

Families with a young child with a disability report high rates of economic hardship and emotional distress

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RAPID measures material hardship as difficulty in the last month paying for one or more basic needs, including food, housing, utilities, child care, and healthcare. Consistent access to basic needs is key to a stable home environment and economic well-being that supports overall family well-being and the healthy development of young children.

Beginning in 2020, RAPID has been surveying parents of young children and reporting on trends, including the persistence of material hardship and its effect on well-being. This is in an effort to document the experiences and hear the voices of families and caregivers in real time.

In this fact sheet, we present what we've learned specifically about the experiences of families with a young child with a disability, using data gathered between April 2020 and August 2025 from parents across the country.



Stanford
Center on Early Childhood

“Health care and support for my child with disabilities [are my biggest concerns].” Parent in Utah

Two in three families with a young child with a disability struggle to meet basic needs

To understand the contexts and circumstances in which young children are developing, RAPID asks parents of children under age 6 if their child has a disability.*

“Medical therapy for my child and balancing my job [are my biggest concerns].” Parent in Texas

Between April 2020 and August 2025, 14% of parents surveyed reported having a child with a disability. Among these parents, difficulty meeting basic needs has been prevalent across the five-year span of the project and recent data show it is increasing.

The percentage of families with a child with a disability experiencing material hardship in August 2025 is the highest level recorded since RAPID began collecting data in 2020.

“Continuous fluctuations in what we are paid for disability. It’s different every month and there’s no way to predict what it’ll be.”
Parent in Pennsylvania

In August 2025, 68% of families surveyed with a child with a disability reported difficulty in the past month meeting one or more basic needs, compared to 54% of families surveyed without a child with a disability. Families with a child with a disability reported the most common areas of hardship were food (48%), utilities (46%), housing (42%), healthcare (29%), and child care (26%).

“Receiving and coordinating therapies and activities for my son with autism.”
Parent in Wisconsin

In responses to open-ended survey questions, parents of a child with a disability wrote about their challenges accessing healthcare, child care, and other basic needs, and the stress and worry this causes, as indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet.

* RAPID surveys define disability as, “A disability is something that makes it harder for your child to do everyday tasks at home or school. It might affect your child’s body or mind.”

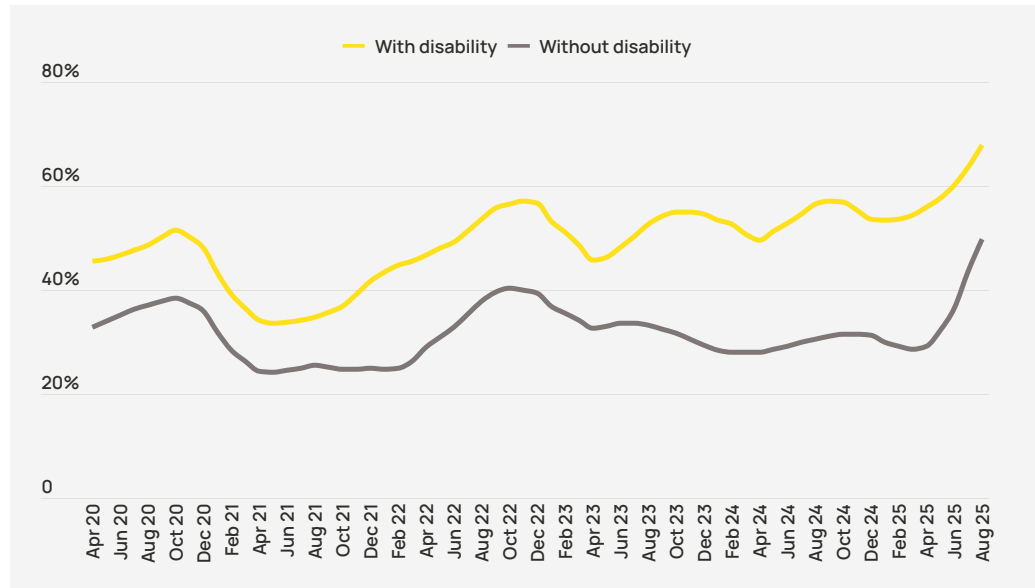
“[My biggest concerns are] making ends meet with bills and mental health and neurodiversity with my family.”
Parent in Oregon

“My child is newly diagnosed with ADHD and level 1 ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder]. So, supports for him [are my biggest concern].”
Parent in Iowa

“I can’t afford private insurance and make too much for Medicaid and my son needs help.” Parent in Michigan

“[My biggest concern] is supporting my child who was recently diagnosed with autism.” Parent in Oregon

Parents reporting one or more material hardship, by child disability status



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

A substantial majority of parents of a young child with a disability experience emotional distress

RAPID surveys ask parents about their emotional well-being, which we measure as a composite of four emotional distress experiences: stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness.*

* RAPID measures anxiety by asking parents to select how often they have been bothered by “feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge” or “not being able to stop or control worrying” in the past month. RAPID measures depression by asking parents to select how often they have been bothered by “little interest or pleasure in doing things” or “feeling down, depressed, or hopeless” in the past month. RAPID measures loneliness by asking parents to select how often they felt lonely in the past month. RAPID measures stress by asking parents to select how often they felt stress in the past month.

