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# Material Hardship, Emotional Distress, and Early Learning Supports Among California Families with Young Children: Evidence from the RAPID California Voices Survey

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# Material Hardship, Emotional Distress, and Early Learning Supports Among California Families with Young Children: Evidence from the RAPID California Voices Survey

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## Introduction

Access to basic material resources, including food, housing, utilities, healthcare, and child care, is essential for the well-being of families and the healthy development of young children. When families struggle to meet these needs, the resulting material hardship can undermine family stability, increase parental stress, and create challenges for children’s social and emotional development (Conger et al., 2002; Neppl et al., 2016). These risks may be particularly consequential during early childhood, a developmental period in which children’s environments and caregiving experiences play a central role in shaping long-term outcomes (Yoshikawa et al., 2012).

In California, recent economic conditions have raised growing concerns about families’ ability to maintain stable access to these essential resources. Rising housing costs, increasing prices for basic goods, and uncertainty surrounding public benefits have placed additional pressure on household budgets (Baldassare et al., 2024; Kimberlin & Rose, 2017). Although income-based indicators are commonly used to assess economic vulnerability, they do not always capture the day-to-day challenges families face in maintaining stable living conditions. Measures of material hardship, on the other hand, provide an important complementary perspective on family economic well-being (Gershoff et al., 2007). Rather than focusing solely on income levels, hardship measures capture whether families experience difficulties paying for basic necessities such as food, housing, utilities, healthcare, or child care. These experiences offer a more direct reflection of families’ lived economic conditions and may help identify challenges that are not visible through income measures alone.

Among these basic needs, access to affordable child care represents a distinct challenge for families with young children. The high cost of child care in California can place substantial financial strain on household budgets and force families to make difficult trade-offs between employment, caregiving, and other essential expenses. Difficulty affording child care may therefore represent a key pathway through which broader economic pressures translate into both material hardship and increased family stress.

Within this broader context of economic pressure, access to affordable early childhood care and education (ECE) represents an important support for families with young children. Early learning programs can promote children’s development while also enabling parents to participate in the workforce and maintain financial stability (Yoshikawa et al., 2016). In California, the state has expanded investments in early learning through the Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program, a publicly funded pre-kindergarten year offered through public schools. By providing free early learning opportunities, TK has the potential to reduce child care costs for families while supporting children’s developmental needs.

Despite growing attention to the affordability challenges facing California families, there is limited timely evidence documenting how families with young children are currently experiencing material hardship and emotional distress, and how families perceive and engage with early learning supports such as TK within the context of these economic pressures. Families navigating economic hardship must make trade-offs between meeting basic needs and securing stable care for their children, with the cost of child care representing a distinct and policy-relevant pressure. In this context, programs such as TK may serve not only as developmental opportunities for children but also as potential supports that help families manage material hardship and caregiving demands. Bringing these domains together addresses an important gap by linking families’ lived economic experiences – including challenges related to child care affordability – with their perspectives on policy-relevant supports designed to promote child development and family stability.

As such, the current study examines experiences of material hardship among families with young children in California using data from the RAPID California Voices Survey. Specifically, this analysis pursues four objectives. First, it examines the prevalence of material hardship among California families with young children. Second, it examines how hardship experiences vary across key

sociodemographic characteristics, including household income levels, geographic locations, family structures, and the presence of a child with a disability. Third, it documents the prevalence of emotional distress among parents and young children across these family characteristics. Fourth, it examines parents' awareness of, interest in, and experiences with California's publicly funded TK early learning program and explores how families perceive TK as a support for children and family well-being. By providing timely information about the economic and emotional experiences of families with young children, this report aims to inform policies and programs designed to support family stability and healthy child development in California.

## Background

### **Material Hardship as an Indicator of Family Economic Strain**

Consistent with prior literature, we use the term material hardship to refer to self-reported difficulty paying for basic needs in the past month, such as food, housing, utilities, healthcare, and child care (Beverly, 2001). Unlike income-based indicators, hardship measures capture the lived experience of economic strain, including situations in which families may have income above official poverty thresholds but still struggle to afford essential expenses (Neckerman et al., 2016). For this reason, material hardship has become a key indicator of family economic well-being in research on poverty and child development.

