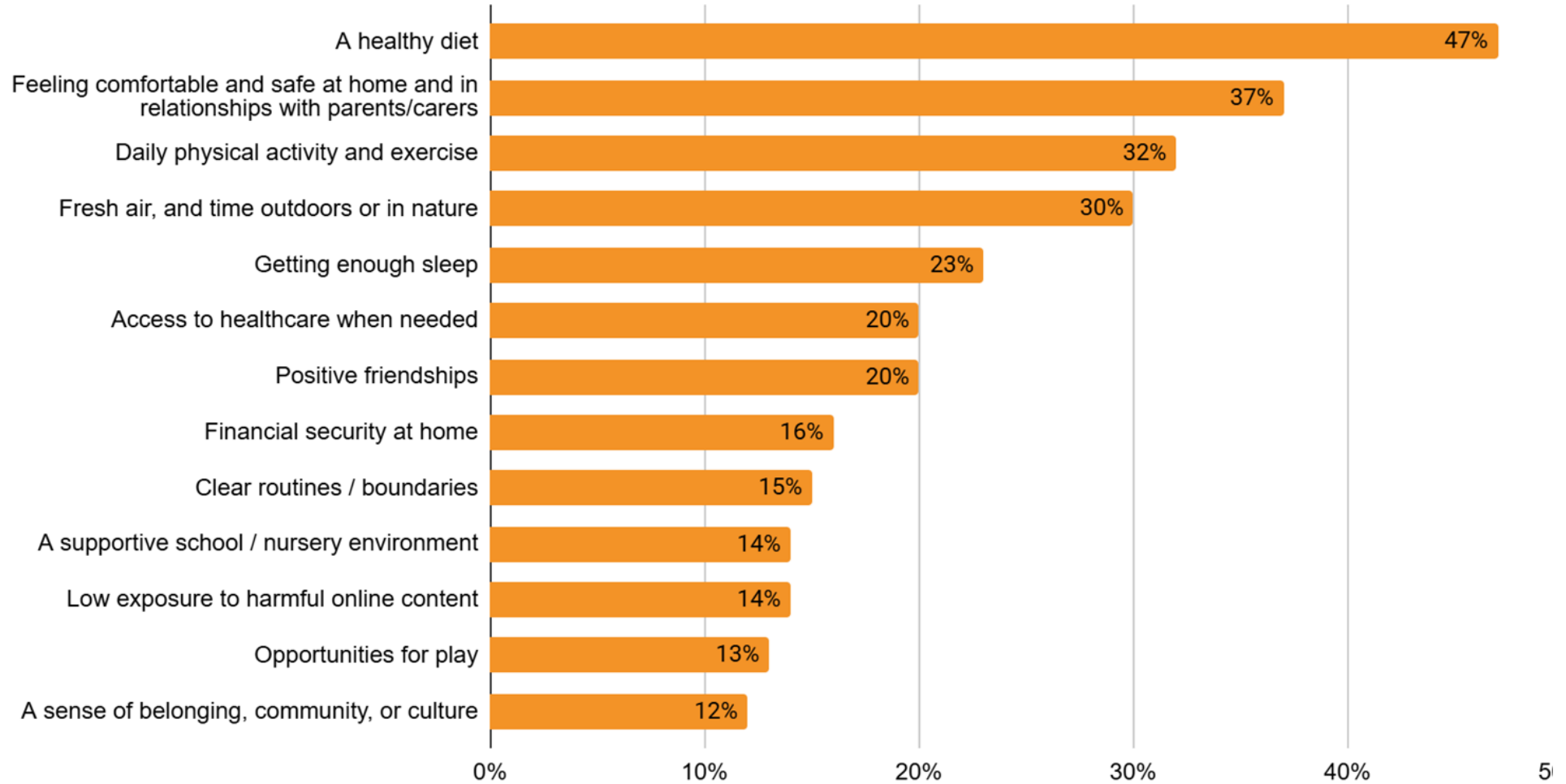


Section summary:

When thinking about the most important ingredients in a healthy childhood, parents consistently emphasised: a healthy diet, safe and loving family relationships, and physical activity.

Costs of healthy activities and external pressures (from school or devices) were felt to be the biggest barriers.

For parents, the most important part of a healthy childhood is a healthy diet, followed by relationships with caregivers and physical activity.



Still thinking about children's health in the UK today... Which of the following would you say are most important for a healthy childhood? Select up to three



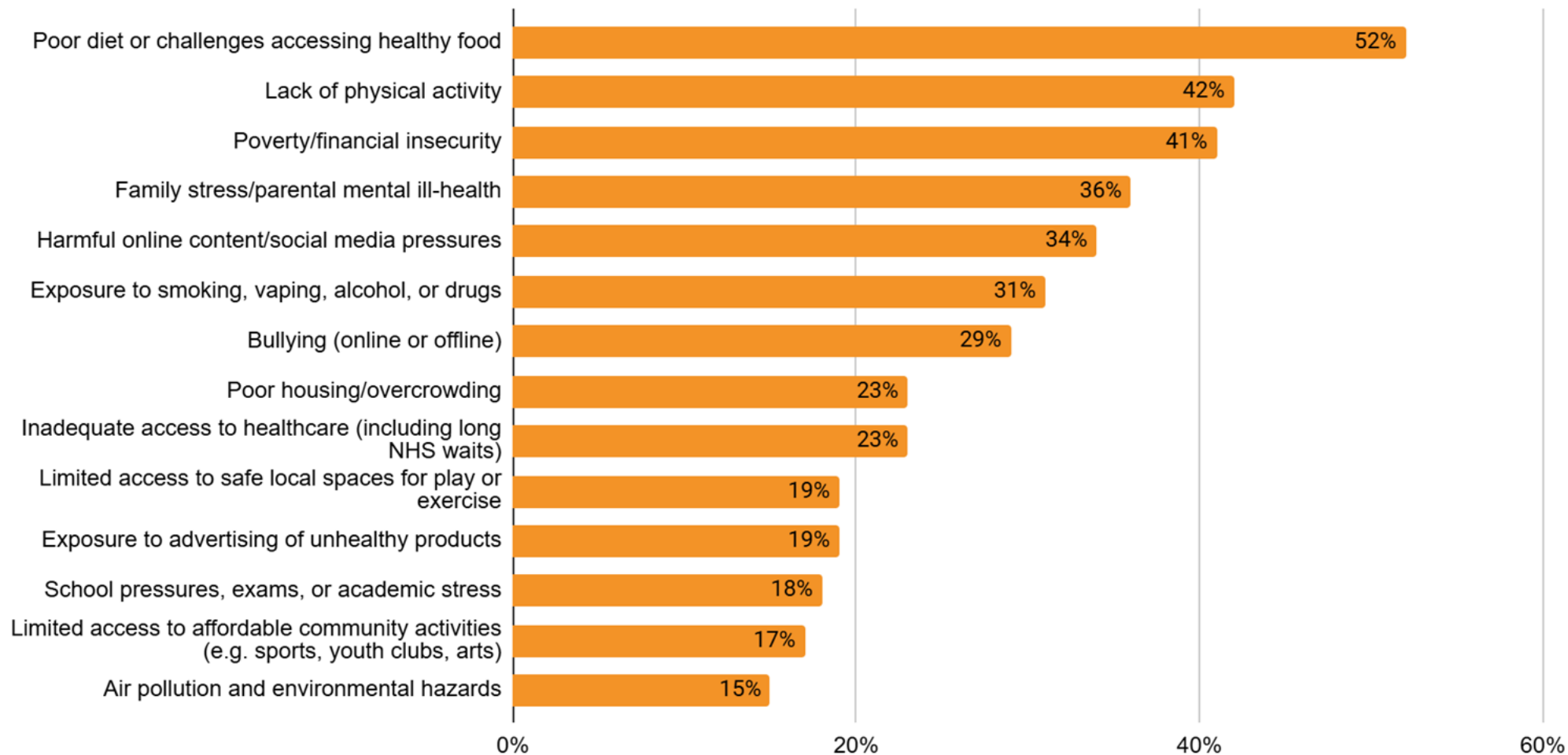
Similar themes emerged when we asked parents to describe a healthy childhood in their own words:

Theme	Description	No. of mentions	% of responses
Nutrition and Diet	References to good food, healthy eating, balanced diet, nutritious meals, fruit and vegetables	532	36.6%
Physical Activity and Play	Mentions of exercise, sport, outdoor play, keeping active	490	33.7%
Emotional Wellbeing and Love	Feeling loved, safe, happy, cared for, emotionally secure	489	33.7%
Family and Home Environment	Supportive family life, stability at home, good parenting	412	28.4%
Balance and Routine	Balanced life including structure, rest, sleep, learning, and education	341	23.5%
Social and Mental Health	Friendships, social interaction, confidence, sense of belonging	133	9.2%

In your own words, what makes a healthy childhood?"



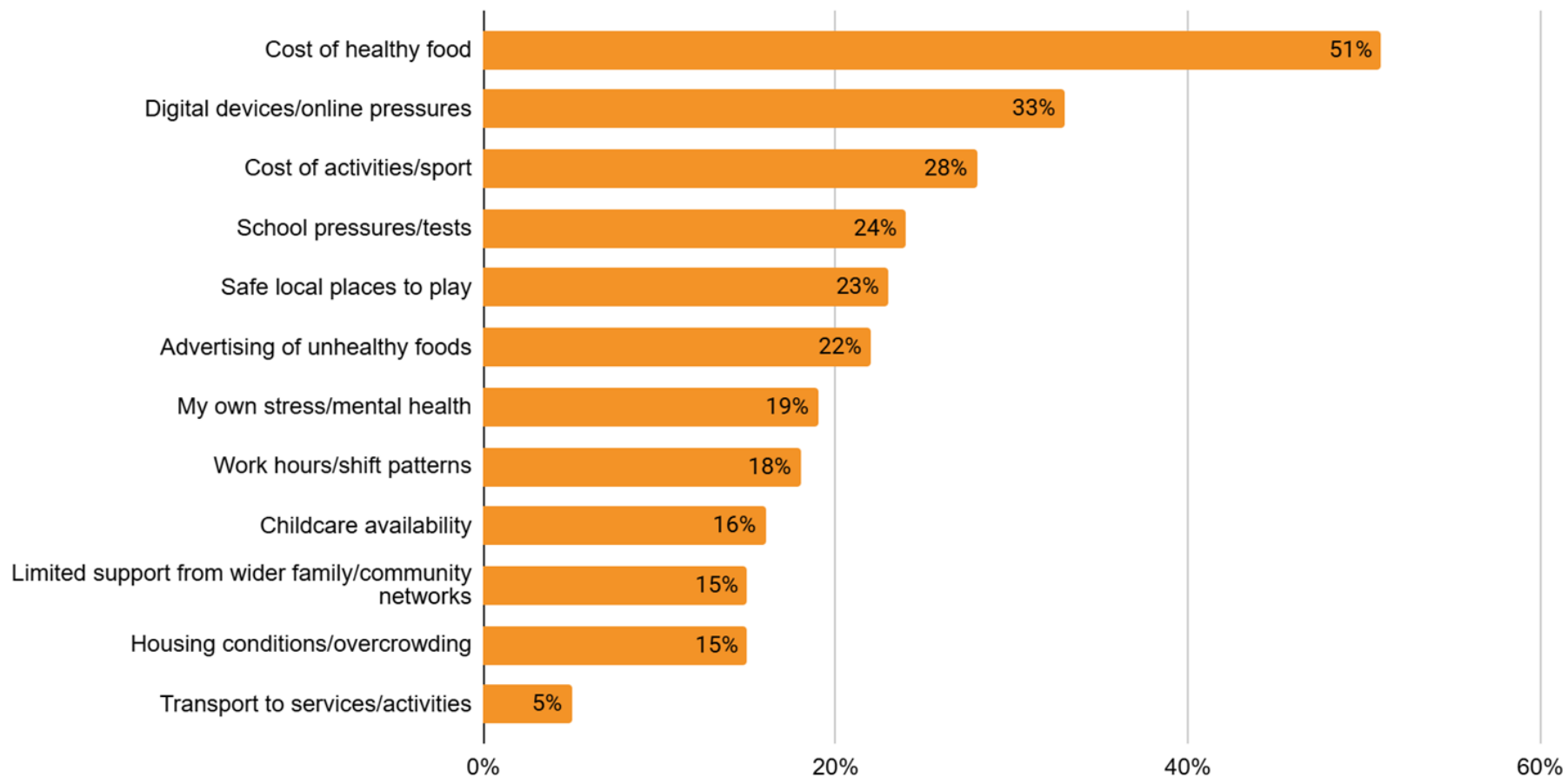
Poor diet, lack of physical activity and family stressors – e.g poverty - were also felt to be key contributors to an unhealthy childhood.



Thinking about poor health among children in the UK, which of the following do you think are the main drivers of poor health? Select any which apply



And when it came to the biggest barriers to a healthy childhoods, costs (of food and activities) and online pressures predominated.



What would you consider the greatest barriers to your children experiencing a healthy childhood? Select up to three of the following



Responsibility and influence on children's health



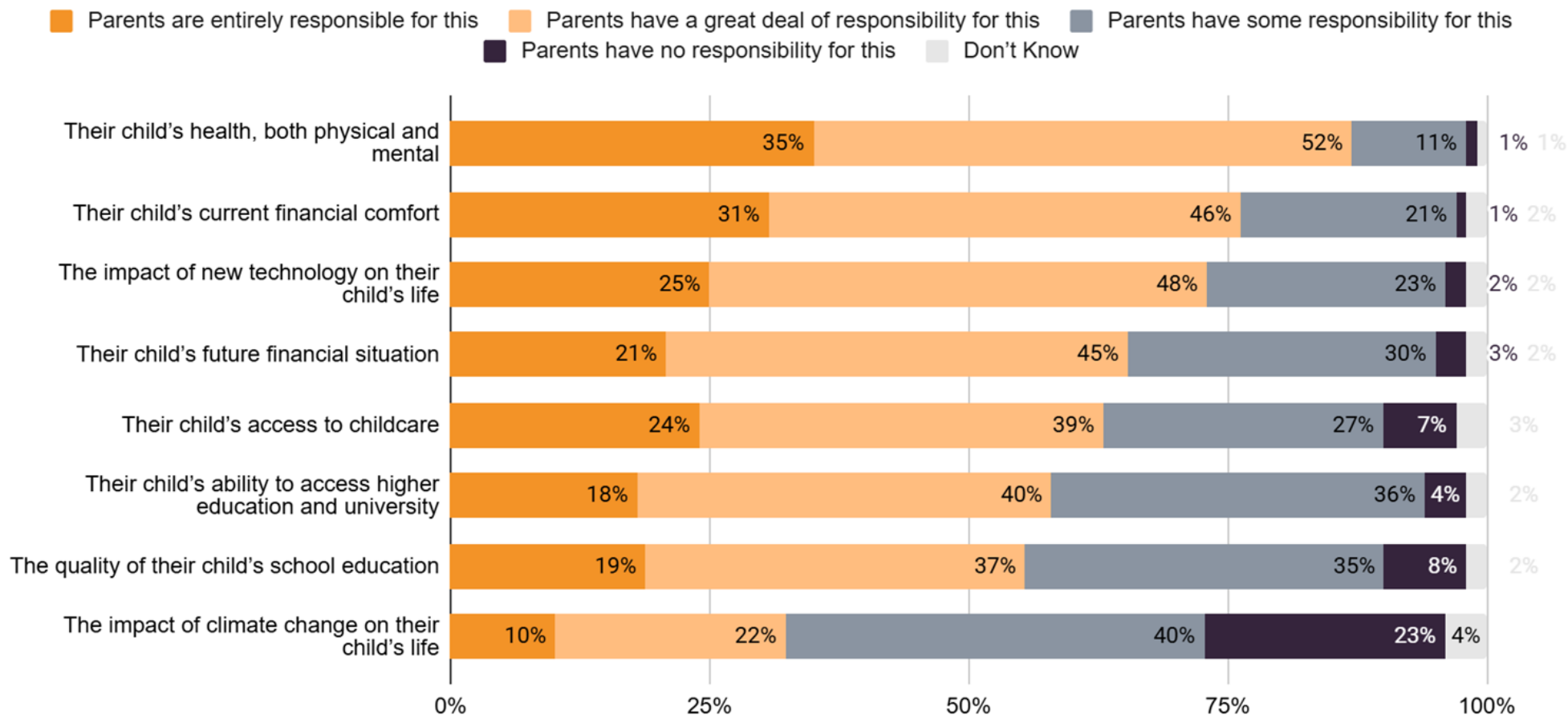
Section summary:

Parents see themselves as the main guardians of children's health, feeling both the greatest responsibility and power to change it.

Beyond the family, schools, tech companies, and the food industry appeared as the most important influences, with more sway over children's wellbeing than national government or the NHS.



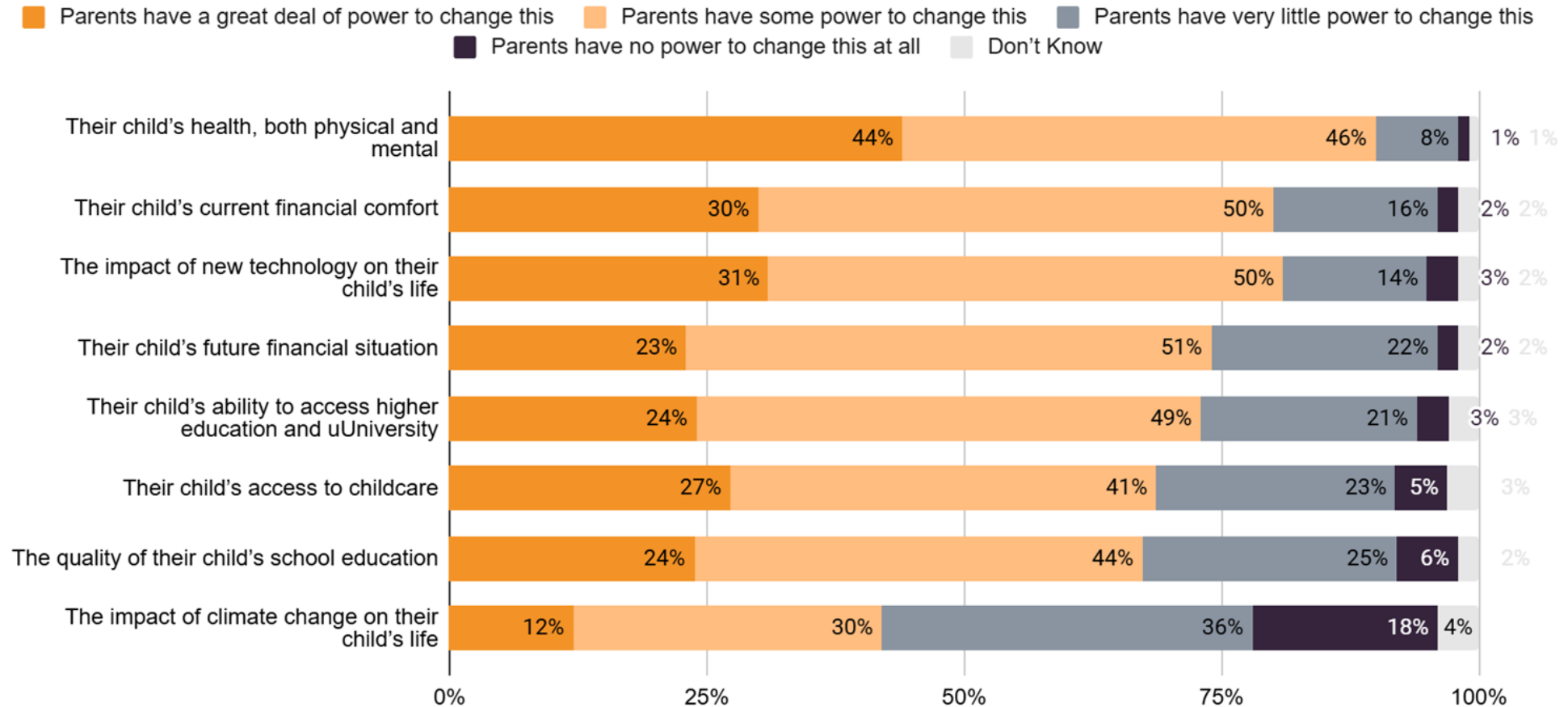
Of all the aspects of childhood we tested - from their education to financial comfort - parents felt more responsible for their health than any other area.



How much responsibility do you feel parents have to support or to change the following?