“My son is still nonverbal and I get very worried.” Parent in Pennsylvania

“We don’t have a strong support system. It feels like we’re going through this alone.” Parent in Kentucky

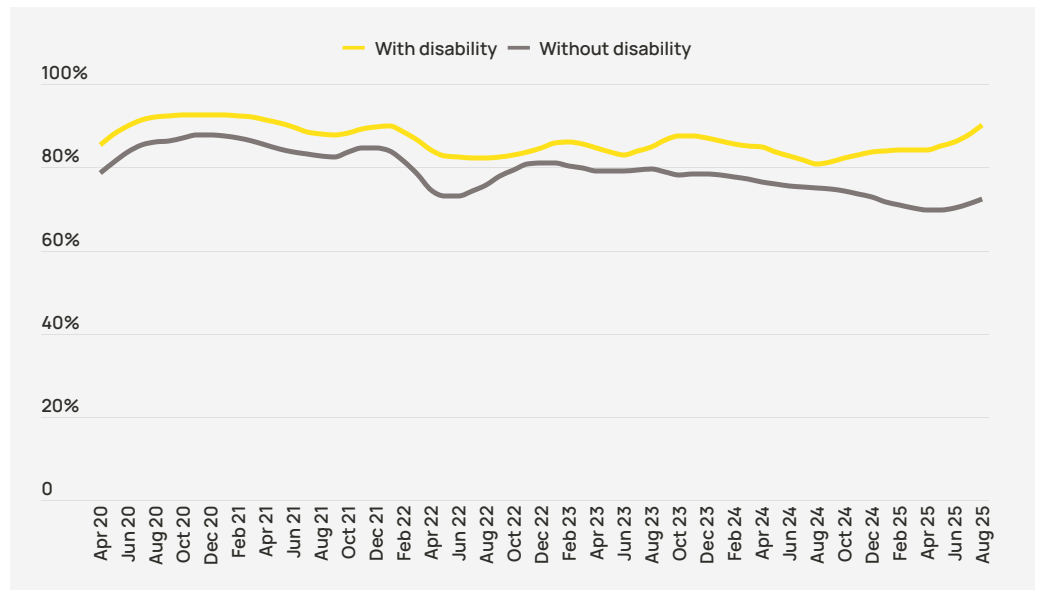
“I’m torn between being a parent and being broke, between buying diapers or paying rent, between affording school supplies or groceries. The stress is relentless, and all I want is a fair shot at giving my kids the life they deserve, without sacrificing my own sanity.” Parent in Hawaii

“Staying positive during times of political uncertainty. Federal transition issues have impacted my professional activities. I try not to bring the stress from work home, but it is challenging.” Parent in Wisconsin

In August 2025, 94% of parents surveyed with a child with a disability experienced emotional distress, compared to 73% of parents surveyed without a child with a disability. Among parents of a child with a disability who reported emotional distress, stress (88%) was the most prevalent experience, followed by anxiety (70%), loneliness (60%), and depression (55%).

Parents’ responses to open-ended questions help us understand what may be behind these high rates of emotional distress. Parents of a child with a disability wrote in their open-ended question responses that material hardship, economic uncertainty, and the stress of caregiving affected their emotional well-being, as indicated by the quotes in this fact sheet.

Parents reporting emotional distress, by child disability status



Data note: We apply a common smoothing method to plot a trend line that approximates the overall pattern of the data while reducing short-term fluctuations. As such, the trend line provides an overall view of the data and is not intended to match the specific numbers cited in the narrative.