Experiencing hardship can create significant stress for caregivers (Neppl et al., 2016). When families face limited resources, parents often must make difficult trade-offs in allocating household finances, for example, deciding between paying for housing, utilities, food, or child care. These financial pressures may disrupt daily family routines and increase psychological stress, which can affect caregivers' emotional well-being and their capacity to maintain consistent and supportive interactions with children (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Among different domains of material hardship, difficulty affording child care is particularly salient for families with young children, as it directly shapes both household finances and daily caregiving arrangements.

### **Family Processes Linking Hardship and Emotional Well-Being**

Economic hardship has also been linked to children’s emotional and behavioral outcomes through processes within the family environment. Research suggests that material hardship may influence children indirectly by increasing parental stress, anxiety, or depressive symptoms, which can in turn shape parenting practices and family relationships (Conger et al., 2010). These family-level processes have been proposed to create a cascading pathway in which economic stress affects children’s well-being through its effects on caregiver functioning and family dynamics (Masarik & Conger, 2017). Financial pressures related to child care may be especially consequential in this process, as they can simultaneously increase material hardship and disrupt caregiving stability, thereby amplifying stress within the household.

Despite these challenges, families also demonstrate resilience in the face of economic stress (Gayatri & Irawaty, 2022). Some caregivers report adapting to difficult circumstances by strengthening family relationships, developing new coping strategies, or adjusting priorities to support their children’s well-being (Liu, Curenton, et al., 2024). Recognizing both the risks associated with hardship and the resilience demonstrated by families is important for understanding the broader context in which families navigate economic challenges (Prime et al., 2020).

### **Economic Instability and Unequal Impacts During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Recent research has also emphasized that economic hardship is often dynamic rather than static (Gennetian et al., 2019). Many families experience fluctuations in their financial circumstances due to changes in employment, unexpected expenses, or shifts in public supports. These short-term changes in families’ ability to meet basic needs, sometimes described as economic unpredictability, may create additional stress for caregivers as they attempt to manage uncertain financial conditions and maintain stable family routines (DeJoseph et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2022).

While economic hardship has long been a concern for many families, recent events have intensified these challenges and drawn greater attention to their prevalence and consequences. Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic highlights both the prevalence and unequal distribution of hardship experiences among families with young children (Liu et al., 2022; Liu, Lombardi, et al., 2024;

Zalewski et al., 2023). Economic disruptions during the pandemic, including job losses and child care closures, created substantial financial challenges for many households. At the same time, these challenges were not experienced evenly across families (LeWinn et al., 2023; Sappenfield et al., 2023). Structural inequities in income, employment opportunities, and access to resources meant that lower-income households and racially minoritized families were disproportionately affected by material hardship (Oberg et al., 2022; White, 2021).

### **Early Learning Supports and Transitional Kindergarten in the Context of Hardships**

Within this context, publicly funded early learning programs such as TK can be understood as policy responses to the financial and caregiving pressures faced by families, particularly those related to child care affordability. In addition to meeting families' basic material needs, access to affordable early childhood care and education (ECE) can serve as an important support for families navigating economic hardship. Early learning programs not only promote children's cognitive and social-emotional development but also help parents maintain employment and financial stability by providing reliable care for young children (Yoshikawa et al., 2012, 2016). For many families, the availability and affordability of child care therefore represent critical components of economic well-being.

At the same time, access to affordable child care remains a significant challenge for many families in the United States (Mazzaferro et al., 2025; Sappenfield et al., 2023). Child care costs have risen substantially in recent years, and in many communities the supply of affordable, high-quality care remains limited (Jessen-Howard et al., 2020). As a result, families, particularly those with young children, often face difficult trade-offs between employment, child care expenses, and other household needs (Connelly & Kimmel, 2003). These pressures may be especially pronounced in high-cost states such as California, where housing, food, and other living expenses already place substantial strain on household budgets.