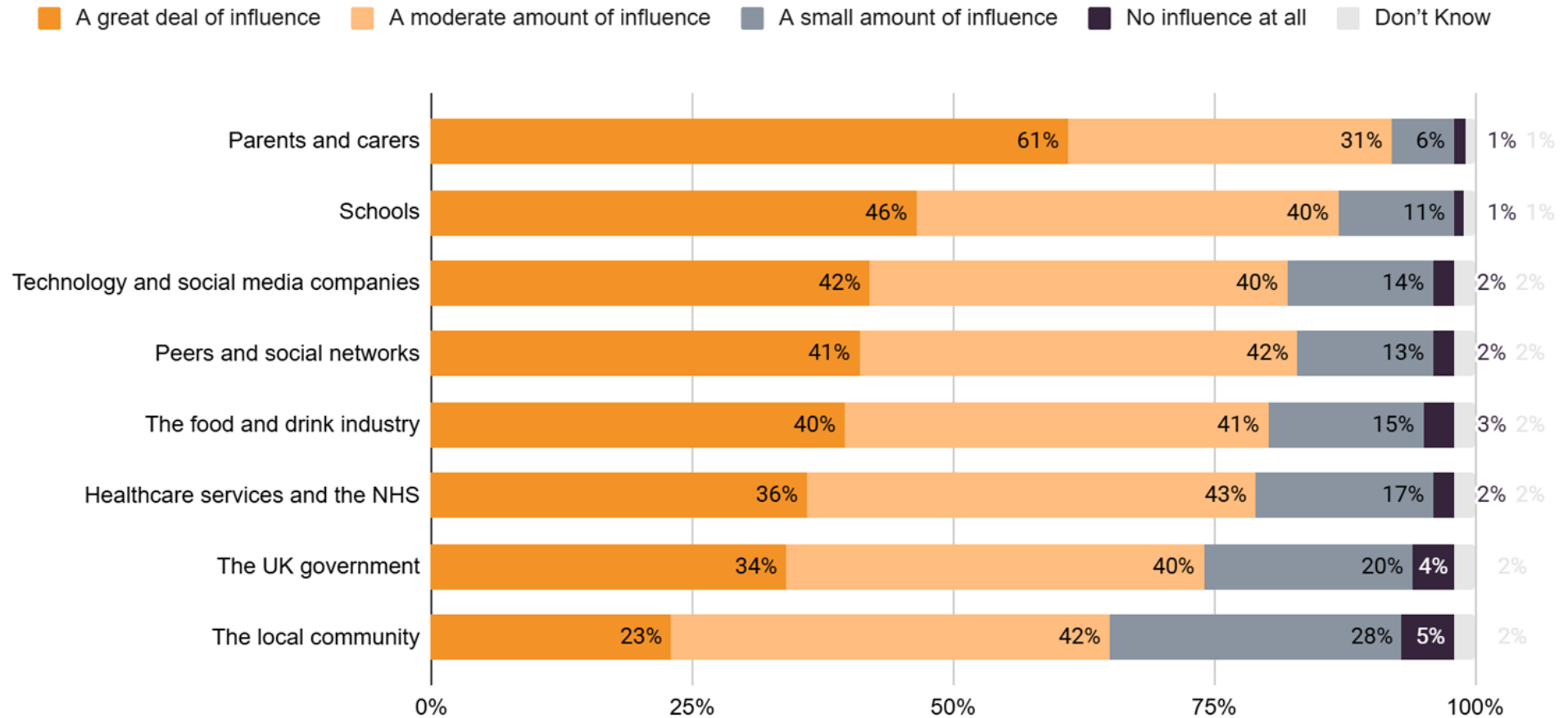


Parents also felt health was the area of their children's lives over which they had the most influence.



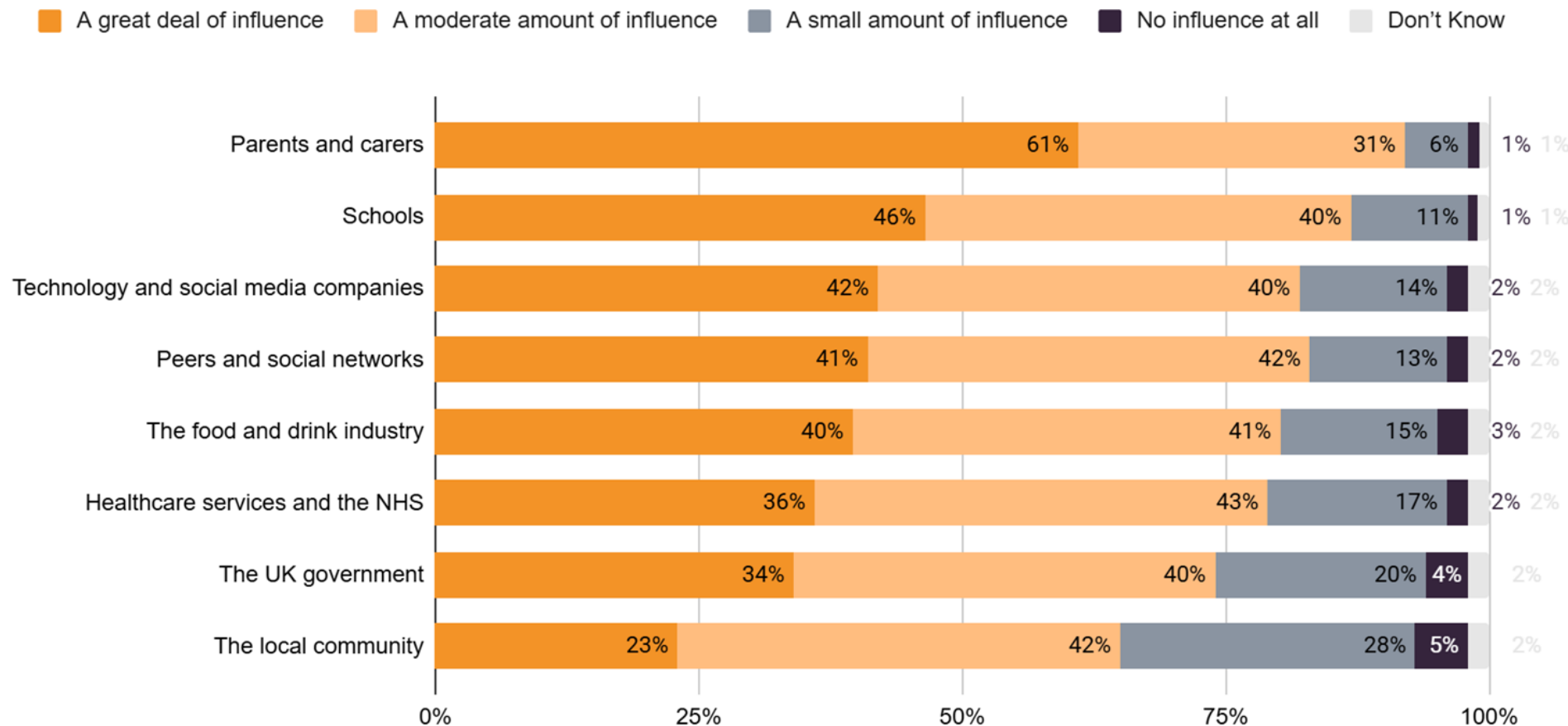
How much power to change the following do you believe parents have?

This persisted when we tested other influences on children's health.



Overall, how much influence do you think the following have on children's health in the UK?

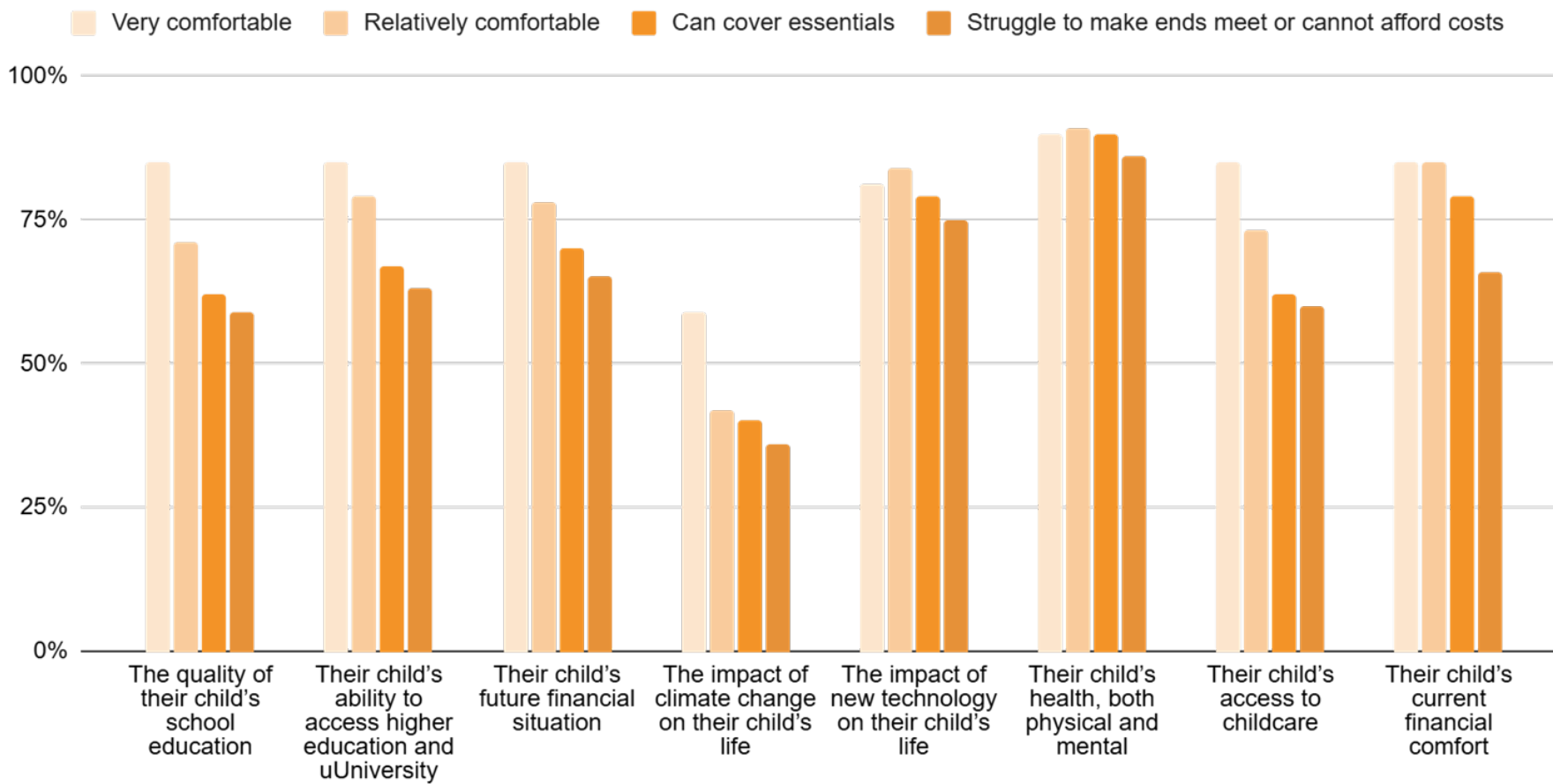
Notably, schools, technology companies, peers and the food and drink industry were felt to have more influence on children's health than the NHS or national government.



Overall, how much influence do you think the following have on children's health in the UK?



Parents' feelings of empowerment reduce for most areas of childhood with greater financial difficulty, but remain fairly resilient for health.



How much power to change the following do you believe parents have?



Parental knowledge and confidence about children's health

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Section summary:

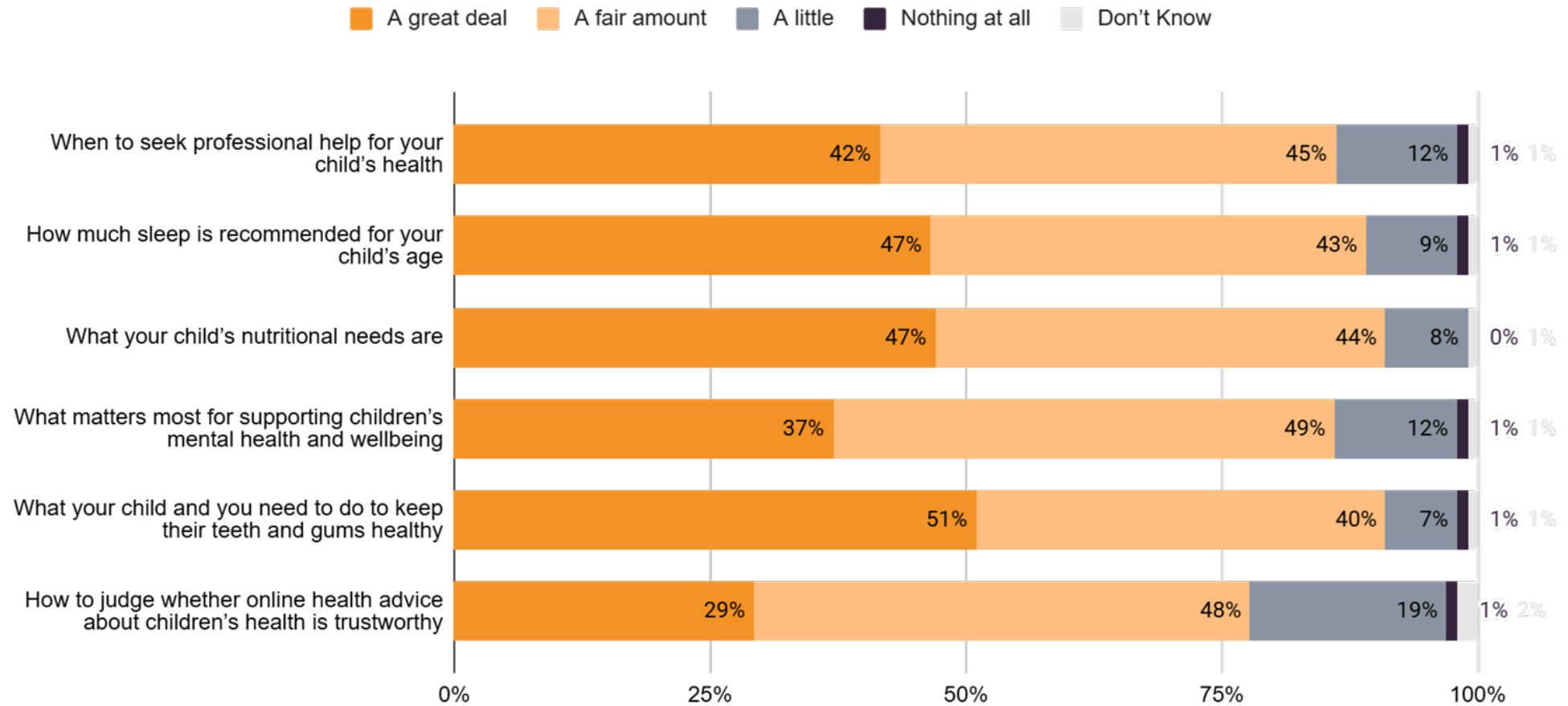
Parents generally feel confident in their knowledge about children's health, with some domains (e.g. oral hygiene) more straightforward than others (e.g. mental health).

Confidence is lower for applying this knowledge in practice, with particular difficulties accessing professional help or managing sleep and emotional wellbeing.

Confidence also varies by circumstance: with parents who were struggling financially or caring for children with illnesses more likely to report difficulties.

Parents feel fairly confident in their knowledge about best practices regarding children's health.

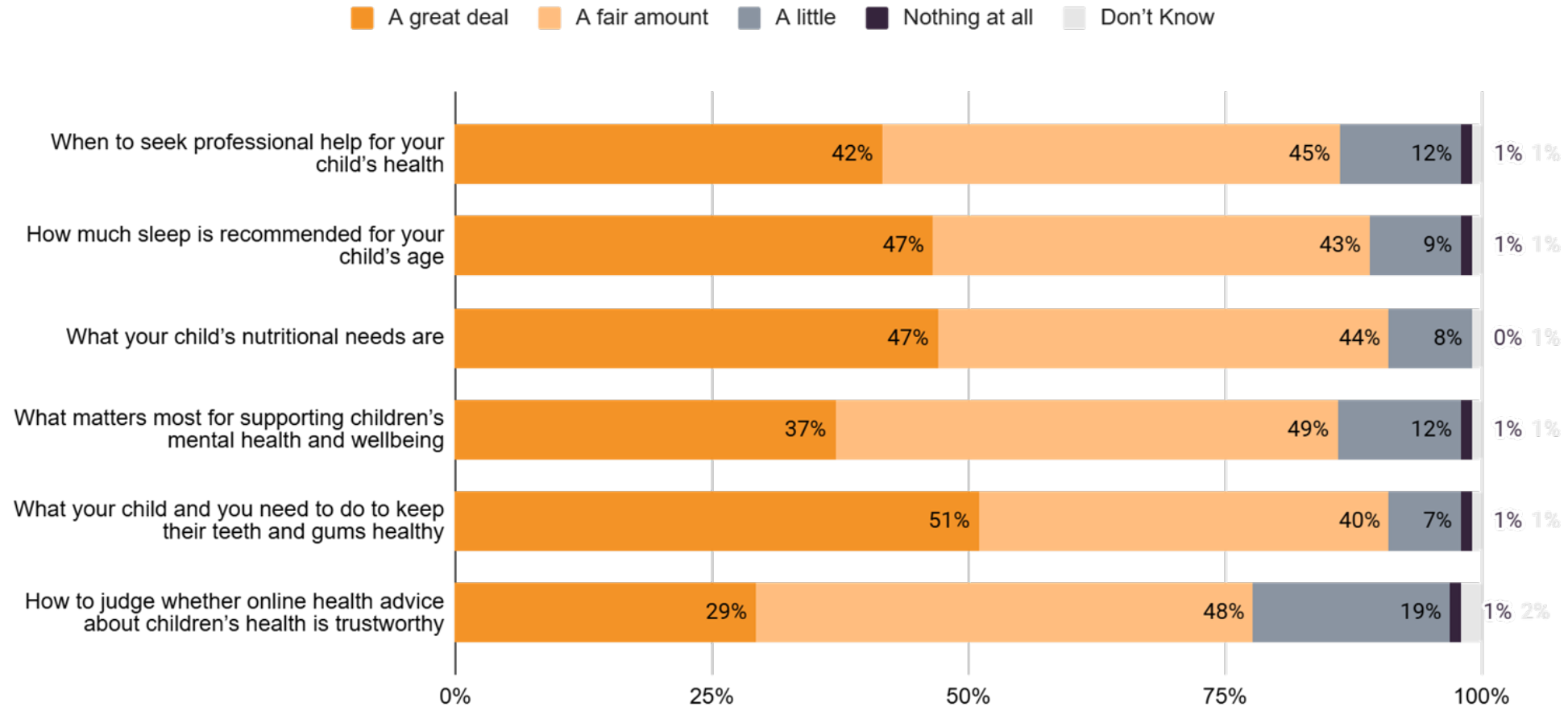
Over 90% said they knew 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount' about when to access services, sleep, nutrition and oral health.



How much would you say you know about each of the following?

Supporting their child's mental health and judging the credibility of online advice are the areas parents feel least confident.

Over 1 in 10 felt they knew 'a little' or 'nothing at all' about supporting their children's mental health, and 1 in 5 on navigating online information.

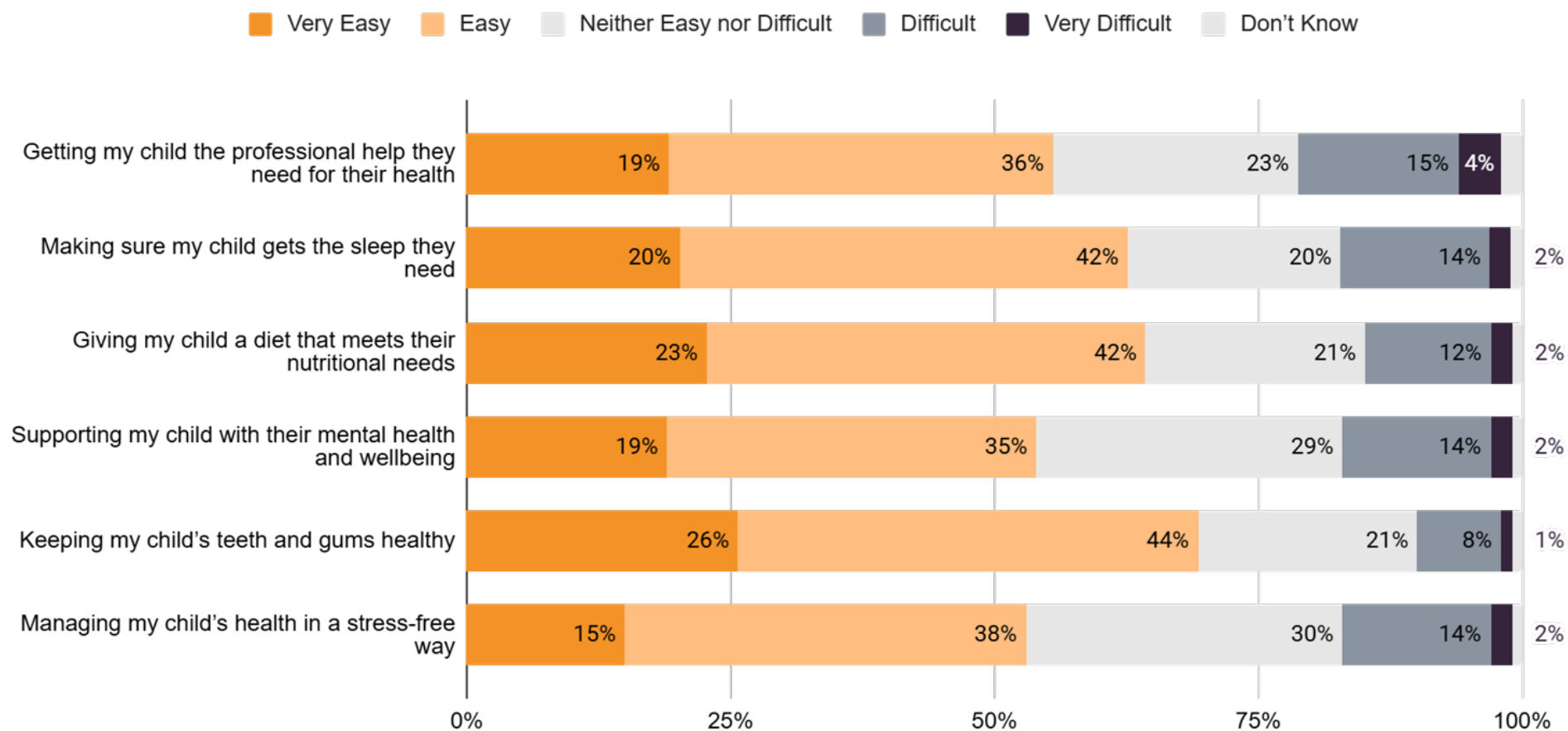


How much would you say you know about each of the following?



Parents' levels of knowledge differ from how easy/hard they found it to look after their child in those domains.