“The stress and uncertainty of our situation are taking a toll on our mental health and well-being.” Parent in Hawaii

“Everything from groceries to child care to rent continues to get more expensive, and I worry that we won’t be able to keep up. What makes it harder is that we fall into the gap where we earn just enough to be disqualified from many assistance programs, but not nearly enough to truly afford what our family needs. It feels like we’re being punished for trying to stay financially afloat. That gap creates a constant sense of stress and instability, especially with another baby on the way.” Parent in Pennsylvania

“Parenting support groups help and offer a platform for parents to connect, share their experience, and access mental health support.” Parent in Vermont

High rates of emotional distress among parents of children with a disability is persistent in RAPID data. RAPID has been reporting on parents' emotional well-being since April 2020, including a [May 2020 report](#) showing parents of young children with disabilities experienced significantly higher rates of emotional distress than parents who do not have a child with a disability. Given the persistence of emotional distress among these families, which represents a serious challenge to the well-being of families and caregivers, targeted policies and supports are essential.

Many parents observe emotional distress in their young child with a disability

Research shows that parents' own emotional well-being affects their children's emotional well-being and development. Because of this, we also ask parents about their children's behavior in the past month and measure child emotional well-being as a composite of two experiences: externalized emotional distress (e.g., fussiness) and internalized emotional distress (e.g., fearfulness).*

* RAPID measures child emotional well-being using items from the Child Behavior Checklist. Parents reported how often the phrases “fussy or defiant” and “fearful or anxious” reflected their view of their child's behavior in the past month, even if other people might not agree.

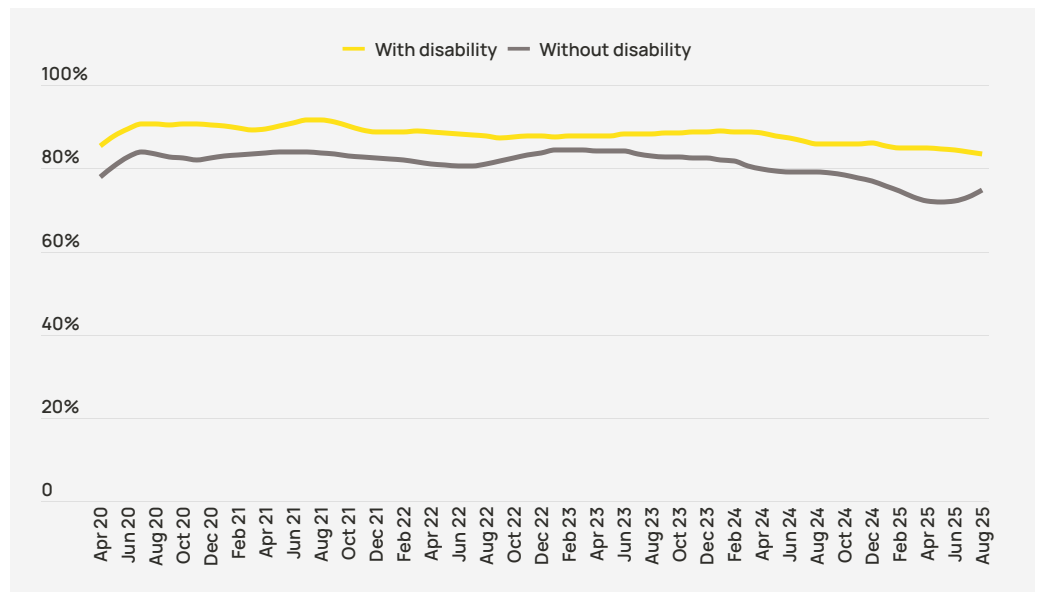
“I’m fighting a daily battle to keep my kid afloat, juggling bills, scarce groceries, and the crushing pressure of providing for him, all while desperately trying to preserve his innocence and give him a chance at a better life despite the overwhelming odds against us.”
Parent in Hawaii

In August 2025, 83% of parents surveyed of a child with a disability reported emotional distress in their young children, compared to 77% of parents surveyed without a child with a disability. Among parents of a child with a disability who reported emotional distress in their children, 77% said their children had externalized emotional distress and 46% had internalized distress.

“We have difficulty balancing attention and time between our child with a disability and our other child.”
Parent in California

Across the five-year span of the RAPID project, we consistently see high percentages of parents with a child with a disability report emotional distress in their young children and at a higher rate compared to parents without a child with a disability.