In response to these challenges, California has made substantial investments in expanding access to early learning through the TK program. TK is a publicly funded pre-kindergarten year offered through public schools and serves as the first year of a two-year kindergarten sequence designed to support children's school readiness and development. Originally established in 2012 for a limited group of 4-year-olds, the program has gradually expanded and now serves all 4-year-old children statewide

beginning in the 2025–2026 school year. This expansion represents one of the largest recent state-level investments in universal early learning in the United States.

Programs such as TK may provide important benefits for families facing economic pressures. By offering free early learning opportunities through the public school system, TK has the potential to reduce child care costs for families while also supporting children’s developmental readiness for school. However, the extent to which families benefit from the program depends in part on their awareness of TK, their interest in enrolling their children, and the degree to which program structures align with families’ needs. Factors such as program hours, transportation, and the availability of wraparound care may influence whether families are able to access and utilize the program.

Taken together, existing research highlights the importance of understanding how material hardship shapes family well-being through its effects on both economic stability and caregiving conditions. Material hardship – particularly related to the cost and availability of child care – may serve as a key factor linking broader economic pressures to parental stress and children’s emotional well-being. Within this context, early learning programs such as TK represents a policy-relevant support that may help alleviate these pressures by reducing child care costs while supporting early development. Examining families’ experiences of hardship alongside their perceptions of TK provides insight into how families navigate economic constraints and engage with available supports. Such evidence is critical for informing policies and programs aimed at strengthening family stability and promoting healthy development in early childhood.

## Data and Methods

### Data Source & Sample

This study uses data from the RAPID California Survey, an ongoing statewide survey designed to assess the experiences and well-being of families with young children in California. The survey collects information from parents and caregivers of children under the age of 6 and focuses on key domains relevant to family well-being, including economic circumstances and material hardship, caregiving experiences, access to services, and parent and child well-being.

The RAPID California Survey is administered online and uses a rapid-response survey approach to collect timely information about families' experiences. Participants are recruited through a combination of outreach via community and family-serving organizations (e.g., Abriendo Puertas, First 5 California) and online recruitment methods (e.g., Facebook Ads). Eligibility criteria require that respondents be at least 18 years old, reside in California, and be the parent or primary caregiver of at least one child under the age of 6. This survey provides a unique opportunity to examine the economic and well-being experiences of families with young children in California during a period marked by ongoing economic uncertainty and recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic.

RAPID uses a rolling, repeated cross-sectional survey design with ongoing participant recruitment and follow-up assessments. Although some participants may contribute data at multiple time points, the analyses presented here treat the data as repeated cross-sections rather than tracking within-family change over time. Given the descriptive nature of the study, observations were treated as independent cross-sections, and no adjustment for within-participant clustering were applied. This sampling strategy ensures our ability to gather monthly information from a large, diverse sample while reducing attrition due to survey fatigue. Specifically, interested participants first completed an online screening survey to determine their eligibility. Once determined eligible, participants were prompted to provide consent to study participation and then directed to answer an initial recruitment survey that included questions about demographic characteristics, pre-pandemic experiences, and core study contents. These consented participants were then entered into a participant pool. Then, for each follow-up assessment, existing participants in this pool were invited to answer a series of survey questions that included both core study contents and special add-in survey questions. Received responses were manually and systemically inspected to identify and remove fraudulent participants or "bot" farms, following state-of-the-art bot detection protocols (Pozzar et al., 2020; Storozuk et al., 2020). Participants received a \$5 incentive for each survey wave response. All study procedures have been approved by Stanford institutional review boards. More descriptions of RAPID design principles and procedures can be found in Fisher et al. (2024). Given the convenience sampling approach, the study sample is not intended to be representative of all families with young children in California. However, survey weights are applied to approximate the demographic composition (i.e., race/ethnicity, household income levels) of the population.

The analyses presented in this report use survey responses collected between November 2022 and December 2025. During this time period, a total of 17,874 parents and caregivers participated in the survey. The sample includes families from diverse racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Approximately 27.9% of respondents identify as Black, 41.7% identify as Latinx, and 43.6% of participating households report incomes below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL). Sample characteristics remained broadly similar across waves due to weighting adjustments. Findings reported on family experiences of material hardships and emotional distress were derived from this sample of 17,874 California households.