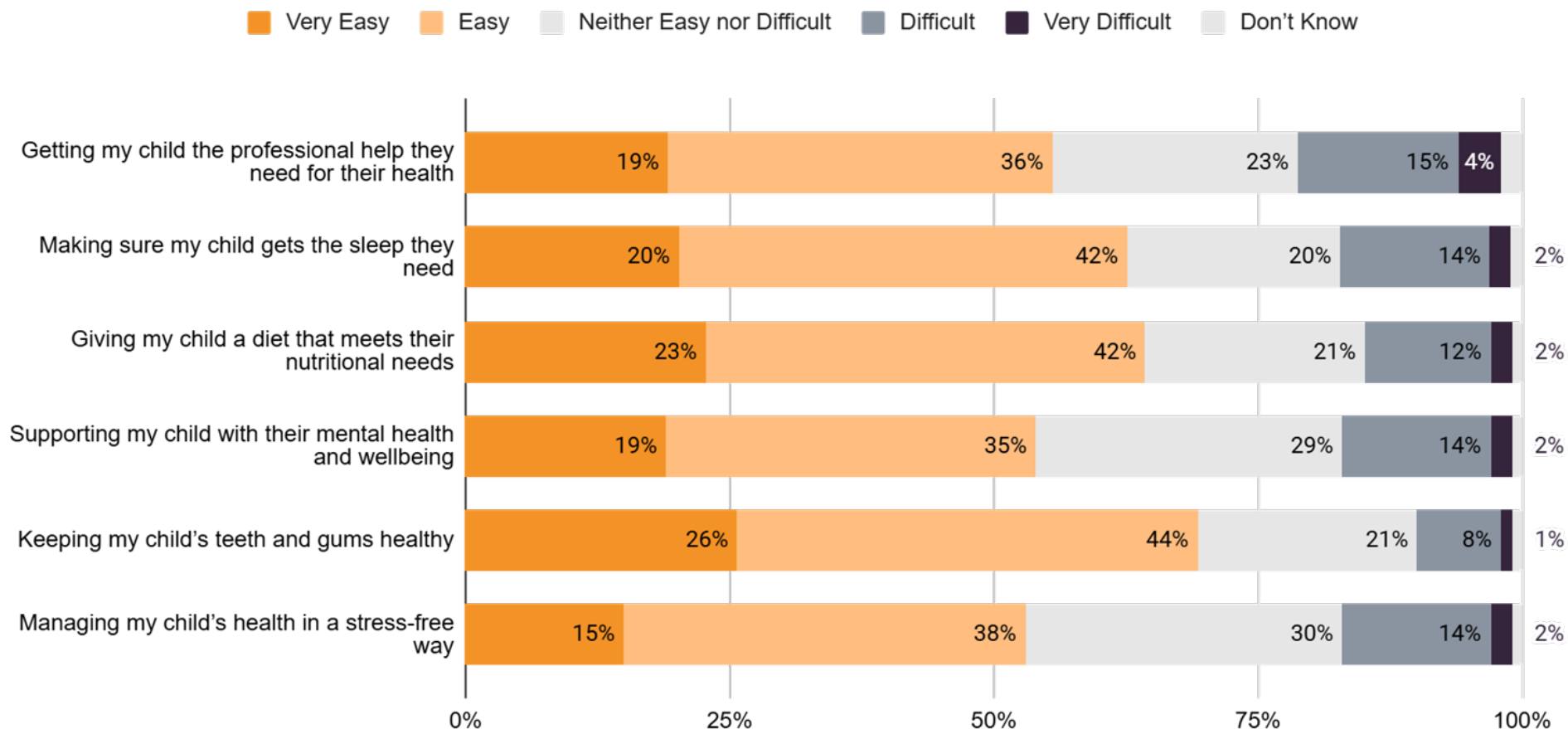
Levels of confidence (how easy/hard parents found certain domains) were lower than for knowledge: c. 55-65% feeling confident vs. 90%+ feeling knowledgeable.



The last question asked about how much you know about various aspects of keeping your child healthy.
This question is about how easy it is to do in practice. How easy or difficult do you find the following?



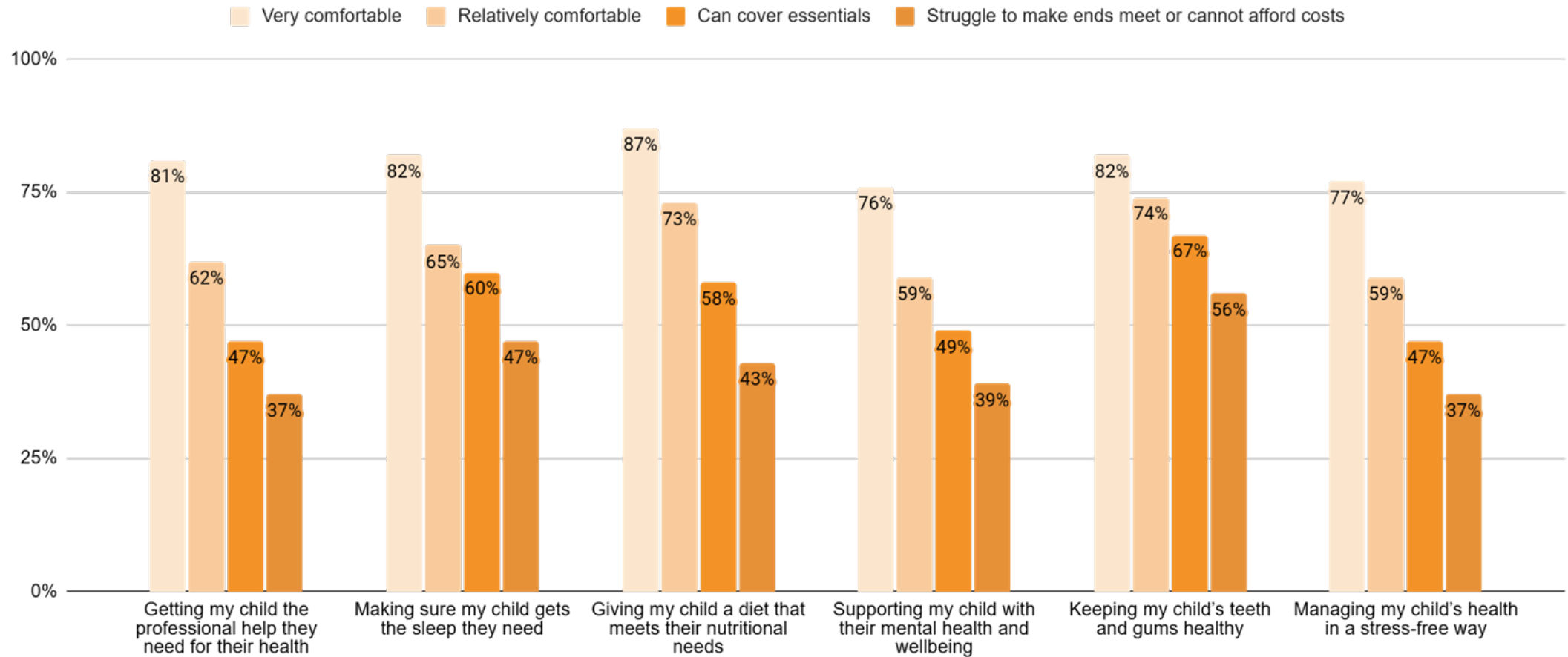
Nearly 1 in 5 found it 'difficult' or 'very difficult' to get professional help; 1 in 6 to support their child's mental health or ensure they are getting enough sleep.



The last question asked about how much you know about various aspects of keeping your child healthy. This question is about how easy it is to do in practice. How easy or difficult do you find the following?

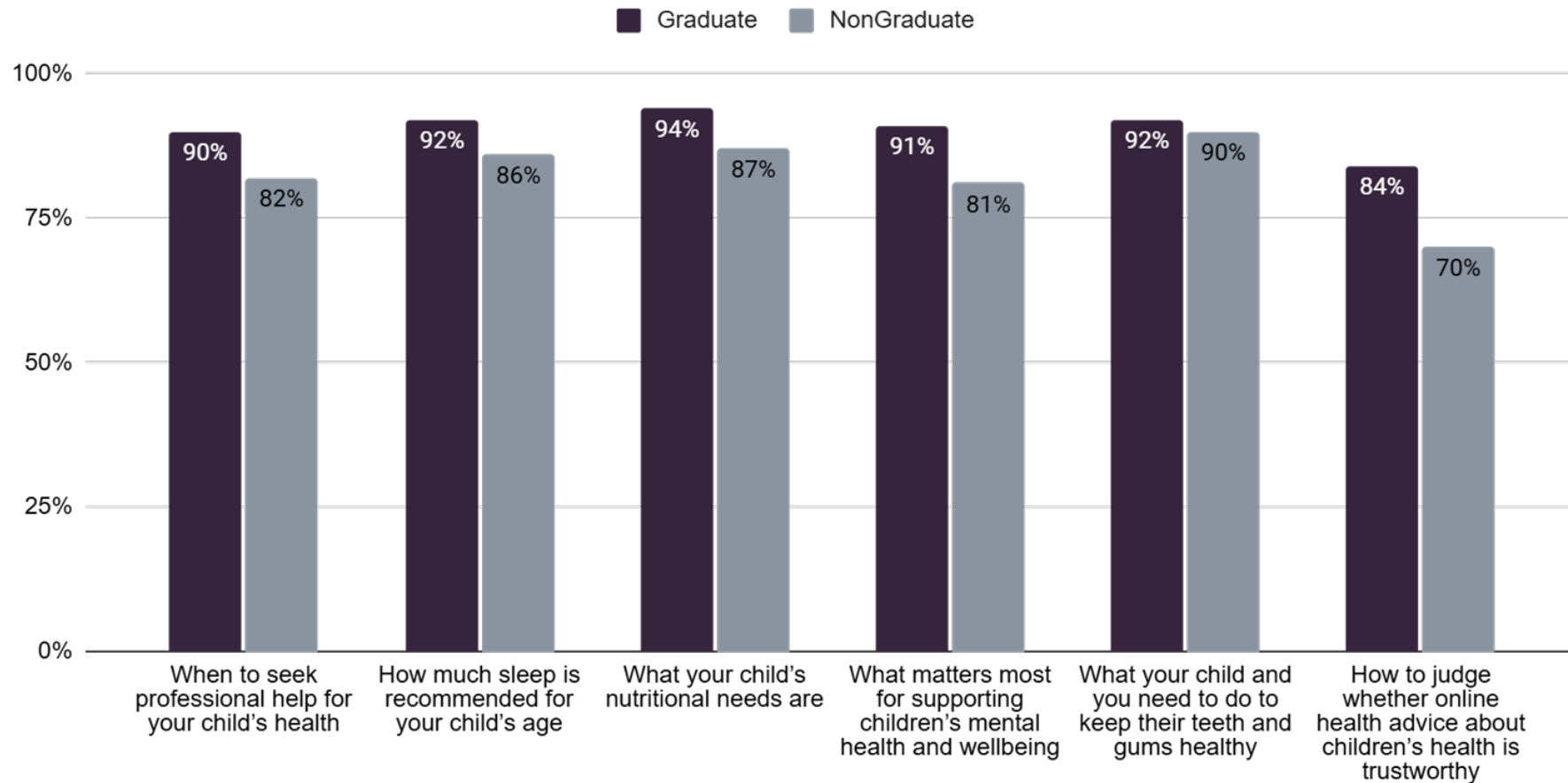
The most financially comfortable parents generally find it easier to keep their children healthy

The most comfortable parents were more than twice (87%) as likely to say it was easy to meet their child's nutritional needs, compared to the least comfortable (43%). Regression analysis found financial comfort was the single biggest contributor to ease.



The last question asked about how much you know about various aspects of keeping your child healthy. This question is about how easy it is to do in practice. How easy or difficult do you find the following? % easy

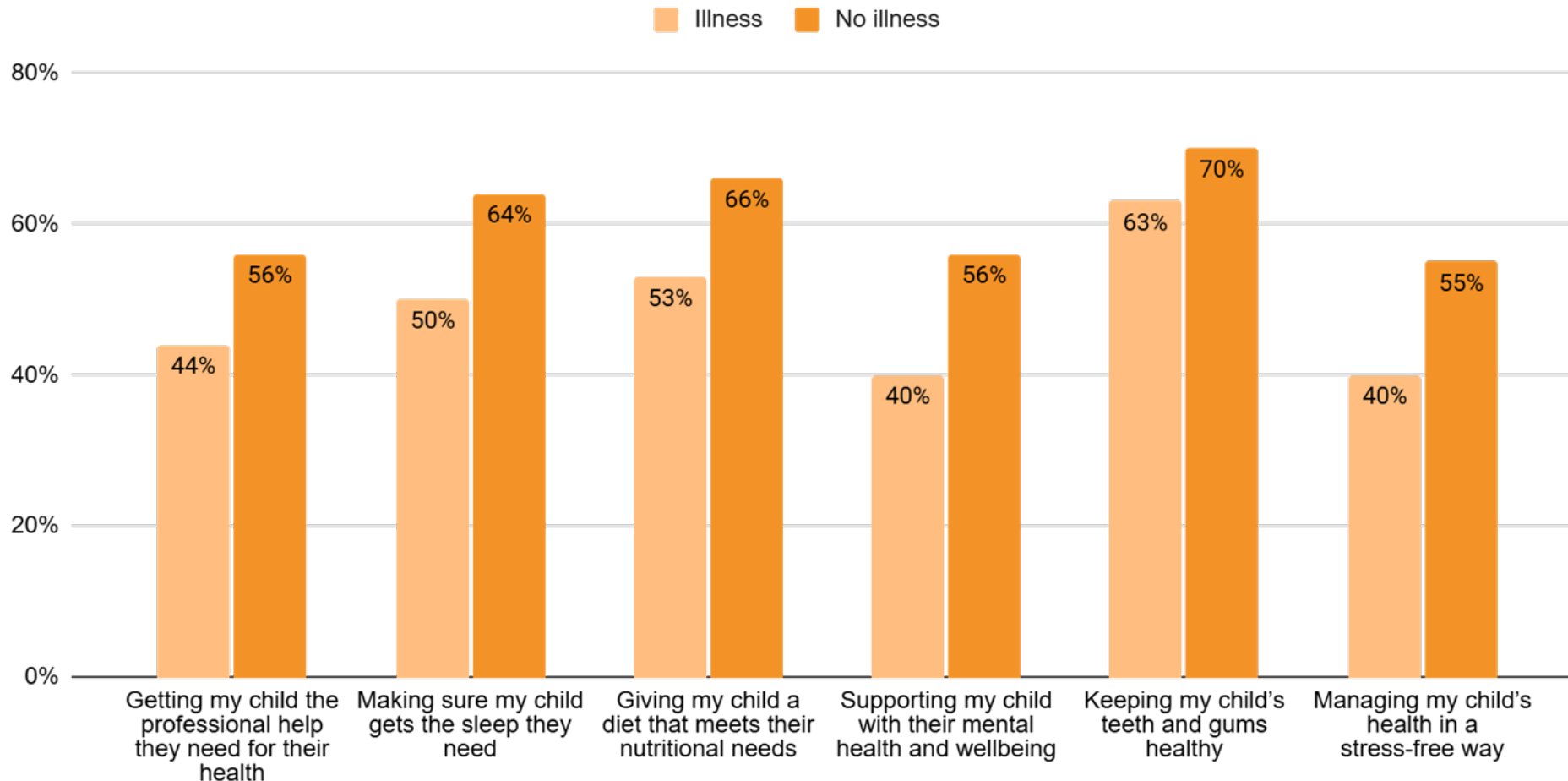
Knowledge of various aspects of children's health also vary by parental education.



How much would you say you know about each of the following?



And unsurprisingly, parents of children with illnesses report more difficulty meeting their child's health needs.



The last question asked about how much you know about various aspects of keeping your child healthy. This question is about how easy it is to do in practice. How easy or difficult do you find the following? % easy



Preparation for parenthood



Section summary:

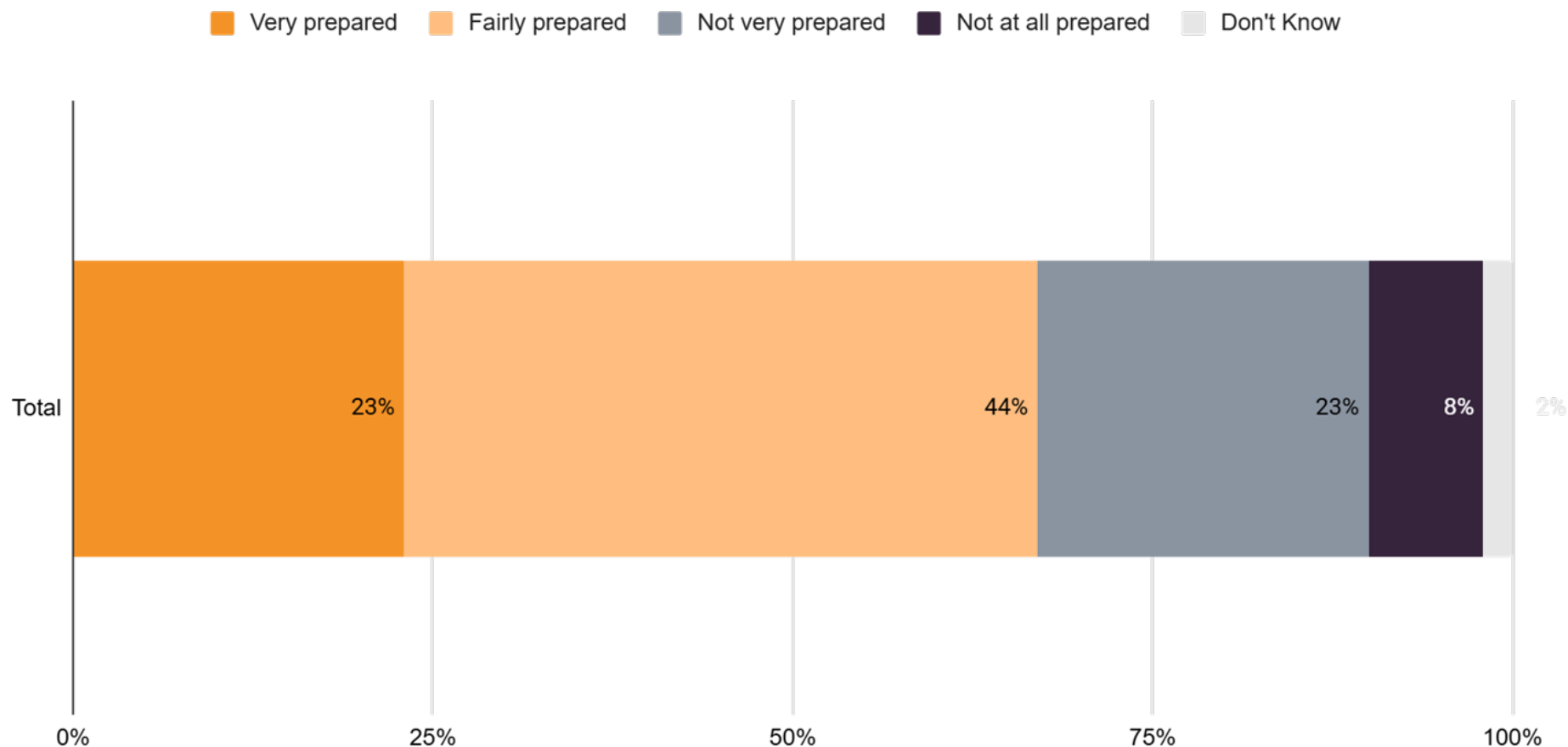
Many parents did not feel well prepared to look after their child's health before becoming parents, with preparedness closely linked to financial comfort and education.

Most parents said they learnt “as they went,” rather than through structured guidance, suggesting that support for building parental confidence in children's health remains inconsistent and unequal.

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1 in 3 parents said they didn't feel prepared to look after their child's health and wellbeing before they became a parent

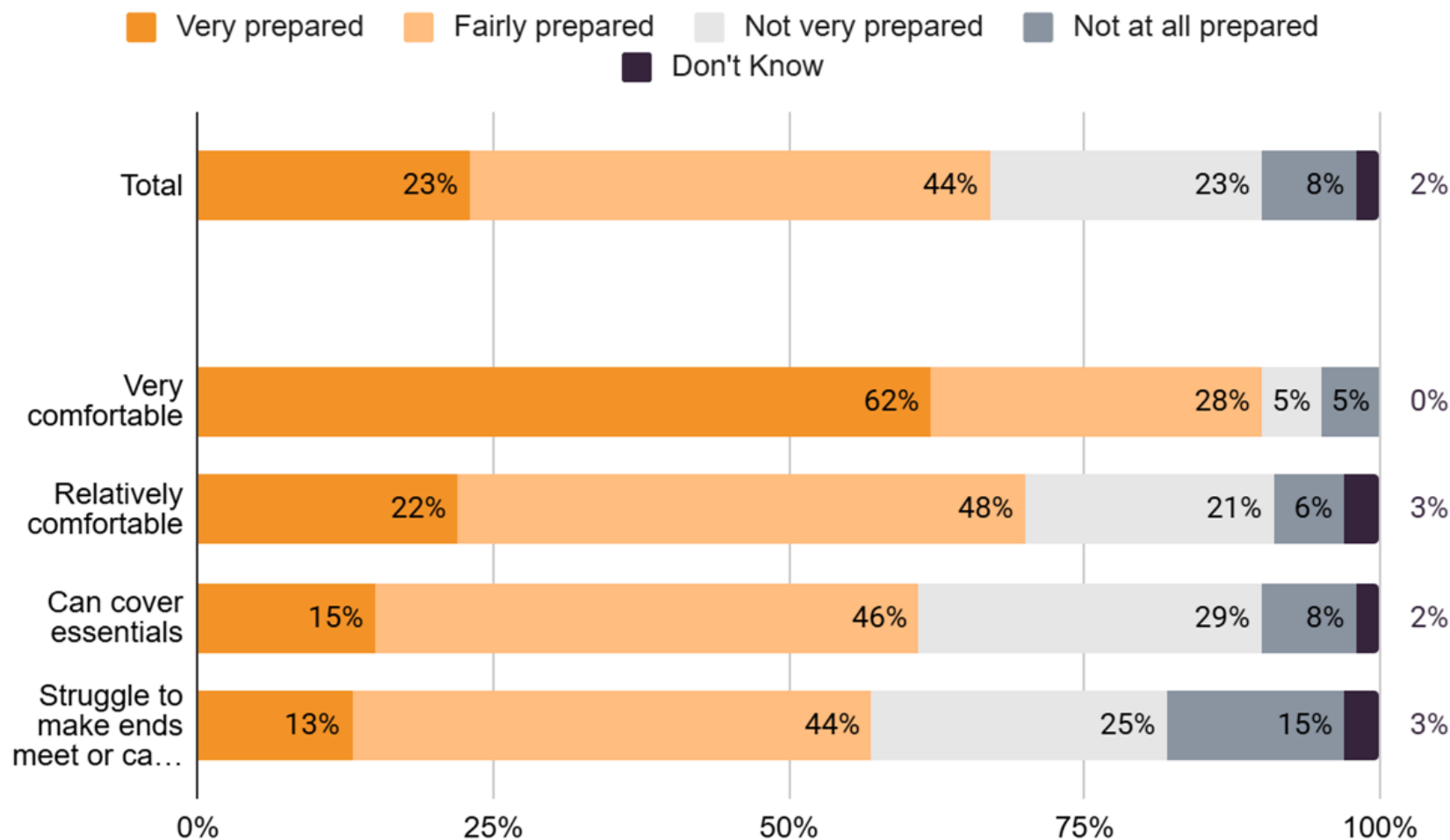


Before you became a parent, how prepared did you feel to look after your child's health and wellbeing?