Parents reporting emotional distress in their children, by child disability status



“Husband lost his job four days after filing for FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act]. I have major disabilities due to a complicated pregnancy and cannot work full time. My daughter was recently diagnosed with ADHD and we’re struggling to balance on medication.” Parent in Michigan

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“My child receives early intervention services for speech therapy and I am concerned that political changes will impact the availability of these highly necessary services for him and children like him.”
Parent in Washington

“I was laid off and my unemployment is running out this month. We were fortunate that the state extended unemployment benefits, but I am really scared that we will lose health insurance from the extra income. And every time we change insurance, it means starting over on every health preauthorization. Half our doctors don't take our current insurance so we are paying out of pocket for their visits and prescriptions. With doctor shortages, it would be months before a single visit with a new provider, let alone completing prior authorizations. We cut all our expenses to the bare minimum as soon as the layoff happened and with unemployment ending, we are going to be living off of savings for a while.”
Parent in Massachusetts

Parents of a young child with a disability point to policies, programs, and supports as essential to meeting basic needs

That so many families with young children are experiencing both material hardship and emotional distress is concerning, as analysis of the national RAPID survey data has consistently found evidence of a chain reaction of hardship. In the chain reaction, as parents' experiences of material hardship increase, they also experience more emotional distress, which is associated with parents reporting increased emotional distress among their young children.

RAPID data have shown that national policy interventions are strongly connected to the levels of material hardship and emotional distress in parents and young children. When policies like the expanded Child Tax Credit, food assistance, and child care supports were in place, parents reported lower material hardship and lower emotional distress. Because parents' emotional well-being cascades to their children, parents also reported their children experienced lower emotional distress.

As these policies expired and cost of living expenses increased, family material hardship and parent and child emotional distress rose sharply, once again leaving many families struggling. This shows the potential of policies to support families' access to basic needs and prevent the chain reaction of hardship.

“Our disabled child is in summer school and that is helpful for all of us. He is happy and occupied for the next four weeks.” Parent in Illinois

“My children are currently still on our state’s Medicaid plan. This is a HUGE help to us financially, as the family plans at my husband’s job are very expensive. It’s a huge help to us financially, and also just the peace of mind knowing that if something happens, we won’t hesitate to take them to urgent care or the ER or the doctor, etc. We won’t have to stop and count the cost of what that visit incur and try to decide, “Is it bad enough that we have to go to the doctor and pay, or can we just try to treat it at home and not have to pay?” I’d hate to be in that position with my children’s health.” Parent in Wisconsin

“The low income assistance program that we are on such as food stamps and WIC as well as the utility assistance really does help.” Parent in Pennsylvania

In responses to RAPID’s open-ended survey questions, parents of a child with a disability wrote about how important policies, programs, and supports are in helping them access basic needs and promote their families’ well-being.

Given the persistence and increase of material hardship, continued investment in proven supports is essential to help families meet basic needs and support children’s health and development. These data and caregiver voices can inform policies and programs that improve family well-being and strengthen communities.

Conclusion

RAPID data show that parents of young children with a disability face significant economic and emotional challenges that undermine family well-being and children’s development. Although hardship and distress are high across families surveyed, in particular households with a child with a disability experience difficult circumstances and require additional resources and supports.

Over the past five years, the RAPID project has listened closely to parents of children under age 6. We have consistently heard about challenges meeting basic needs. In August 2025, RAPID recorded one of the highest rates of material hardship among parents of a child with a disability since April 2020. In open-ended responses, parents shared how economic uncertainty and pressures, including the uncertainty surrounding essential policies and programs, contribute to significant financial strain.

“Right now, what’s helping my family the most is access to Medicaid during my pregnancy, which allows me to receive the healthcare I need without added financial stress.”

Parent in Pennsylvania

These economic difficulties are linked to higher levels of emotional distress in parents and their young children and to negative effects on young children’s development.

Immediate action is needed to improve economic circumstances in support of healthier, thriving families and communities now and in the future. RAPID will continue to listen to parents to ensure that families’ economic and emotional well-being positions them to support the positive, healthy development of their young children.

“Currently we’ve been surviving on loans and the little extra money from side hustle.” Parent in Vermont

“Support from local food pantries and food banks, along with SNAP benefits, has been helping us put meals on the table.” Parent in California

About the RAPID Survey Project

The RAPID Survey Project is based in the Stanford Center on Early Childhood, under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center.

↑
23,000+
Parents

↑
15,000+
Providers

↑
50
U.S. States

This set of analyses on RAPID data is based on responses collected between April 2020 and August 2025 from 25,456 parents of a child under age 6. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 12.2% are Black, 16.7% are Latinx, and 35.7% live below 200% of the federal poverty line. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not out of the total sample size. The June 2025 through August 2025 analyses are weighted in order to adjust the samples to match the known population.

The RAPID project includes a survey of caregivers with children under age 6 and a survey of child care providers and other adults who care for children under age 6. These surveys are designed to gather essential information continuously regarding the needs, health-promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families and important adults in their lives.

RAPID collects data monthly from caregivers and child care providers in all 50 states. The surveys are national in scope, though not technically nationally representative. RAPID collects snapshots of data across time and can also assess trends longitudinally.

For more information about RAPID study design and methods, [see here](#).