For analyses on parent awareness of and interest in California’s TK program, we used data collected from a supplemental RAPID California survey administered between May 2024 and October 2024. This sample included 1,157 parents or caregivers of young children, among whom 13.8% identified as Black, 34.3% identified as Latinx, and 32.4% reported income levels below 200% of the FPL.

For analyses on family experiences with California’s TK program, we used data collected from a supplemental RAPID California survey administered during December 2024. This sample included 560 parents or caregivers of young children aged four to five years old (i.e., eligible for TK enrollment), among whom 14.3% identified as Black, 36.2% identified as Latinx, and 36.5% reported income levels below 200% of the FPL.

Because participation in the survey is voluntary and recruitment occurs through multiple channels, the sample is not intended to be strictly representative of the California population. To improve population representativeness, survey weights are applied to adjust the sample to match known demographic characteristics of families with young children in California. These weights account for differences between the survey sample and the population distribution across key demographic characteristics.

## Measures

### ***Material Hardship***

Material hardship was assessed using caregivers’ self-reports of difficulty paying for basic household needs. Consistent with prior work using RAPID survey data, material hardship was defined

as experiencing difficulty paying for at least one essential expense within the past month. Specifically, caregivers were asked whether their household had difficulty paying for food, housing, utilities, healthcare, child care, or wellness activities (e.g., well-being related expenses; not presented separately in results), using an item from the Institute of Medicine financial strain scale (IOM, 2014). This measure captures perceived financial strain related to essential expenses (e.g., food, housing, utilities, child care) and does not necessarily indicate that families experienced severe or realized deprivation (e.g., eviction or food insufficiency). As such, this indicator is best interpreted as reflecting financial strain that may signal risk for material hardship.

For analytic purposes, respondents who reported difficulty paying for one or more of these expenses were categorized as experiencing material hardship. This approach reflects the conceptualization of material hardship as an indicator of economic strain that directly captures families' lived experiences in meeting basic needs.

### ***Parent Emotional Distress***

Parent emotional distress was measured using caregivers' self-reported experiences of negative emotional states during the past month. Caregivers were asked how frequently they experienced several indicators of emotional distress, including self-reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and loneliness. Measurement tools used to capture these distress experiences included a one-item stress measure (Elo et al., 2003), the Generalized Anxiety Disorder – 2 item scale (Kroenke et al., 2007), the Patient Health Questionnaire – 2 item scale (Kroenke et al., 2003), and a loneliness item from the NIH Toolbox 2.0 (Gershon et al., 2013), respectively. These items capture common indicators of psychological strain that have been widely examined in research on family well-being. Scale scores from these four measurements were first transformed to a range of 0-100 and then averaged to create a composite caregiver emotional distress score. Caregivers who reported experiencing one or more of these emotional states during the past month were classified as experiencing emotional distress. This low threshold (i.e., any reported symptom) was used to capture the broad prevalence of emotional strain in the population; this approach prioritizes sensitivity to experiences of distress rather than identification of clinically significant levels. This measure reflects the broad presence of emotional distress among caregivers rather than clinical diagnoses of mental health conditions.

### ***Child Emotional Distress***

Child emotional distress was assessed using caregiver reports of children’s behavioral and emotional responses during the past month. Caregivers were asked the frequency of each of their children under age 6 exhibiting behaviors indicative of emotional distress, including fussiness/defiance and fear/anxiety. These two items were selected from the Child Behavioral Checklist preschool version (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2000) as they were broadly applied to children within the targeted age range and represented externalizing and internalizing tendencies, respectively. These indicators provide brief behavioral proxies and do not constitute a comprehensive assessment of child emotional functioning. Children whose caregivers reported either type of behavior were categorized as experiencing emotional distress. These indicators capture observable behaviors that may reflect children’s emotional responses to stress within the family environment.