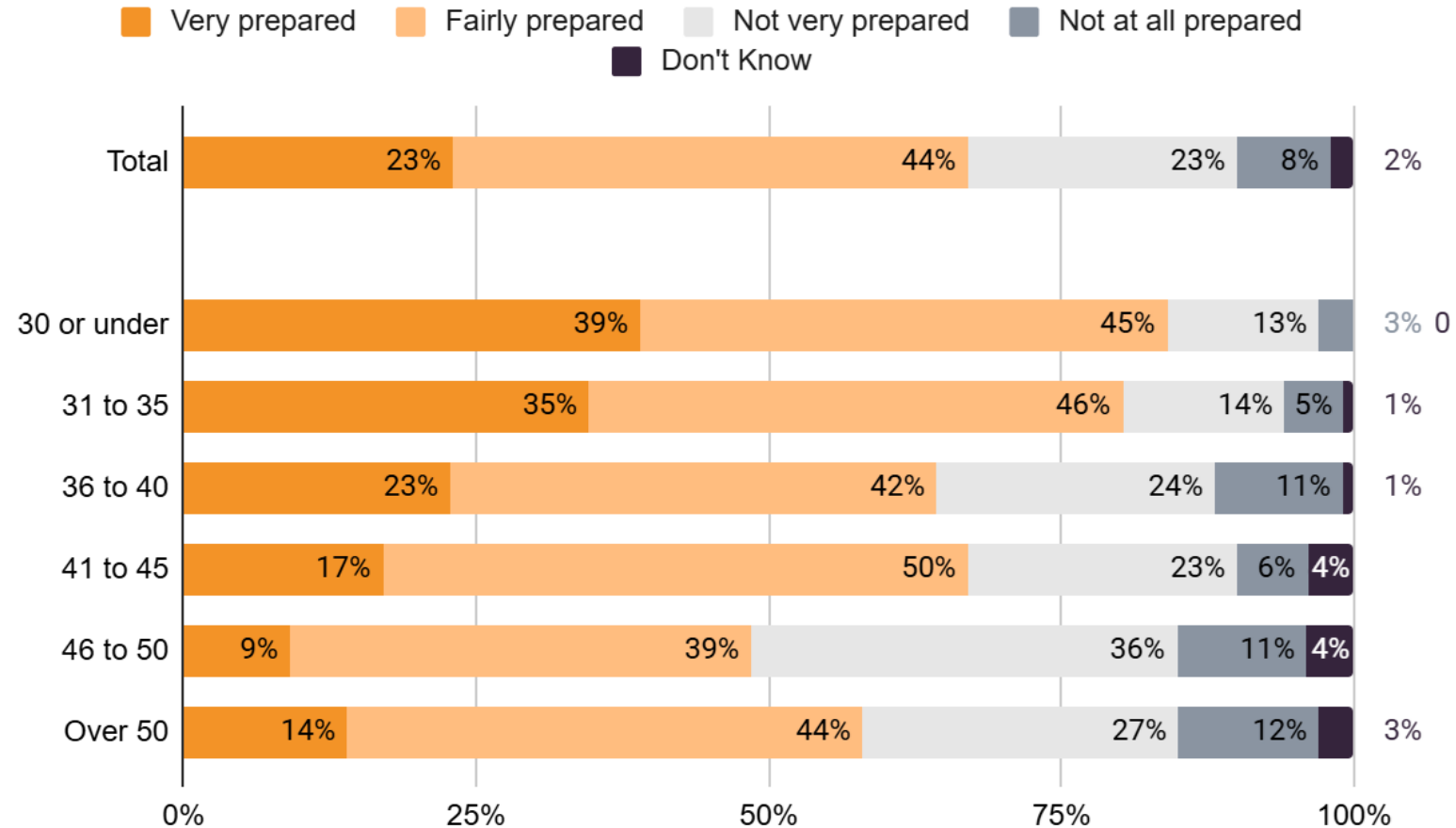
More financially comfortable parents were much more likely to feel prepared to look after their children's health

Regression analysis found financial comfort was the single biggest contributor to parents' feelings of preparedness for parenthood.



Before you became a parent, how prepared did you feel to look after your child's health and wellbeing?

Interestingly, younger parents reported higher levels of preparedness than older parents.

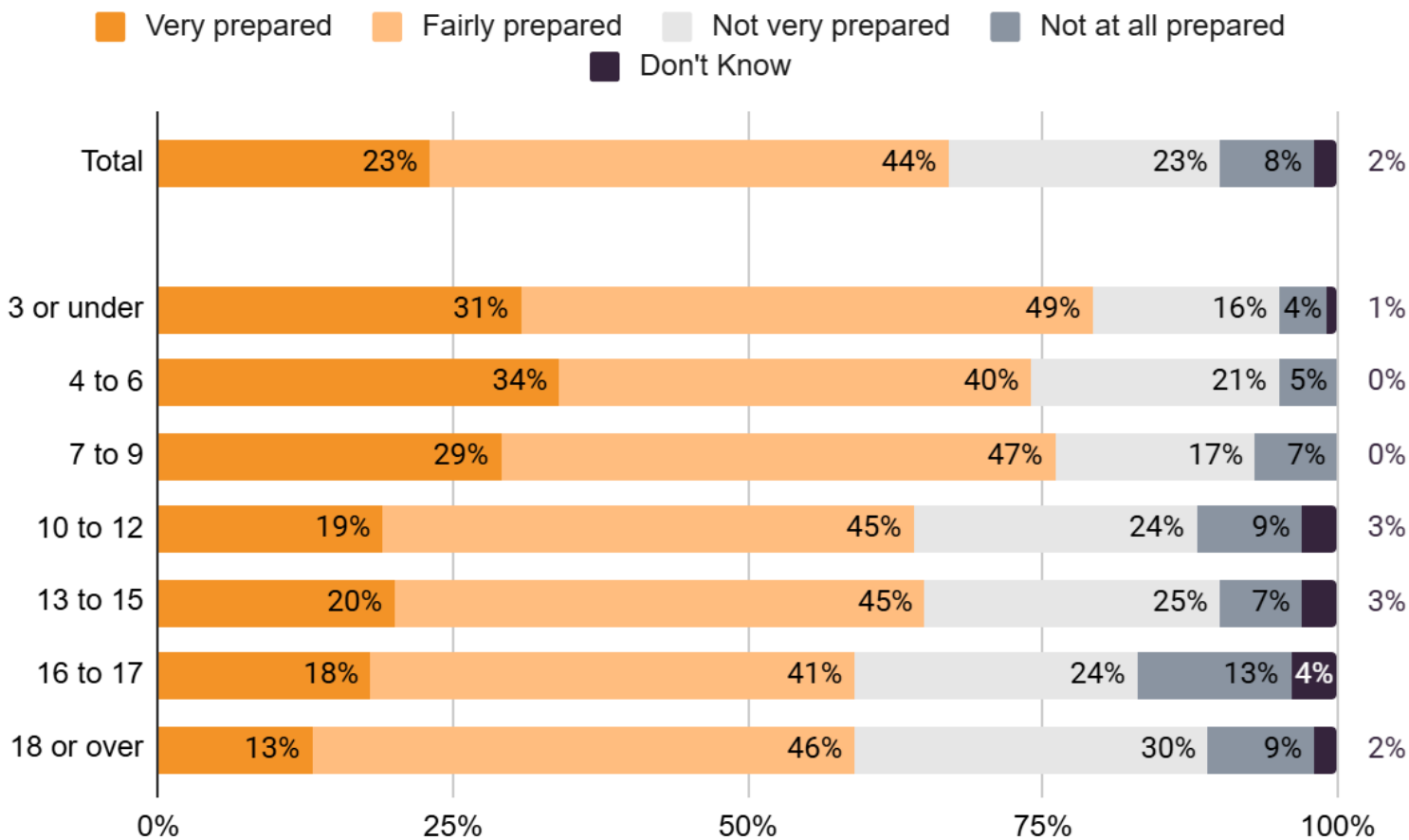


Before you became a parent, how prepared did you feel to look after your child's health and wellbeing?



Again, this may be driven by the age of their children, and the recency of becoming parents*.

*During which period, parenting support - from antenatal classes and midwifery to health visiting and children's centres - is often more intensive.

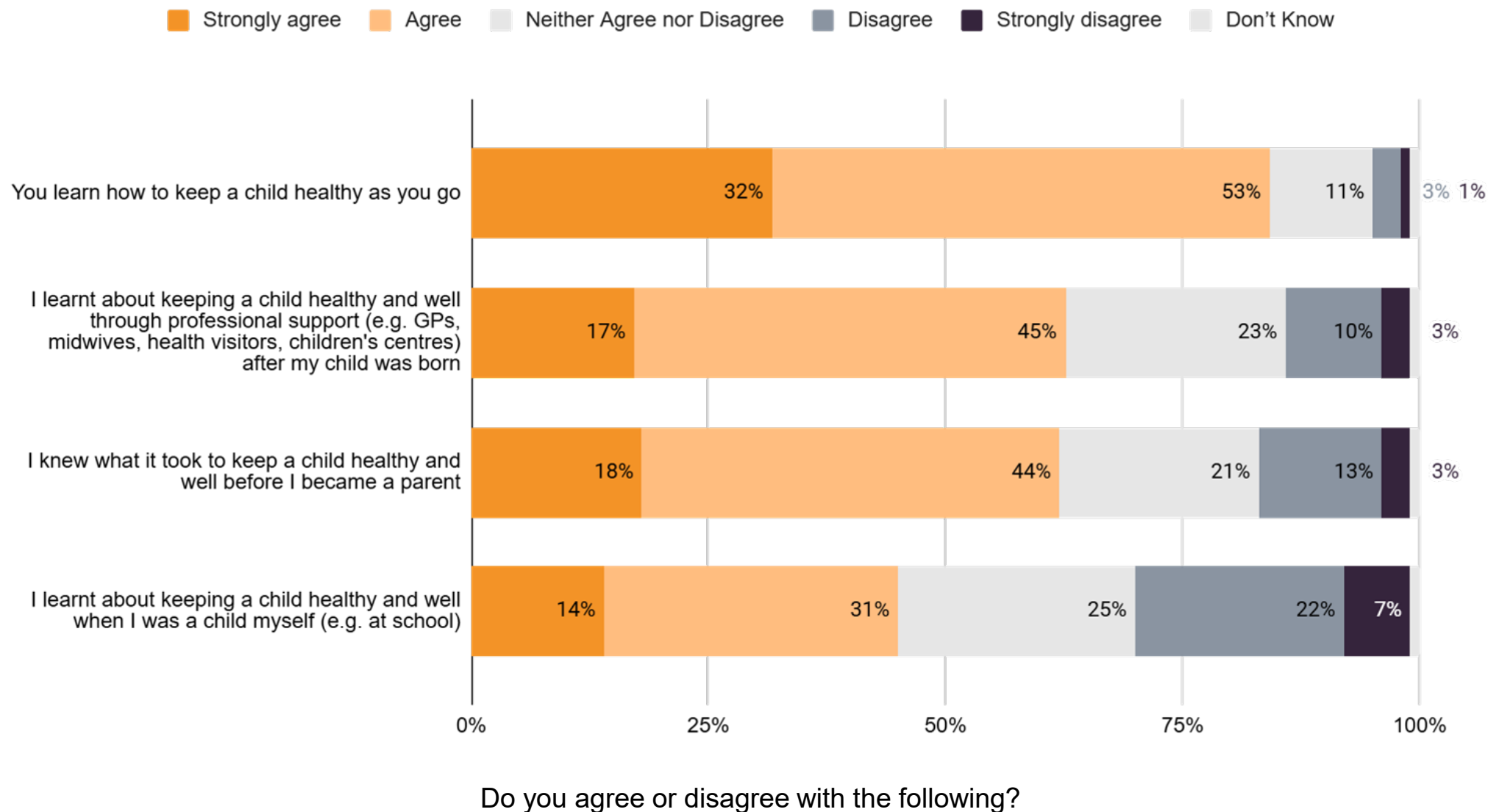


Before you became a parent, how prepared did you feel to look after your child's health and wellbeing?

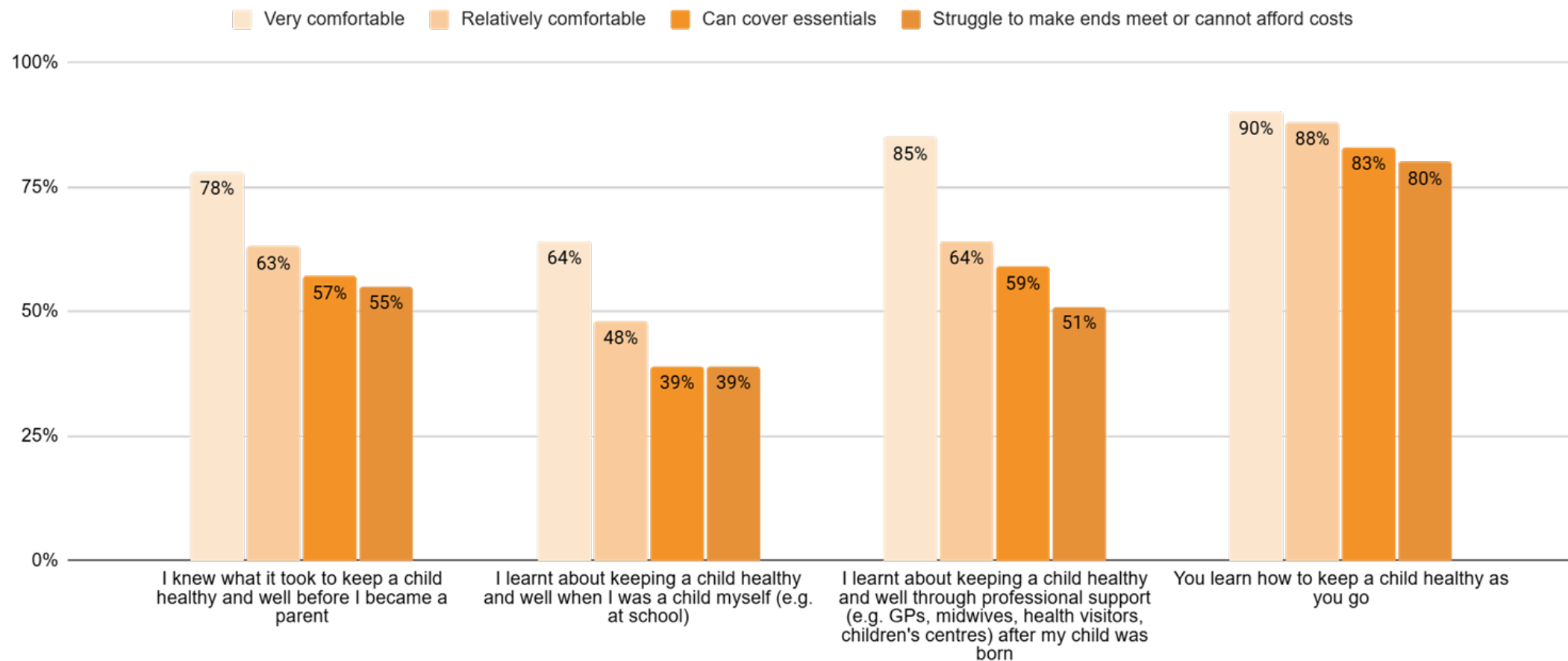




Most parents felt they learnt 'as you go' rather than through any more deliberate instruction on keeping children healthy.



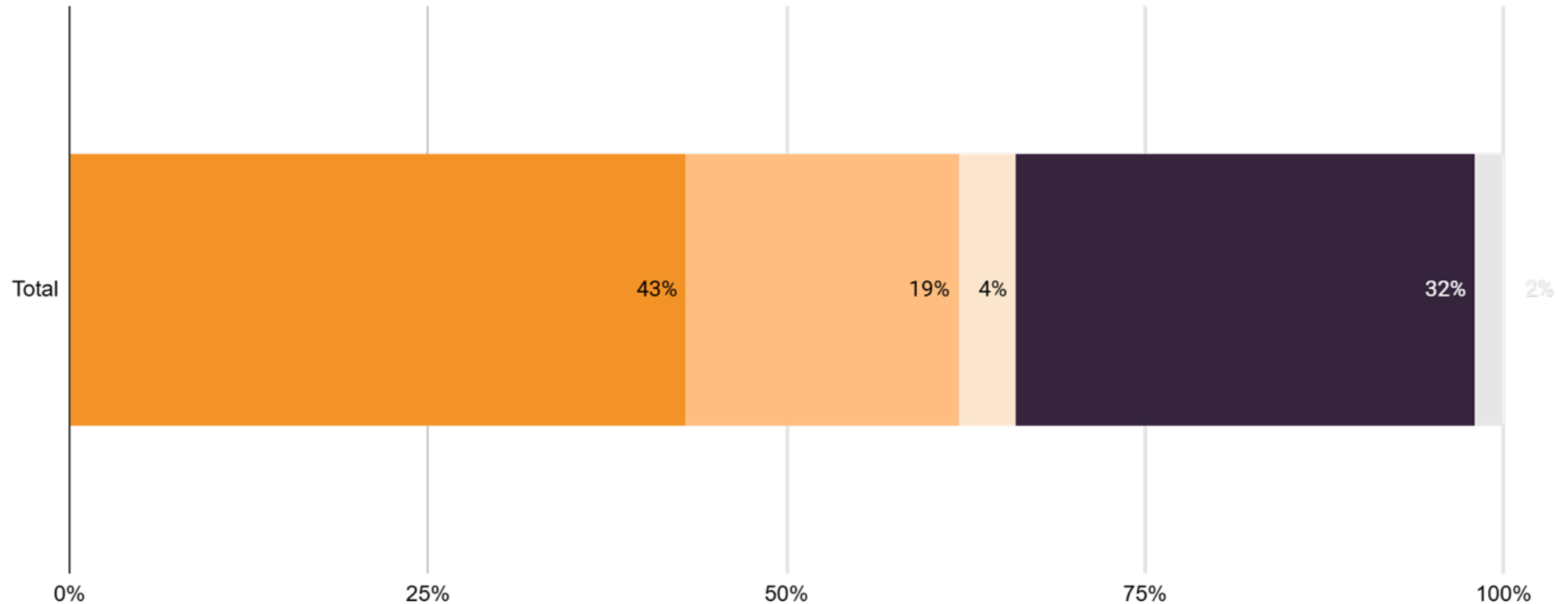
Parents who are less financially secure were consistently less likely to report learning about children's health, irrespective of the means.



Do you agree or disagree with the following?

1 in 3 parents did not attend any antenatal classes before the birth of their children.

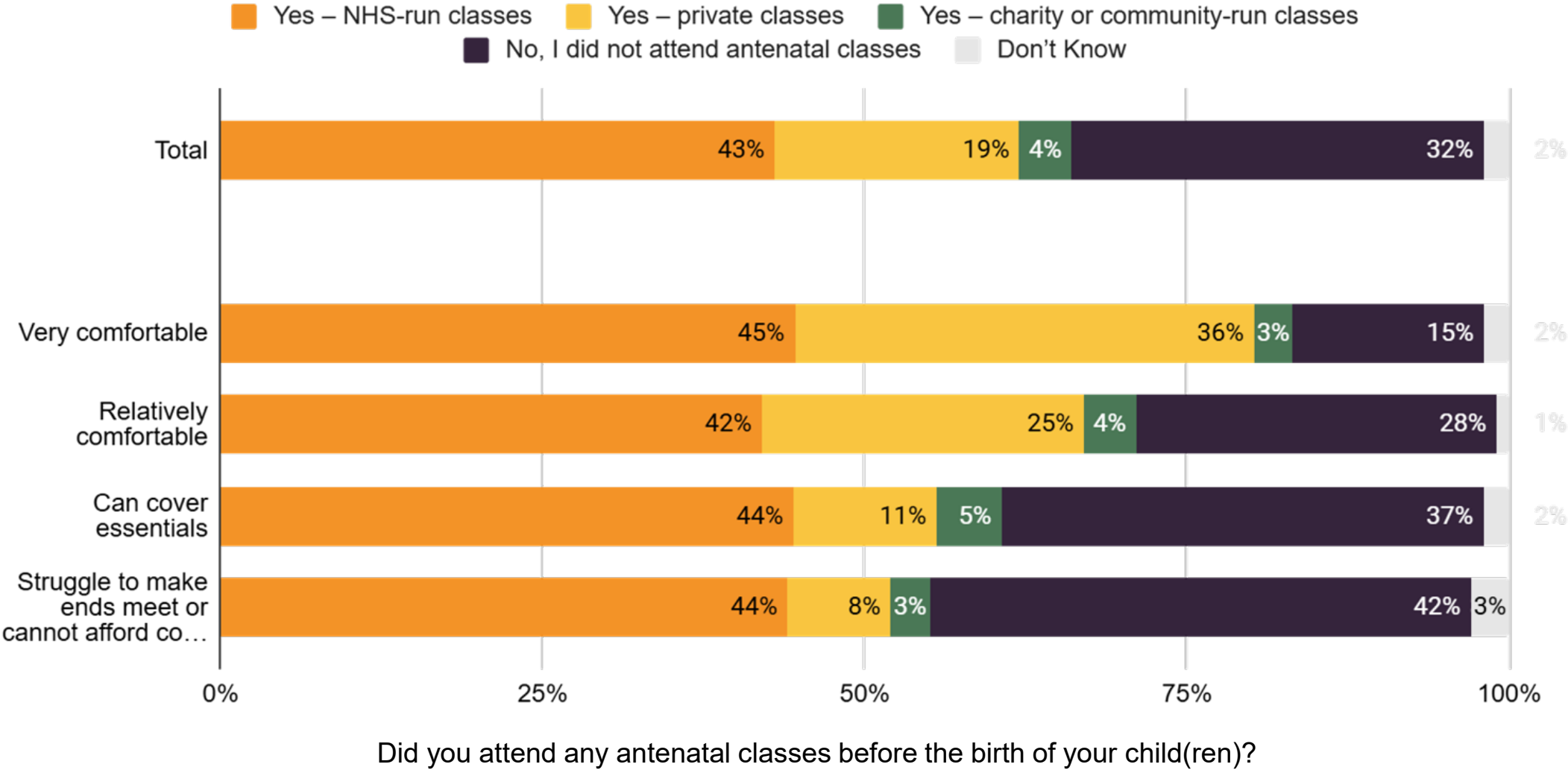
Yes – NHS-run classes Yes – private classes Yes – charity or community-run classes No, I did not attend antenatal classes Don't Know



Did you attend any antenatal classes before the birth of your child(ren)?

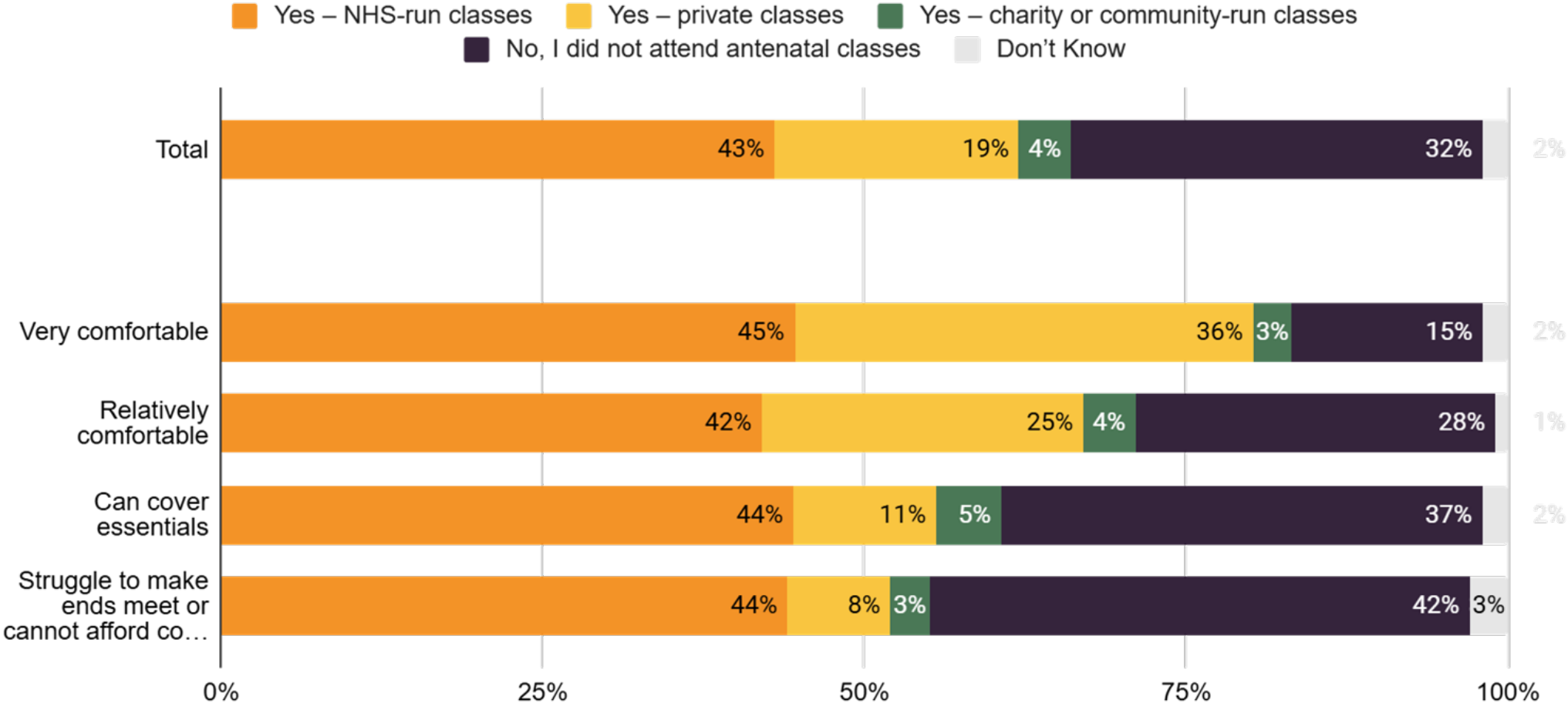


This increased to over 2 in 5 amongst parents in the most financially insecure groups.



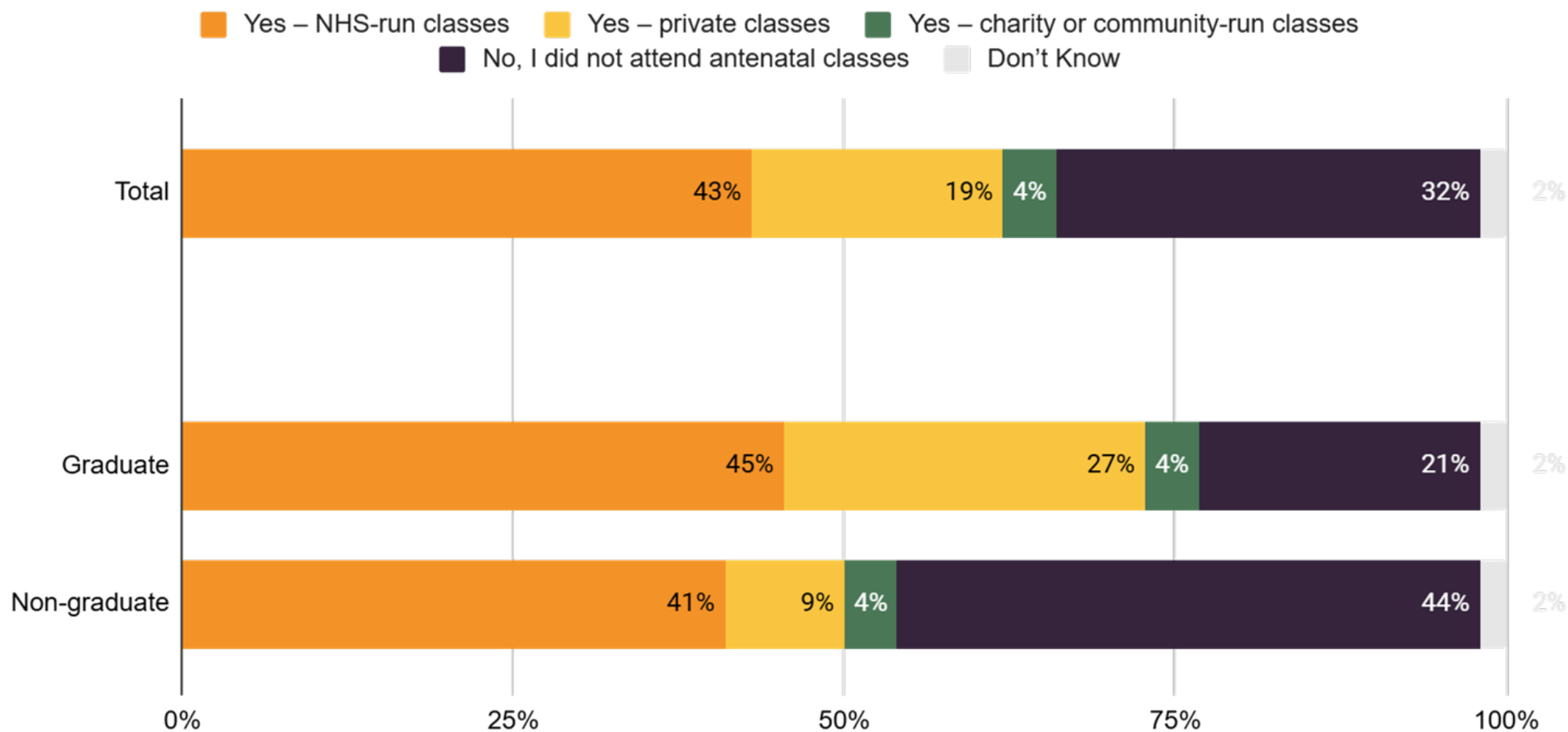


4.5x as many parents (36%) in the most financially secure groups attended private classes compared to the least secure group (8%).



Did you attend any antenatal classes before the birth of your child(ren)?

A similar pattern can be observed between graduate and non-graduate parents.



Did you attend any antenatal classes before the birth of your child(ren)?



Experiences of services



Section summary:

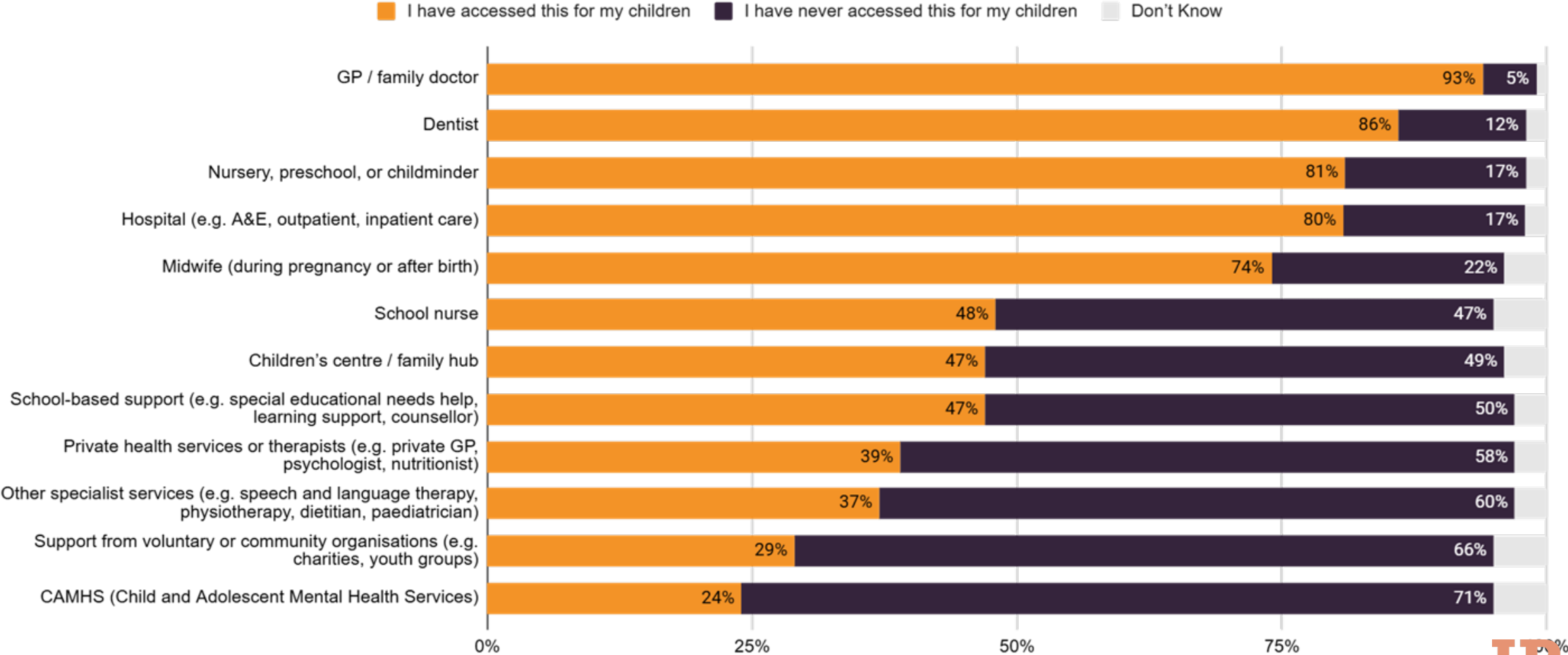
Access to specialist services - like CAMHS or SEND support - was higher amongst better-off parents. The same pattern was observed amongst intentionally inclusive services, like children's centres or community groups.

Parents simultaneously reported the best experiences with these community-oriented services, with specialist services the least well reviewed.

Again, parents who were less financially secure or had unwell children reported worse experiences with services.



Unsurprisingly, primary care services - like GPs or dentists - were the most commonly accessed by parents, with specialist services with the lowest uptake.



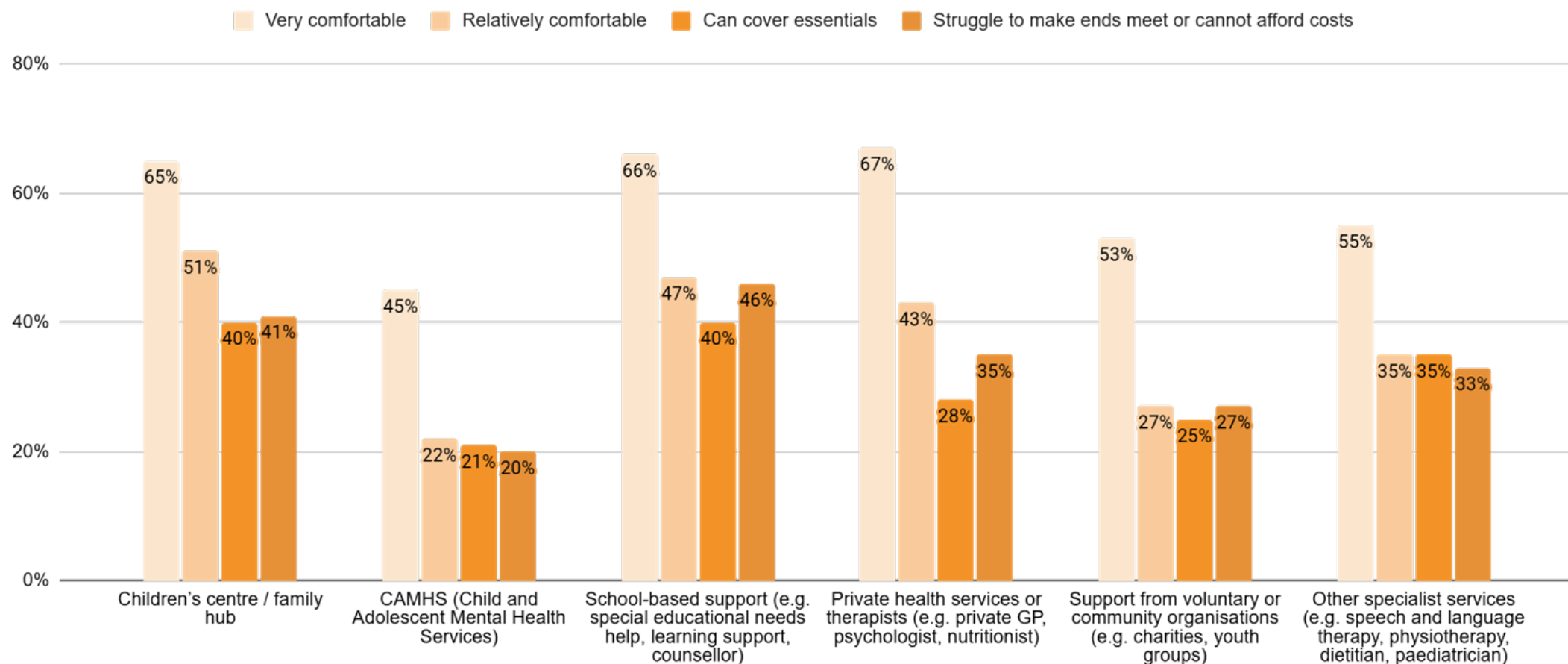
Which of the following, if any, have you accessed for any of your children?





However, access to specialist services - like CAMHS or learning support – were patterned by financial comfort.

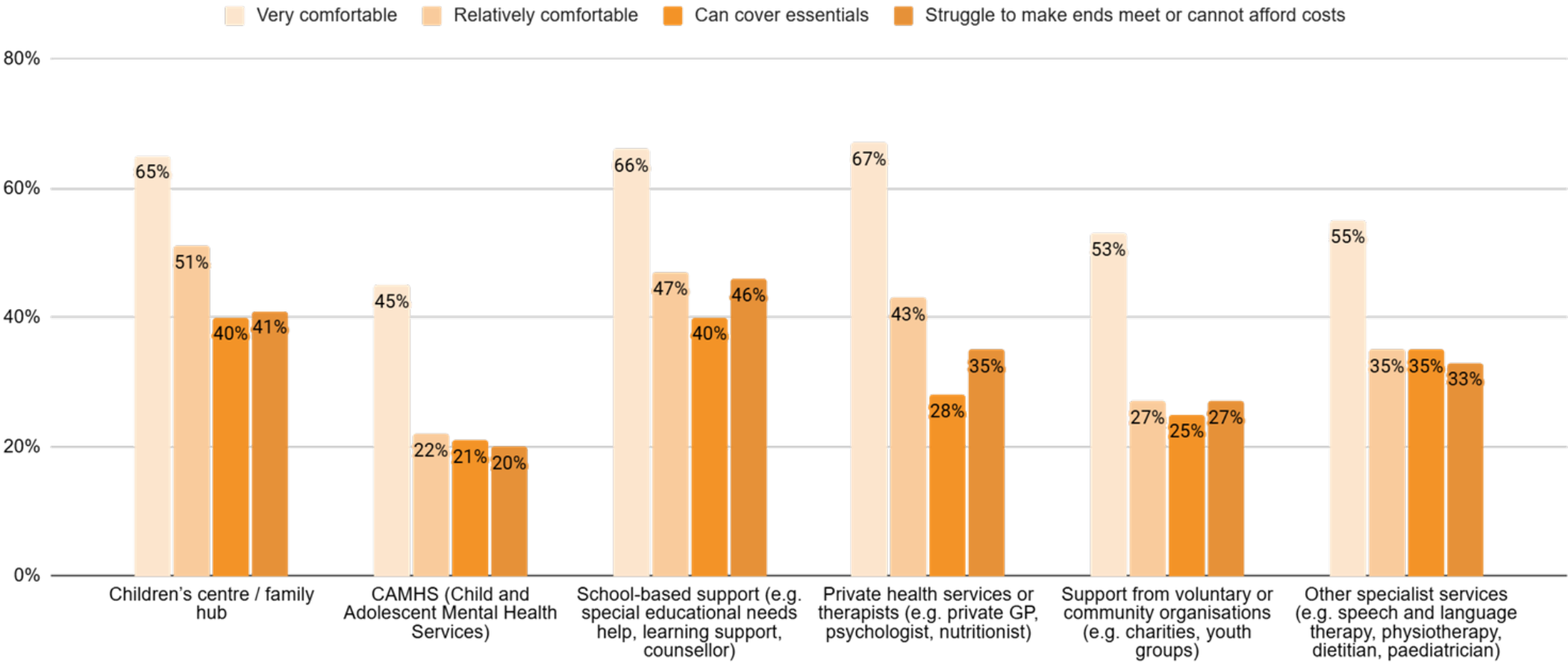
Regression analysis found financial comfort and children's SEND were the biggest contributing factors to access to CAMHS.



Which of the following, if any, have you accessed for any of your children? % have accessed



It was especially interesting that services intended to be inclusive - such as Family Hubs or community groups - were more often accessed by better-off groups.