### ***Demographic Characteristics***

To examine differences in experiences of material hardship and emotional distress across families, analyses incorporated several demographic characteristics. Household income was measured relative to the federal poverty level (FPL), a standardized threshold established annually based on household size and geographic locations that is commonly used to assess economic need. For each household, annual income was converted to a percentage of the FPL by dividing reported annual household income by the applicable poverty threshold for a household of that size and multiplying by 100. Based on this measure, households were categorized into income groups to distinguish families living in lower-income (below 200 percent of the FPL), middle-income (between 201 and 400 percent of the FPL), and higher-income (above 400 percent of the FPL) levels. Geographic location was classified based on whether families resided in rural areas or urban/suburban communities in California. Family structure was defined by whether the household included two caregivers (dual-parent households) or a single caregiver (non-dual-parent households). Finally, caregivers reported whether any child in the household had a disability, allowing analyses to examine differences in hardship experiences among families with children with additional care needs. These demographic indicators were included to assess how experiences of economic hardship and emotional well-being vary across key family characteristics.

### ***Transitional Kindergarten Awareness and Interest***

Parents' awareness of and interest in California's TK program were assessed using items from a supplemental RAPID survey administered to California families in December 2024. Caregivers were asked whether they had previously heard about the TK program prior to taking the survey. Parents were also asked about the likelihood that they would enroll their child in TK if the program were available to them.

For families who had at least one children between four and five years old, additional questions asked about participation in the TK program and reasons for not enrolling if their child was not participating. Parents also provided open-ended responses describing their experiences and perceptions of TK. These qualitative responses were used to illustrate families' perspectives on the benefits and challenges associated with accessing the program.

### ***Analytical Approach***

All analyses were conducted using weighted survey data to better approximate the demographic composition of families with young children in California. Survey weights adjust for differences between the survey sample and the known population distribution across key demographic characteristics.

The analysis proceeded in four stages corresponding to the study objectives. First, weighted descriptive analyses were conducted to estimate the prevalence of material hardship among families with young children in California and the monthly weighted estimates over time. Second, subgroup analyses were conducted to examine how experiences of material hardship vary across key family characteristics, including household income, geographic location, family structure, and child disability status. Third, weighted descriptive analyses were conducted to summarize the prevalence of parent and child emotional distress within the sample. These estimates are presented alongside patterns of material hardship to provide context for understanding families' experiences, but no formal tests of association or causal relationships were conducted. Lastly, weighted descriptive analyses were conducted to examine parents' awareness of and interest in California's TK program, as well as reported experiences among families with eligible children. All TK-related analyses are descriptive and intended to characterize families' experiences and perceptions rather than evaluate program impacts.

In addition to these quantitative analyses, the report incorporates a mixed-methods perspective by drawing on open-ended survey responses from participating caregivers. Respondents were invited to describe their experiences and challenges related to meeting basic needs in their own words. Selected quotations from these open-ended responses are presented alongside quantitative findings to provide illustrative examples of families' lived experiences. These qualitative responses are included as anecdotal evidence to contextualize the statistical patterns observed in the survey data, offering additional insight into how families navigate material hardship.

All analyses are descriptive and intended to identify patterns in families' experiences rather than establish causal relationships. Findings are presented as weighted percentages to provide population-relevant estimates of material hardship and related well-being indicators among families with young children in California.

## Results

Given the descriptive nature of this study, results presented in this section should be interpreted as descriptive of the survey sample and weighted estimates, rather than population-level prevalence.

### *Prevalence of Material Hardship*

Material hardship was widespread among families with young children in California. Across the survey period (November 2022 – December 2025), at least one in three families reported difficulty meeting one or more basic needs in a given month. In December 2025, 84% of surveyed families reported experiencing some form of material hardship, which was among the highest observed levels recorded since RAPID began collecting these state-level data in 2022. Notably, it is also considerably higher than what we observe in our national RAPID data collected across all 50 states, suggesting that California parents might be more likely to experience material hardship compared to the U.S. national average.

Among the families who reported experiencing material hardships in December 2025, the most frequently reported challenges were difficulty paying for utilities (72%), followed by healthcare (52%), food (45%), housing (42%), and child care (21%). Although child care hardship was reported less frequently than other forms of hardship, a notable proportion of families still reported difficulty

affording care. Overall, these findings indicate that many families often report multiple forms of hardship simultaneously and face difficult trade-offs when attempting to meet essential needs. For example, some parents reported prioritizing housing and food payments while delaying utility payments.