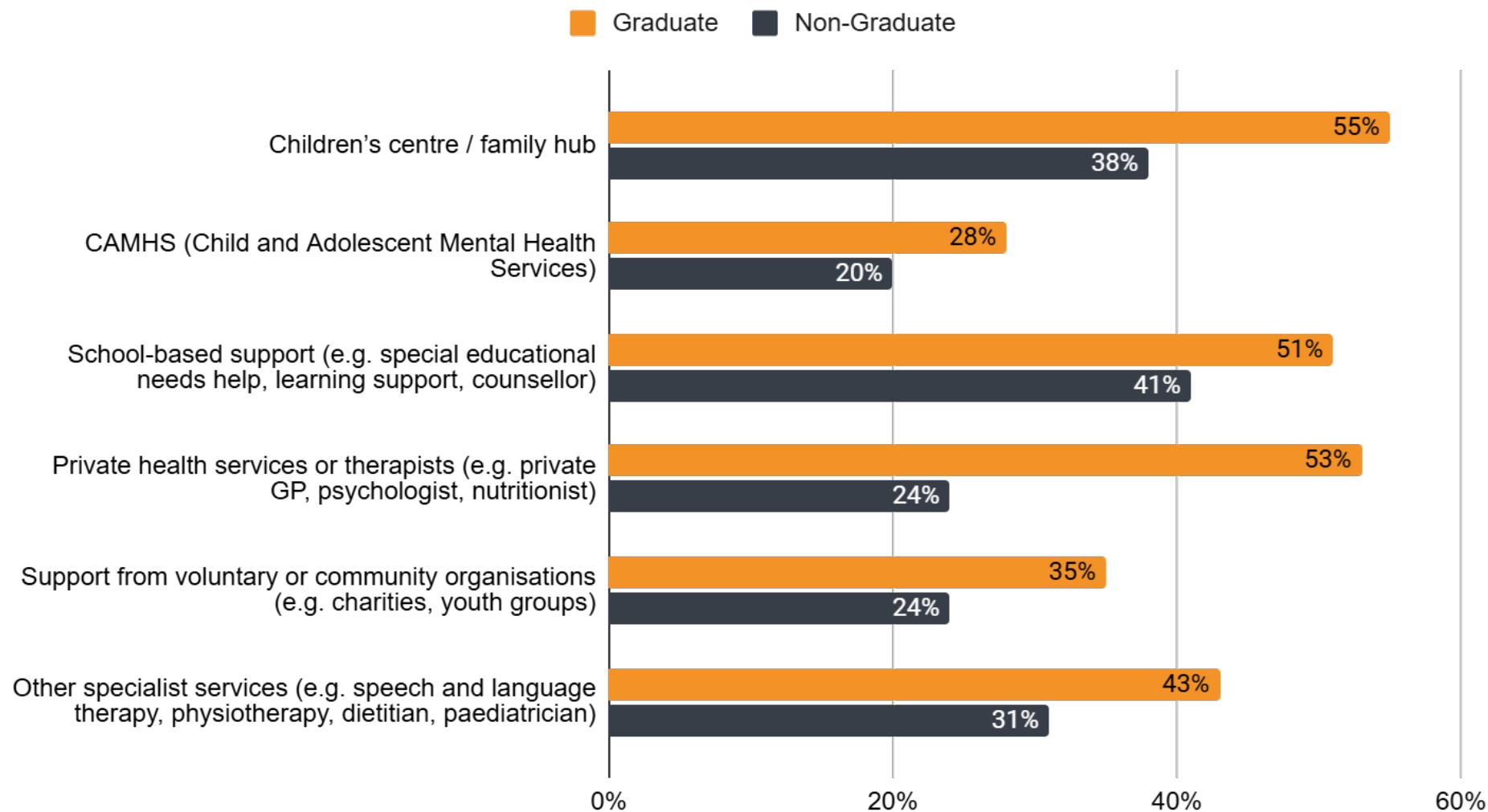


Which of the following, if any, have you accessed for any of your children? % have accessed





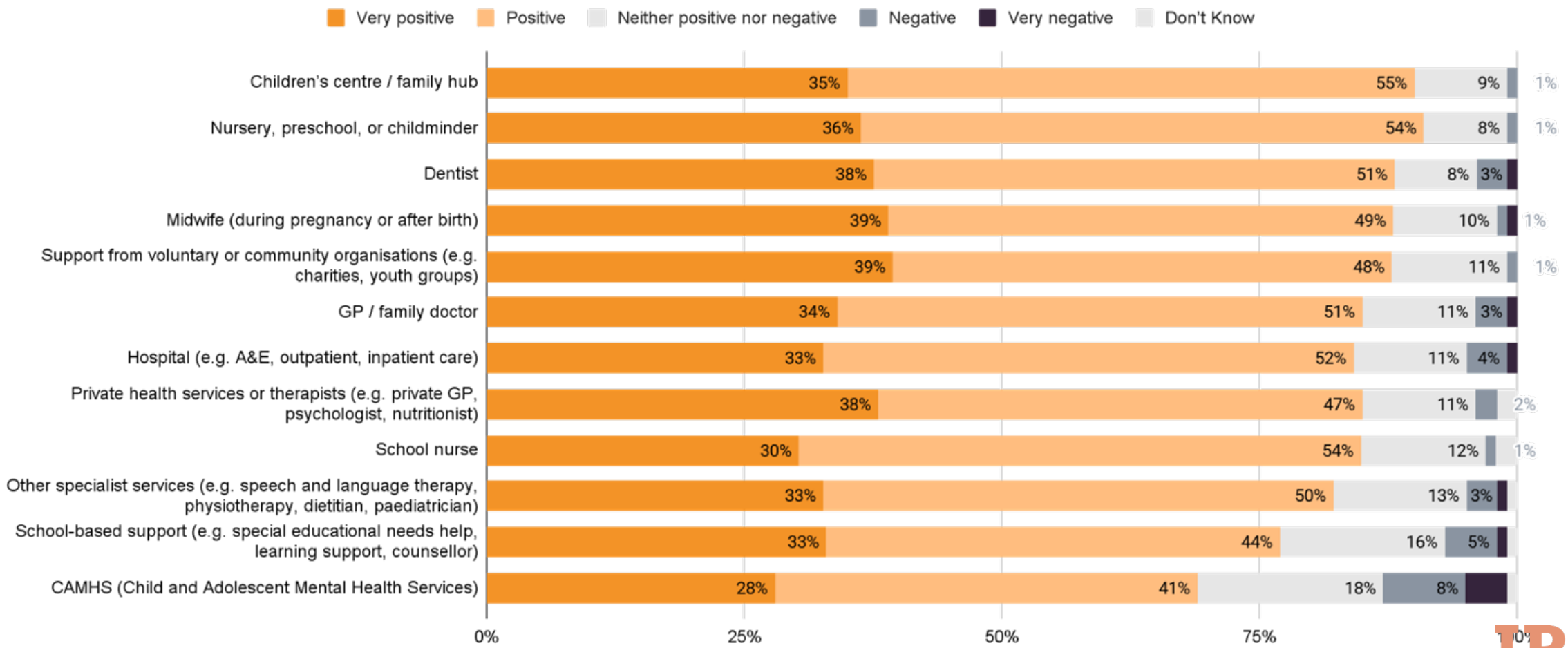
There were similar gradients by education, with higher rates of access amongst degree-educated parents.



Which of the following, if any, have you accessed for any of your children? % have accessed



Parents were least likely to report positive experiences with CAMHS and school-based learning support, while children’s centres and nurseries received the most favourable reviews.

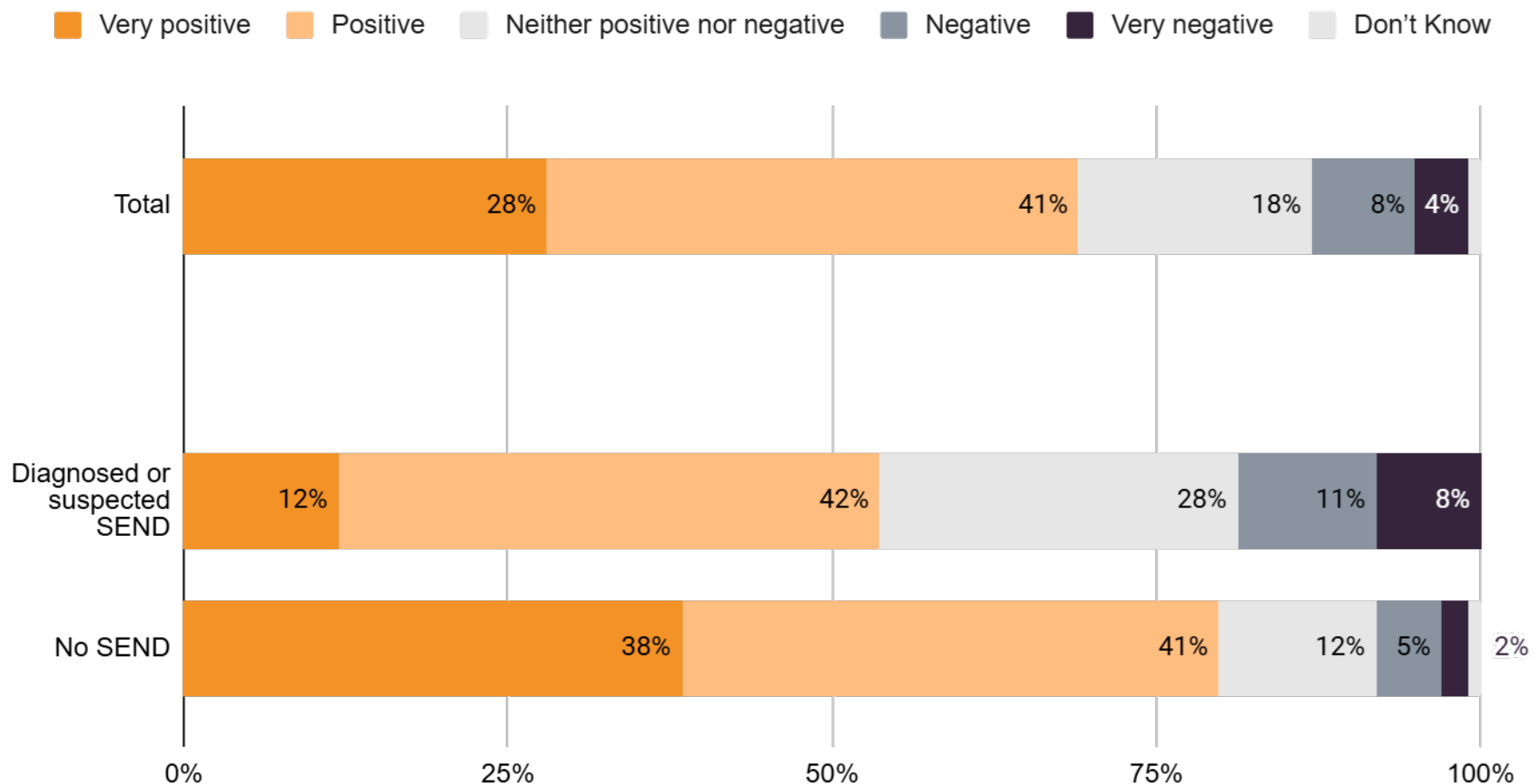


You said that you accessed the following services for your children at some point. Overall, did you have a positive or negative experience with these services?



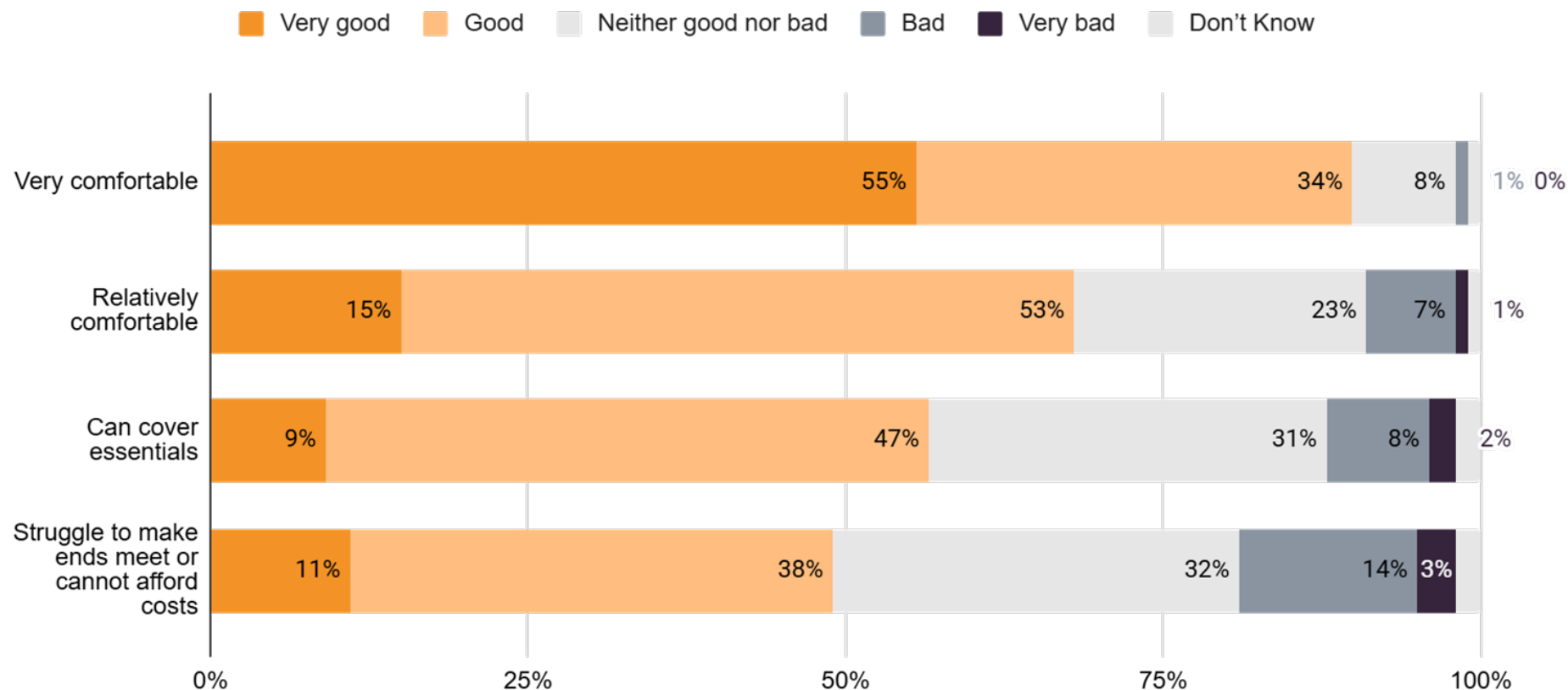


Parents of children with diagnosed or suspected SEND were much less likely to report a positive experience with CAMHS.



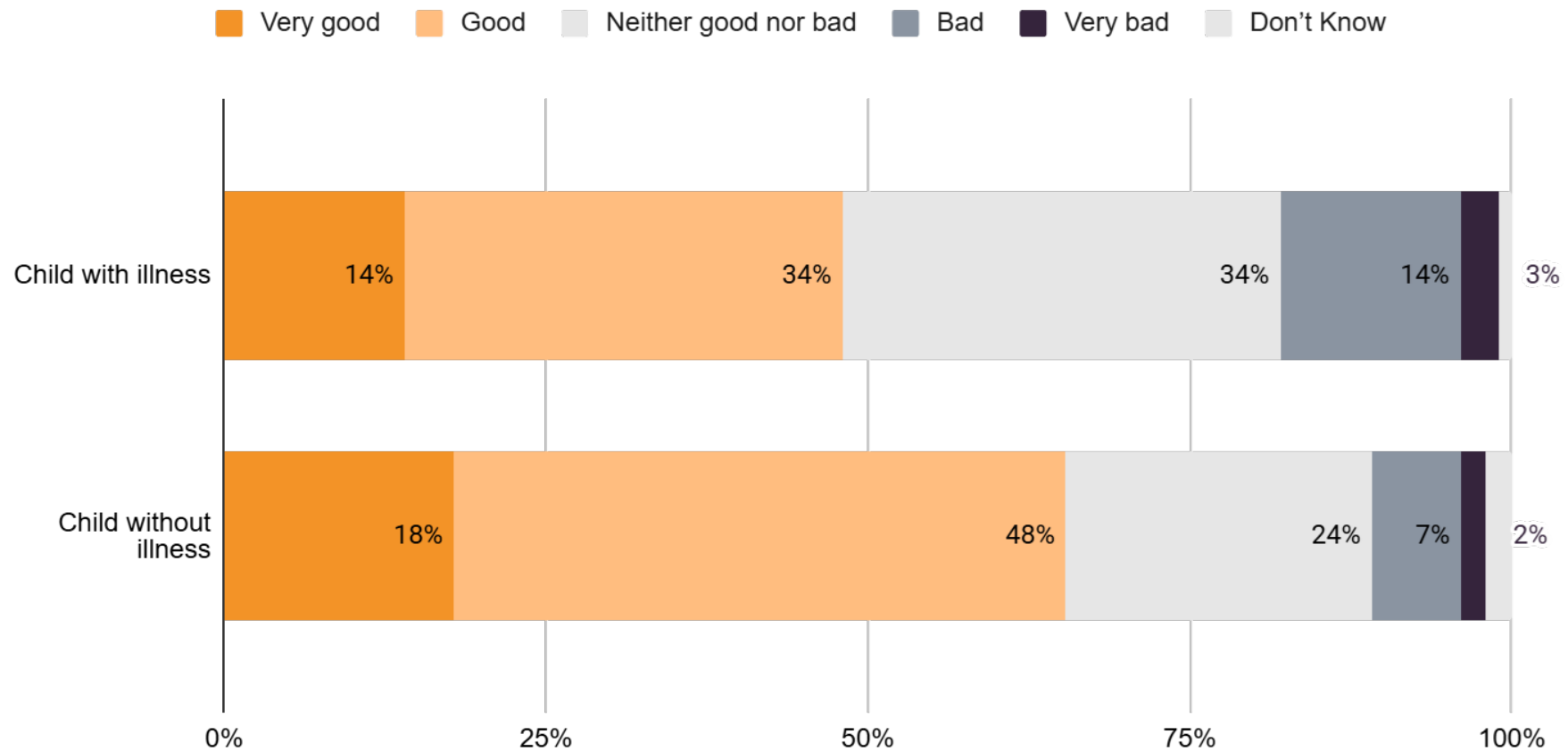
You said that you accessed the following services for your children at some point. Overall, did you have a positive or negative experience with these services? CAMHS

Whether or not parents felt services supported them with their children's health also varied significantly by financial comfort.



In general, how would you rate the services available to support parents with children's health?

Parents who had children with illnesses or conditions were also less likely to feel well supported by services.



In general, how would you rate the services available to support parents with children's health?

* Do any of your children have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?



Sources of advice and support



Section summary:

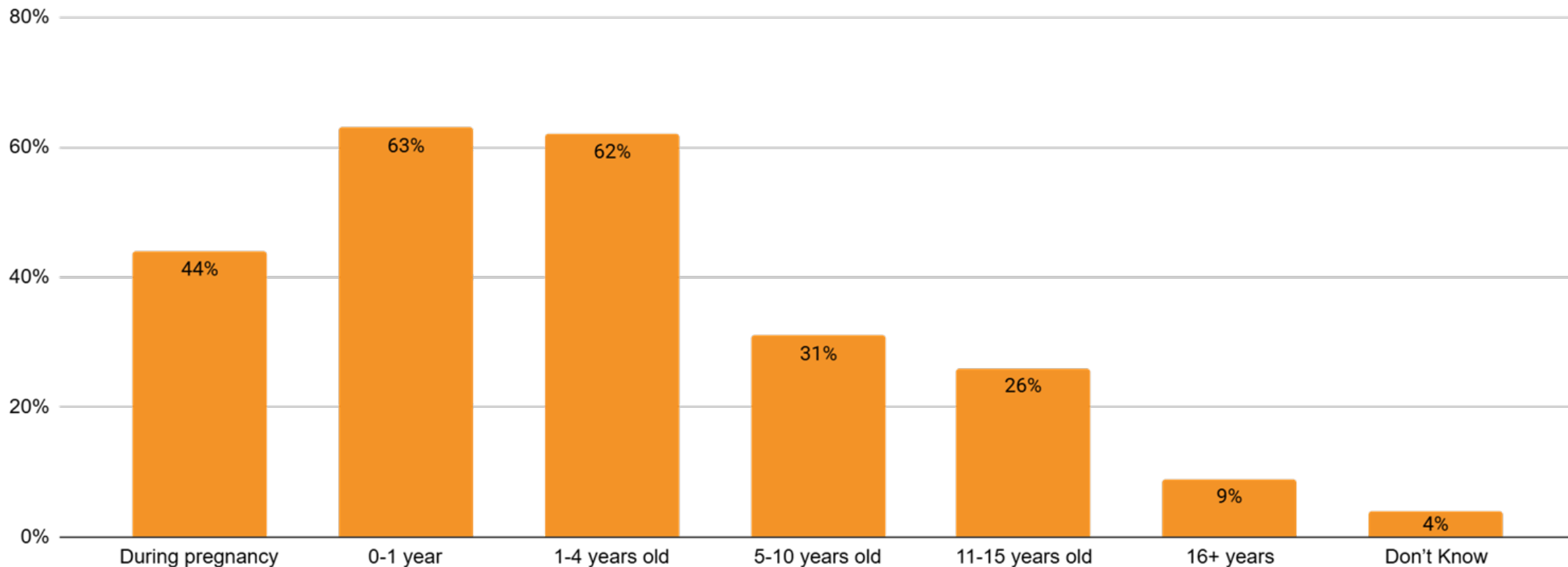
Parents felt the early years were the period in which they needed most support.

While generally parents are most likely to seek health advice from GPs, younger parents were less likely to do so and more likely to seek advice from informal sources (family and friends, online).

A majority found antenatal classes overly focussed on birth and wanted more guidance on longer-term care for their child's health.



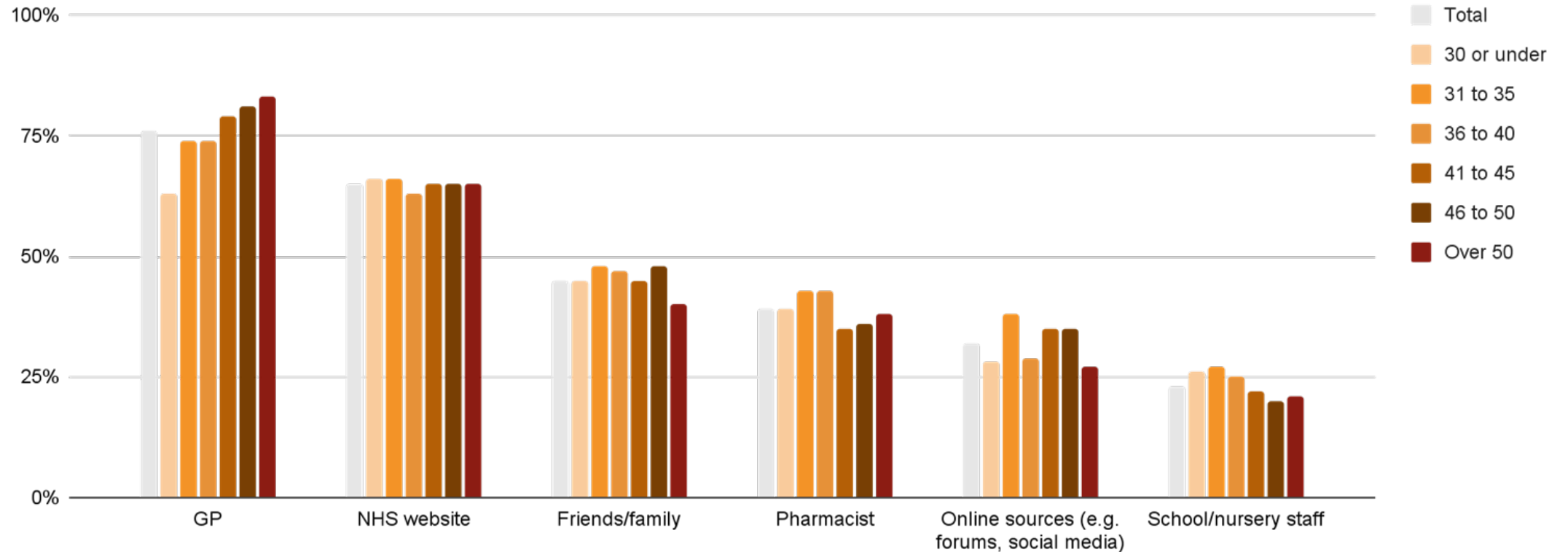
Parents generally felt they needed the most support with their children's health in the early years (0-4).



Thinking about a child's life, at what stage do you think parents most need support to keep their child healthy and well? Select up to three

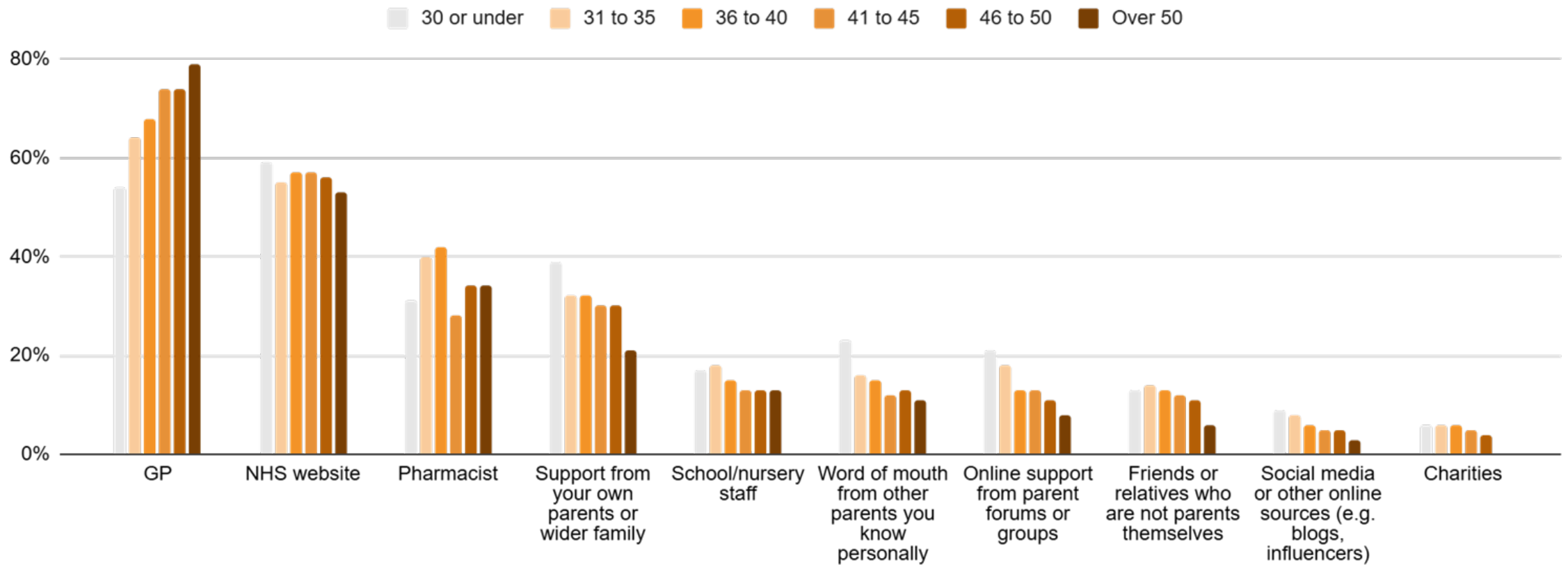
Most parents would go their GP for advice on their child's health, followed by the NHS website and friends and family.

Reflecting a broader trend (see next slide) older parents were slightly more inclined to rely on doctors than younger parents.



Where would you go for advice on your children's health? Select any which apply

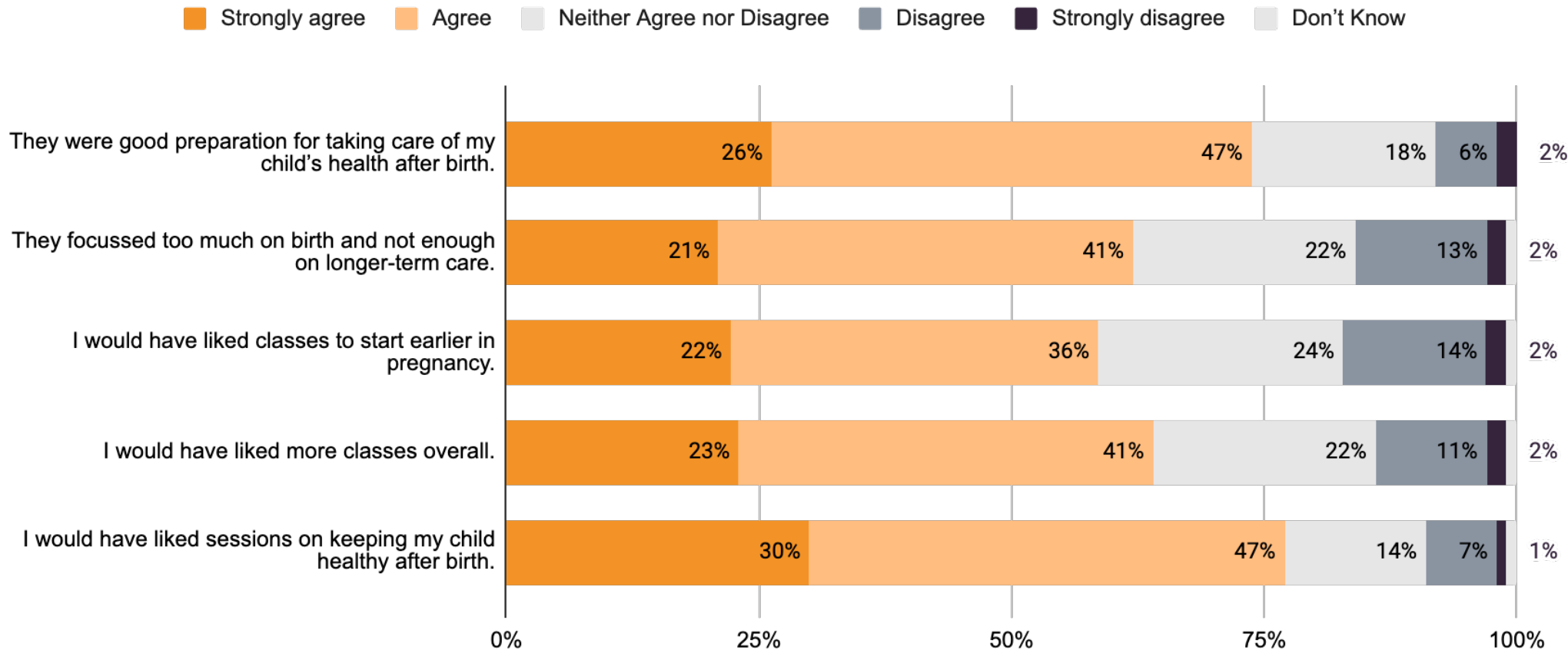
Compared to older parents, younger parents are slightly less likely to trust formal services for advice, and more likely to draw on more informal sources (family and friends, online forums, social media).



When it comes to managing your children's health, which of the following do you most trust for advice? Select up to three of the following



When it came to preparation for parenthood, a majority wanted more education on longer-term health, beyond the typical focus on birth and the first few weeks.



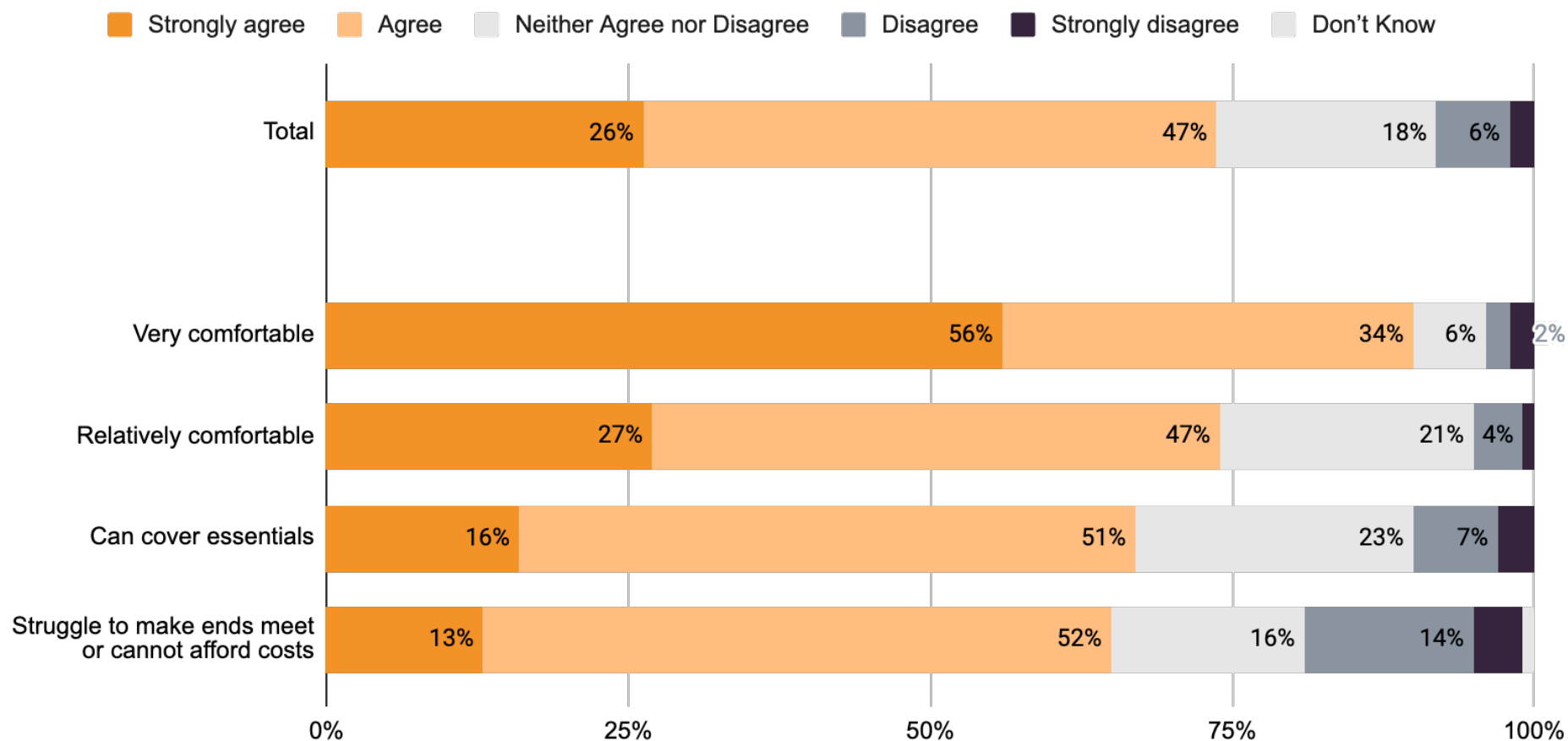
Thinking about your experience at the antenatal classes, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?





Whether antenatal classes were felt to be good preparation for looking after their child's health varied by financial comfort.

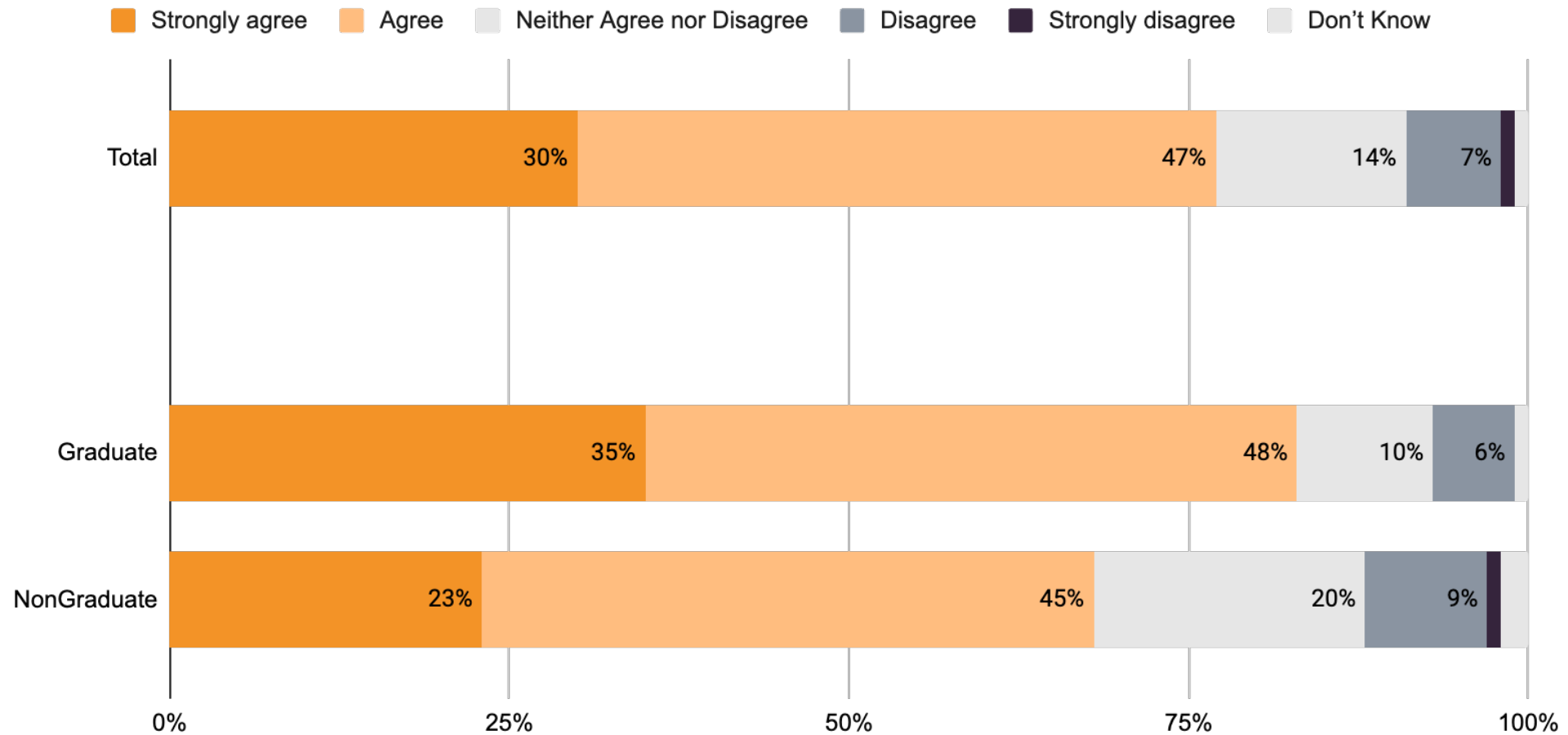
A majority (56%) of the most comfortable group strongly agreed, compared to just 13% of the least comfortable group.



Thinking about your experience at the antenatal classes, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? : They were good preparation for taking care of my child's health after birth.



77% of parents wanted more education on keeping their child healthy after birth, with even higher rates amongst graduates.



Thinking about your experience at the antenatal classes, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? : I would have liked sessions on keeping my child healthy after birth.



What parents
want from
services, policy
and other support



Throughout, we have been interested in finding out what parents felt was the right balance of state, community and family in raising healthy children.

Based on our qualitative research, we also wanted to test a hypothesis that parents tended to prefer informal, community-oriented forms of support over formal, clinical settings.

As a result, we tested both the ideal overall balance between these actors, and various policies that tackled key health issues for children (nutrition, mental health and physical activity) from different perspectives - from state regulation to service provision to parental education.



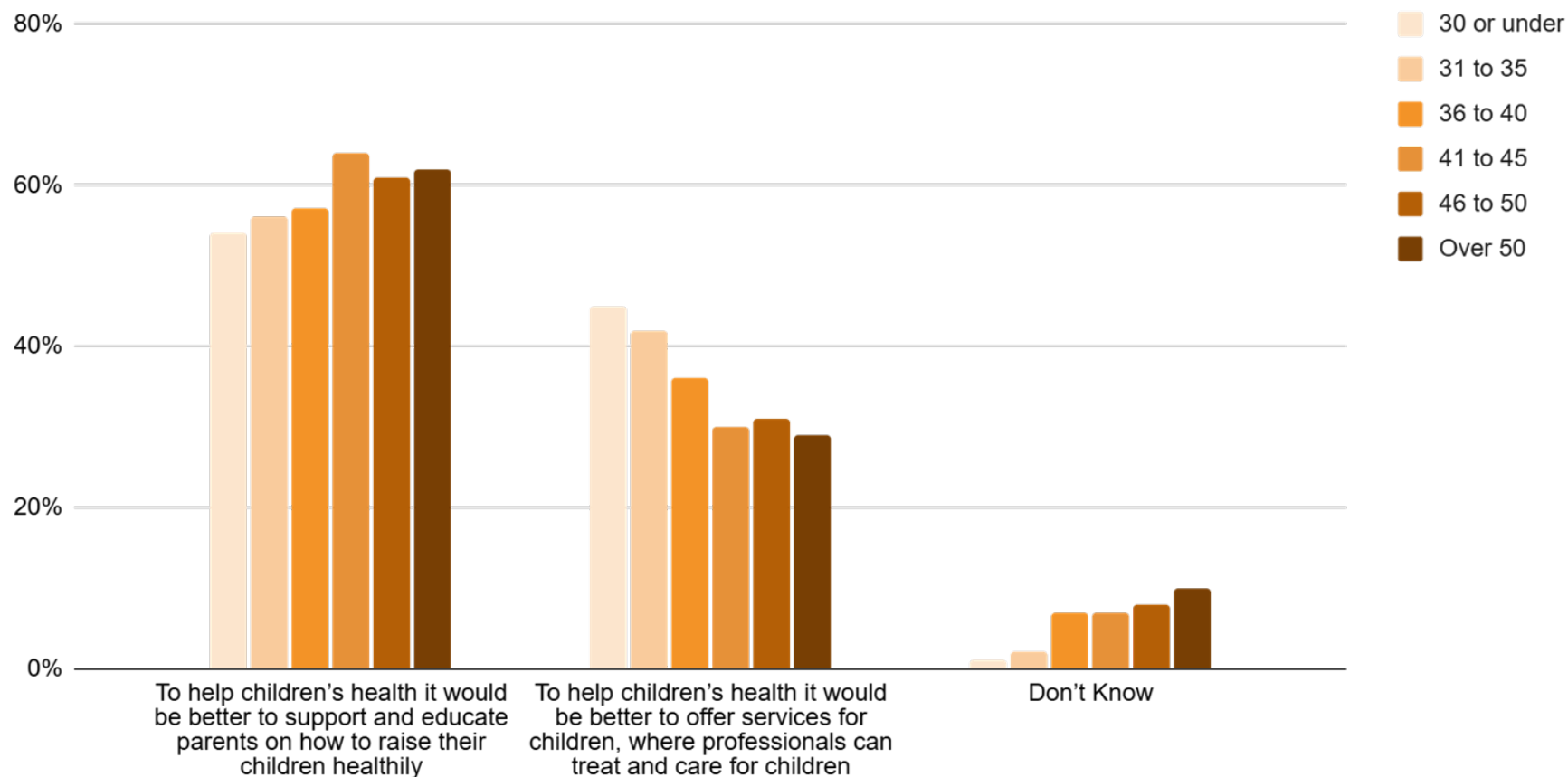
Section summary

Parents were more inclined to want help to raise healthy children themselves rather than more formal services, favouring a mix of community and professional support.

They prioritised making healthy food more affordable, expanding free local activities, enabling family-friendly work policies, and holding tech companies responsible for online harms - indicating support for state action on market forces that make it harder to provide a healthy childhood.