As mentioned earlier, RAPID collects open-ended survey responses to provide anecdotal evidence to contextualize the statistical patterns observed in the survey data. Between January 2025 and December 2025, parents wrote in responses to RAPID’s open-ended survey question, “What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now?” about their challenges and concerns managing the cost of food, household goods, and child care for their family, and the stress and worry this causes their household. Parents’ responses reflected both the high cost of specific expenses, such as child care, and broader concerns about economic instability. Some examples include:

*“We have child care spots but it's \$40K annually per child. Hard to be able to afford a babysitter on top of that. Hard to find last-minute care if our child is ill and needs to stay home.” Parent in San Francisco County*

*“After the pandemic, I feel like the San Francisco area hasn't recovered from the economic recession. Everything gets more and more expensive but our income stays the same. Lately people are talking about how AI will replace a lot of jobs. I am not familiar with that but it seems like something to worry about in the future.” Parent in San Mateo County*

### ***Variation in Material Hardship Across Family Characteristics***

Material hardship among families with young children was widespread across all family characteristics examined in the RAPID California Survey. High rates of difficulty meeting basic needs were reported regardless of household income level, geographic location, family structure, or the presence of a child with a disability, suggesting that material hardship is broadly experienced among families with young children in California.

Although prior research often finds higher levels of material hardship among single-parent households (Gershoff et al., 2007), the present data show relatively similar rates of hardship across family structures. Specifically, 90% of non-dual-parent households reported difficulty meeting at least one basic need, compared with 84% of dual-parent households. The ratio of families experiencing child care hardship was also comparable in non-dual-parent households (17%) and dual-parent households (21%). Similarly high levels of overall hardship were observed when comparing families based on whether they had a child with a disability: Among families with a child with a disability, 89% reported experiencing material hardship, compared with 83% of families without a child with a disability. Meanwhile, 40% of households with a child with disability reported child care hardship, compared with 18% of families without a child with a disability.

Material hardship was also prevalent across household income levels. As expected, hardship was most common among lower- and middle-income families, defined as households whose annual income fell below 200% FPL, and between 200%-400% FPL, respectively. The December 2025 data indicate that 85% of lower-income families reported experiencing material hardship, and 93% of middle-income families also reported difficulty paying for at least one essential expense. When asked specifically about child care, 27% of lower-income families and 19% of middle-income families indicated difficulty affording care for their young children. However, substantial proportions of families at higher income levels (i.e., household annual income above 400% FPL) also reported difficulty meeting basic needs. The December 2025 data indicate that 42% of higher-income families also reported difficulty paying for at least one essential expense, and 11% of these high-income families could not afford child care specifically. Although the percentages vary across income groups, the presence of hardship across all income levels highlights the broad reach of economic pressures facing families with young children in California.

Experiences of material hardship were similarly widespread across geographic locations. Families living in rural areas reported particularly high rates of hardship (95%), though hardship was also common among families living in urban and suburban areas (83%). Child care hardship was reported at a comparable rate among families living in rural areas (17%) and those living in urban and suburban areas (21%). Overall, these findings suggest that challenges meeting basic needs are not confined to specific types of communities but are experienced across diverse regions of the state.

Taken together, these patterns suggest that material hardship among families with young children in California may have reached levels where hardship is common across many groups of families. The consistently high rates of hardship reported since the RAPID California Survey began in 2022 further indicate that these challenges are persistent rather than temporary. Even among families with higher incomes, a notable share reported difficulty meeting basic needs, underscoring the widespread impact of the state’s affordability challenges on families with young children.

## ***Parent & Child Emotional Distress***

### ***Prevalence of Parent Emotional Distress***

Parents of young children in California reported very high levels of emotional distress during the study period. Throughout the survey period, emotional distress among parents remained consistently high. After October 2023, the proportion of parents reporting emotional distress never fell below 52%, indicating that at least half of surveyed parents experienced distress throughout the remainder of the study period.