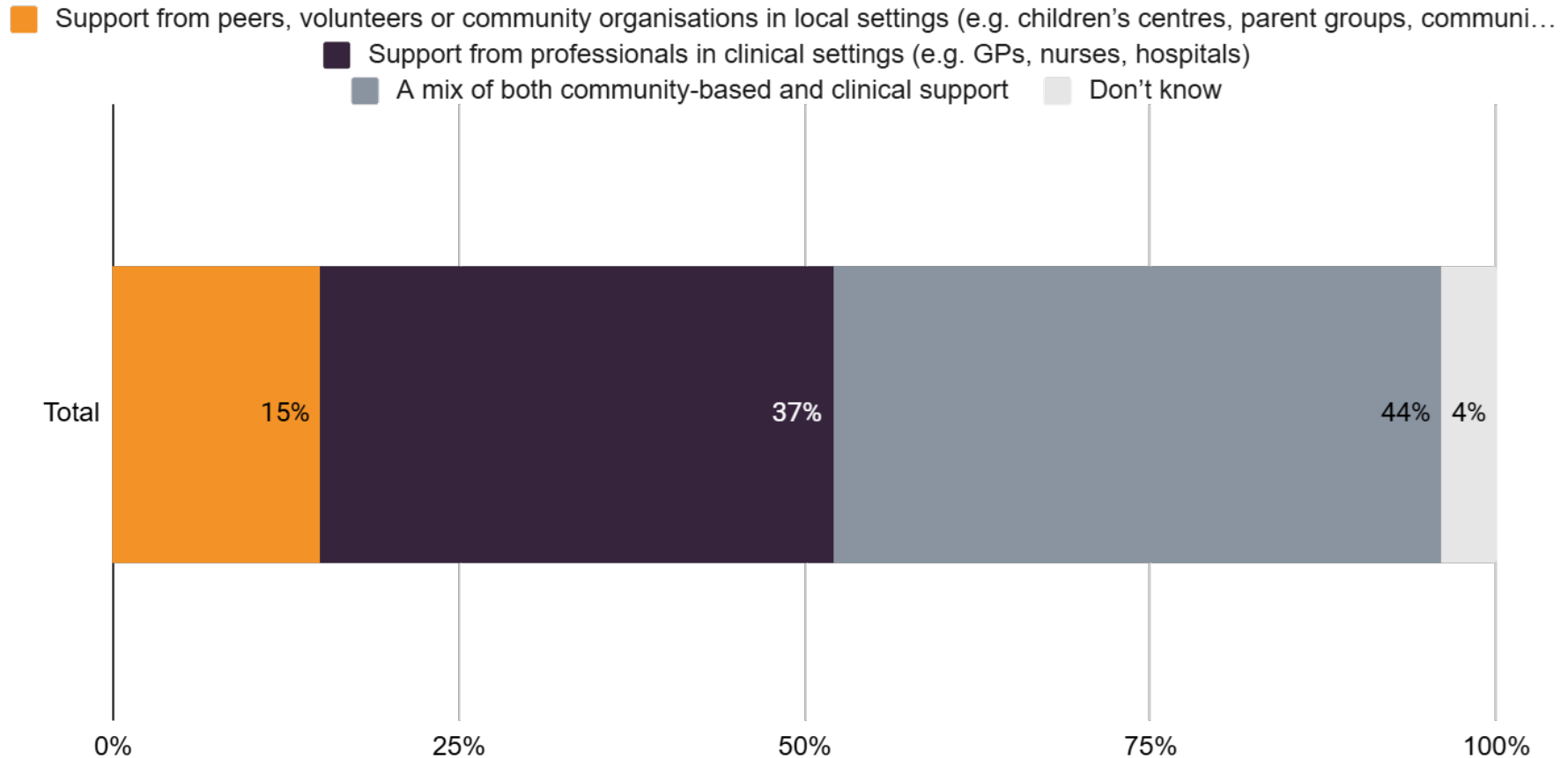


Parents are more likely to want education and support to raise their children healthily themselves than to receive more services.



Which of the following comes closest to your view on how the Government should help parents?

Overall, parents prefer of a mixed model of community and clinical support.

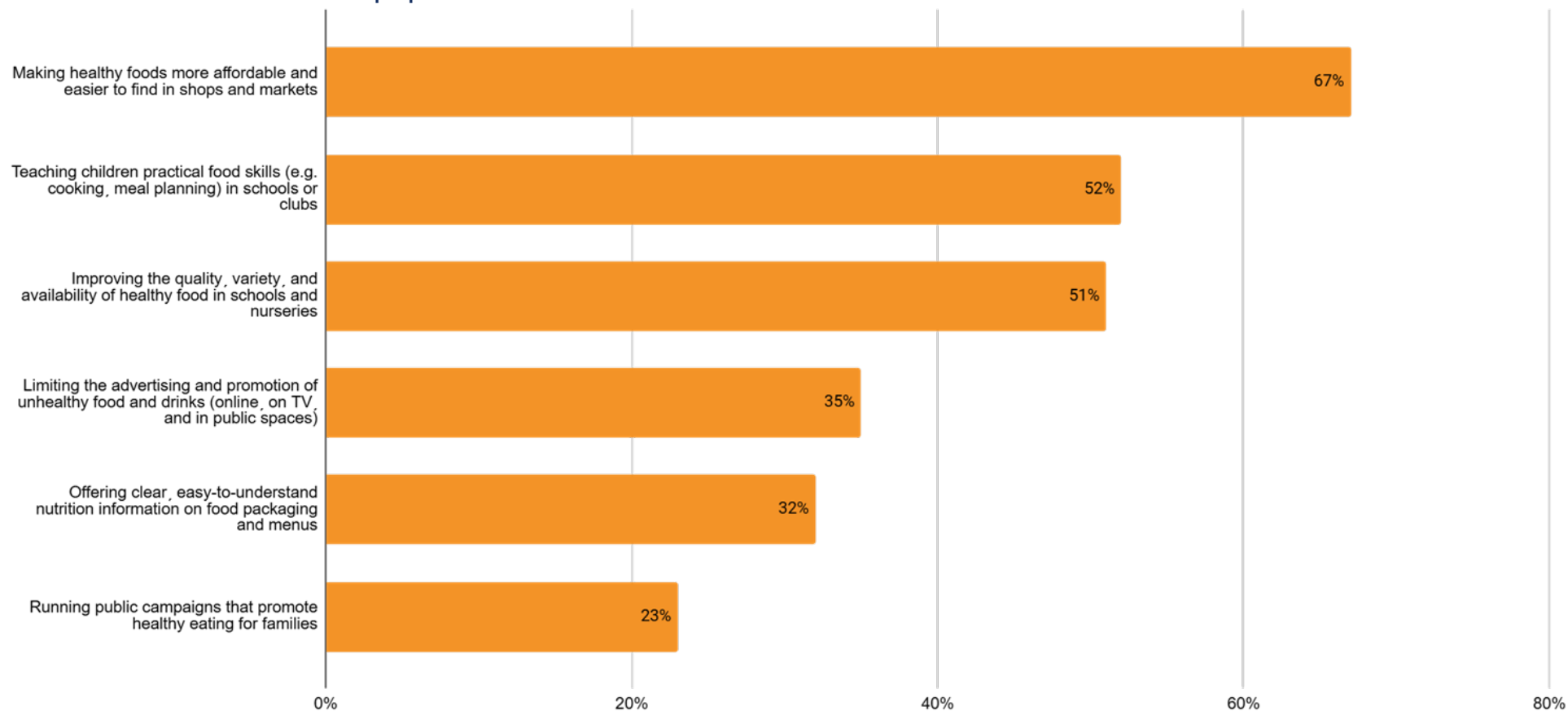


When families need support with children's health, which of the following types of support do you think is most helpful? Please select one



By far the most popular policy for improving child nutrition was action to make healthy food more affordable and accessible.

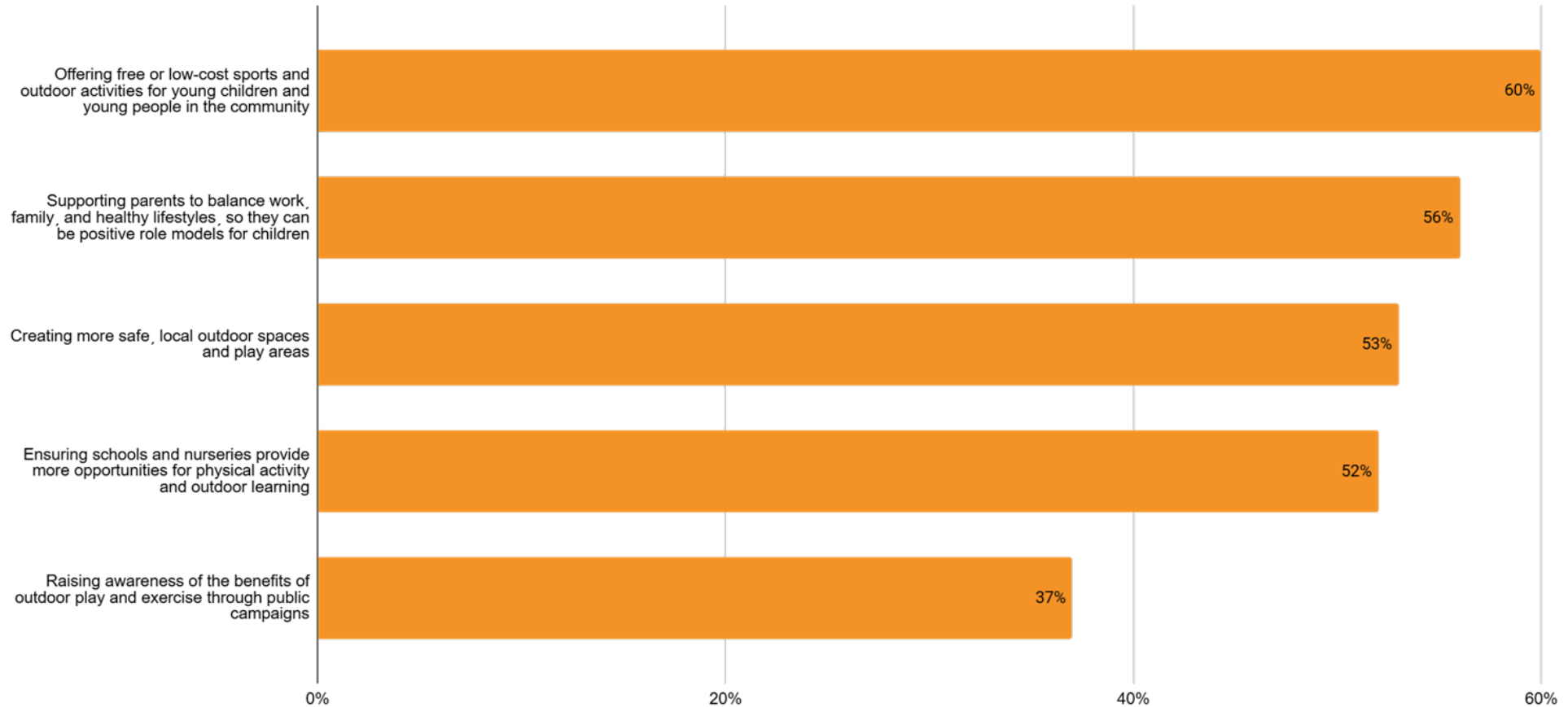
This was compared to policies which might improve public information or limit advertising, while direct provision of healthier food and cooking lessons to children was also popular.



When it comes to encouraging children to eat healthily, which of the following approaches do you think would be most effective? Select up to three

To encourage more physical activity, parents most wanted free or low-cost activities to be available in the community.

Making it easier for parents to set positive examples, direct provision by schools or more local spaces were also very popular, however. Awareness-raising - as before - was considered less effective.

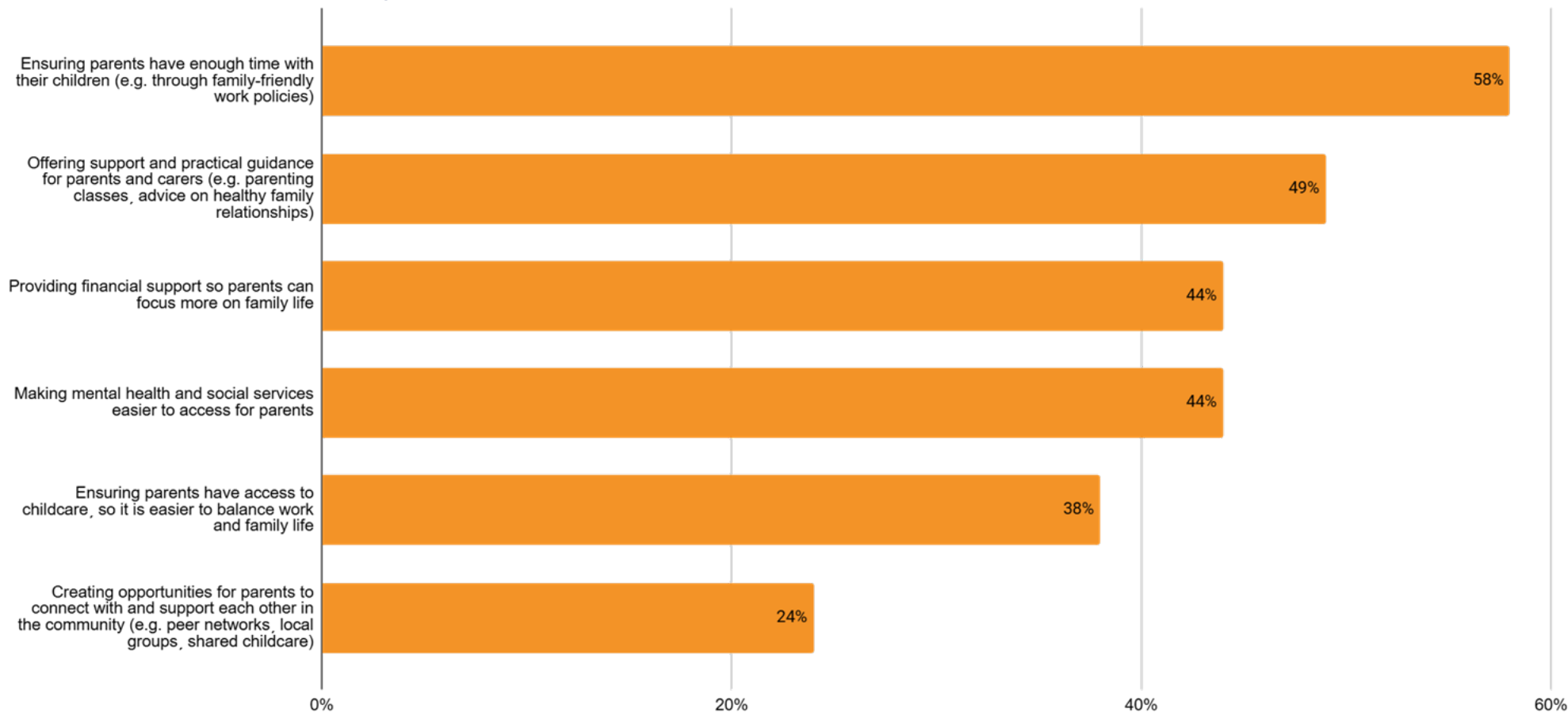


Which of the following do you think would make the biggest difference in ensuring children get enough physical activity and time outdoors? Select up to three



To lay the foundations for good mental health - through positive relationships at home - parents most wanted more family-friendly employment policies.

But forms of direct support - parenting classes, financial help and mental health services - were also popular.

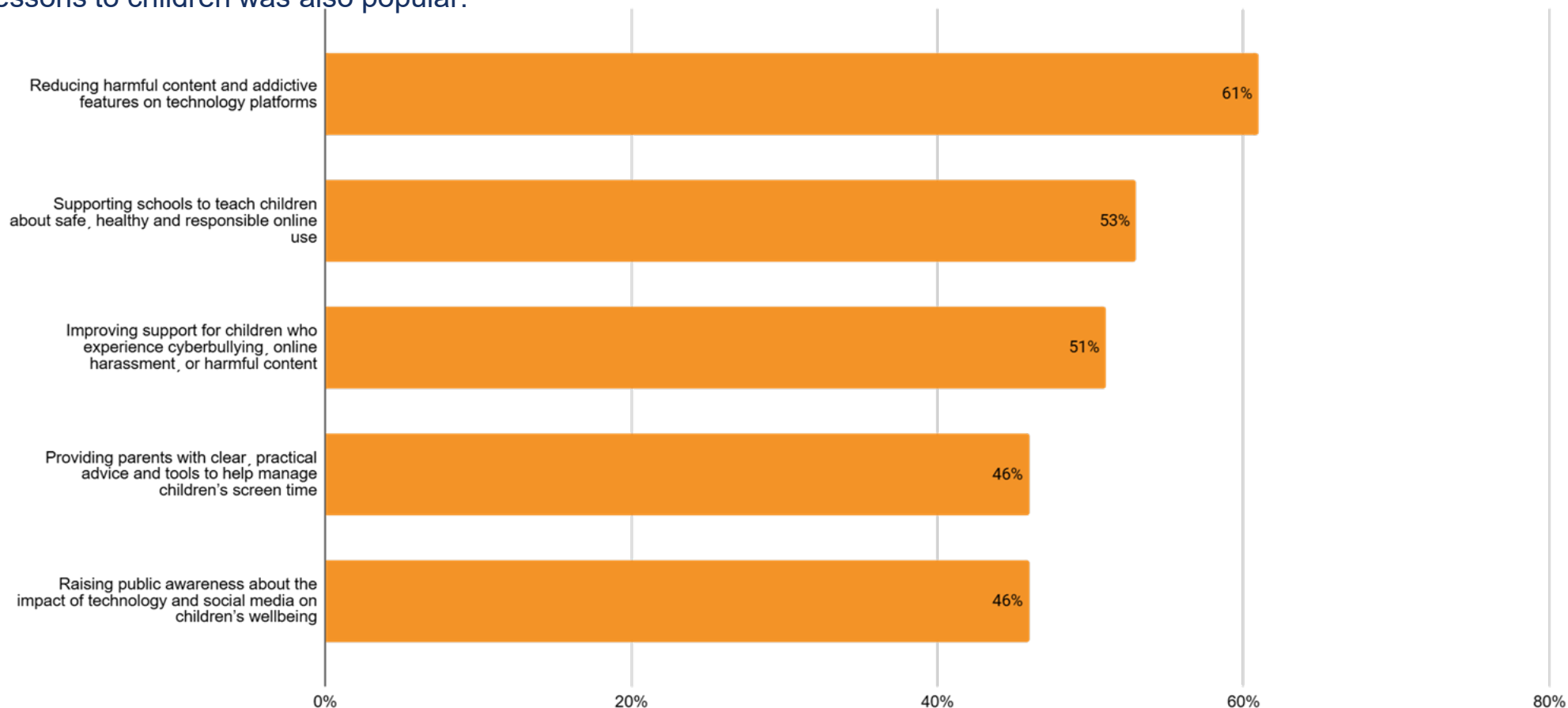


When it comes to helping children have loving, stable relationships at home, which of the following do you think would be most effective? Select up to three



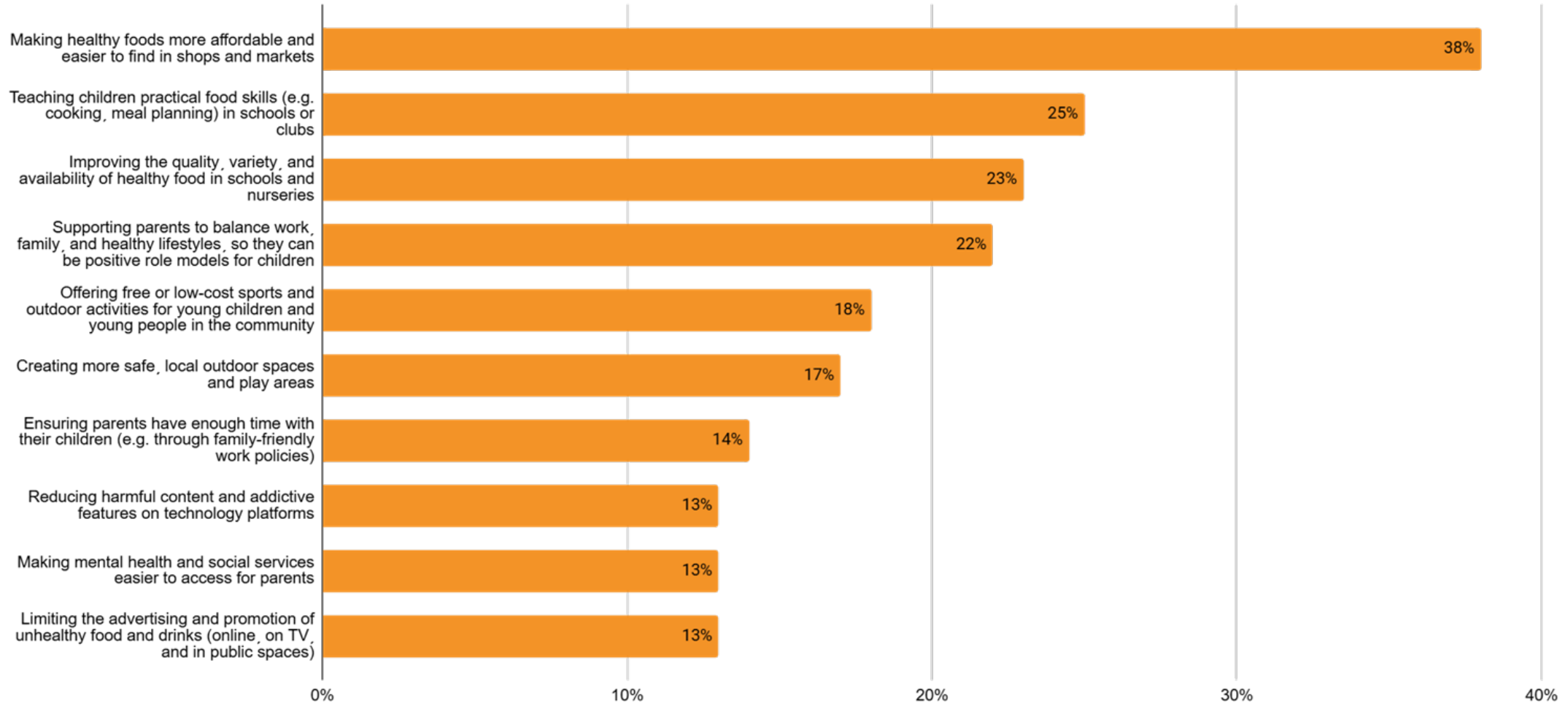
And when it came to safer use of technology and social media, parents wanted action on technology platforms.

This was compared to policies which might improve public information or limit advertising, while direct provision of healthier food and cooking lessons to children was also popular.



Thinking about children's use of technology and social media, which of the following do you think would make the biggest positive difference? Select up to three

Compared to all other policies, parents would most like to see the government focus on making healthy foods affordable



Now taking those policies, which would you most like to see the UK government prioritise? Select up to three (Top 10 answers)



Given the popularity of all types of policies tested, it is difficult to infer too much from these final questions.

If inferences can be drawn, however, the responses highlight:

- parental concern about the costs and the demands of their working lives.
- a general preference for (implicitly) state intervention in the market (i.e. on cost, employment, online content), direct service provision and information and awareness raising, in that order.