By December 2025, emotional distress was reported by 92% of parents of young children surveyed, highlighting the extent to which psychological strain affects families across the state. Among the specific emotional experiences reported, symptoms of anxiety were the most prevalent (86%), followed by stress (81%), symptoms of depression (78%), and loneliness (74%).

High rates of emotional distress were observed across all family demographic groups. Distress was reported by 94% of lower-income parents and 95% of middle-income parents, while 75% of higher-income parents also reported experiencing emotional distress. Emotional distress was similarly widespread across geographic locations, with 96% of parents living in rural communities and 92% of those living in urban areas reporting distress. Families with a child with a disability reported high rates of distress (97%), as did families without a child with a disability (92%). Finally, emotional distress was reported at similarly high levels across family structures, with 95% of non-dual-parent households and 92% of dual-parent households reporting distress.

In addition to the quantitative findings, parents’ responses to open-ended survey questions provide further insight into the sources of emotional distress affecting families with young children. Many parents described material hardship, rising costs of living, health concerns, and uncertainty

surrounding immigration and public policies as significant sources of stress and anxiety in their daily lives. The following excerpts from parents' responses illustrate how these pressures shape families' experiences and contribute to the high levels of emotional distress reported across the survey sample.

*"I'm the first generation born in the U.S. and I'm teaching my daughter Spanish. With ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] targeting brown people, I'm scared for my safety, the safety of my daughter, family, and friends." Parent in Santa Cruz County*

*"Our biggest challenge is just making it day-to-day without becoming too stressed or overwhelmed. Life with two young children feels like a constant balance of drop-offs and lunches and sicknesses and it feels like we're barely cutting it every day. We have no family in the area to help, and even when they're able to visit, our parents are not healthy enough to help. Throw in a recent death in the family, plus the state of our country, and it all feels hard. We want to create a simple, comfortable family life for our children, but right now it feels stressed and chaotic. We'd also love to build a community for us/them, but we don't have time and no one else does either." Parent in San Mateo County*

Taken together, these findings suggest that emotional distress among parents of young children in California is widespread and cuts across traditional demographic boundaries. The consistently high rates of distress across groups indicate that economic pressures and broader social stressors may be affecting families broadly rather than being concentrated among specific subgroups.

### ***Prevalence of Child Emotional Distress***

Parents also reported substantial levels of emotional distress among their young children. Across the RAPID California Voices Survey period, parents consistently reported emotional distress among their children. In December 2025, more than two in three parents (69%) reported that their child had exhibited at least one emotional distress behavior during the previous month. Specifically,

63% of parents reported fussiness/defiance behaviors, while 57% reported fear/anxiety behaviors among their children.

As with parent emotional distress, child emotional distress was reported across all demographic groups. Among families with different income levels, 77% of lower-income families, 65% of middle-income families, and 65% of higher-income families reported emotional distress among their children. Child distress was prevalent among families with a child with a disability (79%), and also common among families without a child with a disability (68%).

Geographic differences were also observed, with parents living in rural areas reporting especially high levels of child distress (89%), compared with 68% of parents living in urban areas. Similarly, 80% of non-dual-parent households reported emotional distress among their children, compared with 68% of dual-parent households. Although distress was somewhat more common in certain groups, the findings indicate that emotional distress among young children is widely experienced across families in California.

### **Parent Awareness and Interest in Transitional Kindergarten**

Within the context of the high prevalence of material hardship and emotional distress documented above, the RAPID survey also examined parents' awareness of and interest in California's Transitional Kindergarten (TK) program to better understand the policy responses to the financial and caregiving pressures facing households with young children. These findings provide insight into how families perceive publicly funded early learning programs as potential supports during periods of economic pressure.

#### ***Awareness***

Overall, approximately 65% of parents of children under age 6 reported that they had heard about the state's TK program prior to taking the survey. However, this awareness varied across household income levels. Lower-income families were somewhat less likely to report prior awareness of the program (64%) compared with middle-income families (74%) and higher-income families (81%), suggesting that information about the program may be reaching families unevenly.

#### ***Strong Interest in Enrollment***

Despite differences in awareness, interest in the program was high. Overall, 90% of surveyed parents reported that they would be likely to enroll their child in TK. Interest was particularly high

among lower-income families (94%) and higher-income families (91%), while 78% of middle-income families also reported that they would likely use the program. These findings suggest substantial demand for publicly funded early learning programs among families with young children in California.

### ***Benefits and Barriers to Access***

Among families who were eligible for TK and had enrolled their children, parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the program. Caregivers frequently described TK as supporting children’s early learning and social development while also easing financial pressures associated with child care costs.

At the same time, some parents reported barriers to accessing TK. Among eligible families whose children were not enrolled in TK, 20% of parents reported that the program did not fit their family’s needs, such as incompatible program hours or lack of transportation. An additional 10% of parents reported that their preferred school location did not have available space in the program. These findings suggest that program design and implementation factors may influence the extent to which families are able to benefit from TK.

Open-ended responses from parents provide additional context for these patterns. Many caregivers described TK as an important source of financial relief and a valuable early learning opportunity for their children. At the same time, parents also noted challenges related to program hours, after-school care, and availability of slots in local schools. The following excerpts illustrate how families experience both the benefits and the practical constraints of the program.

*“[The biggest help right now is] public school. TK will be available to my younger son next year and suddenly I’ll have room in my budget to pay off student loans.” Parent in Los Angeles County, CA*

*“Funded preschool [is my family’s biggest concern right now]. Although our child is TK eligible, the on-site after care was already full. There wasn’t enough space, and honestly, we couldn’t afford it anyway. If we were to enroll our child in TK, it would mean giving up the time to work or having to pay a nanny more than we would make ourselves.” Parent in San Diego County*

Together, these responses highlight both the perceived value of TK as a support for families and the practical constraints that may limit access for some households.

## Discussion

### **Persistent Material Hardship Among California Families**

This study provides evidence that material hardship remains widespread among families with young children in California. Using data from the RAPID California Survey collected between 2022 and 2025, we find that a substantial majority of families report difficulty meeting at least one basic need, including utilities, food, housing, healthcare, or child care. Among these hardships, although child care hardship was reported less frequently than the other forms of hardship, it represents a distinct domain of economic strain that is uniquely tied to caregiving arrangements and labor force participation. Notably, the prevalence of hardship remains high several years after the economic disruptions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that many families continue to face persistent material hardship.

One notable finding is the extent to which material hardship appears across a broad range of families. Although hardship is most common among lower-income households, substantial proportions of middle- and higher-income families also report difficulty paying for essential expenses. These patterns suggest that material hardship among families with young children in California may reflect broader structural pressures related to the state's high cost of living. Rising housing costs, child care expenses, and increases in the prices of everyday goods may be contributing factors to a situation in which many families, regardless of income level, experience difficulty maintaining stable access to basic resources.

### **Material Hardship and Links to Widespread Emotional Distress**

The findings also highlight the widespread nature of emotional distress among parents of young children. Across the study period, a large majority of parents reported experiencing symptoms such as anxiety, stress, depression, or loneliness. Emotional distress was similarly prevalent across demographic

groups, suggesting that the pressures affecting families may be broadly shared rather than concentrated among specific subpopulations. In addition, parents reported substantial levels of emotional distress among their young children, with more than two-thirds of caregivers indicating that their child exhibited behaviors reflecting emotional strain during the past month.

Although the current analyses are descriptive, these patterns align with a growing body of research linking economic hardship with family well-being. Prior studies have documented how material hardship can increase parental stress and psychological distress, which may in turn affect children's emotional and behavioral functioning through changes in parenting practices and family dynamics (Masarik & Conger, 2017; Prime et al., 2020). Analyses of national RAPID survey data have described a pattern consistent with this prior evidence suggesting links among material hardship, parental emotional distress, and child emotional distress (Liu, Curenton, et al., 2024; Liu & Raikes, 2025). The high levels of both hardship and emotional distress observed in the present study are consistent with this broader pattern. Notably, material hardship related to child care may represent one potential pathway through which broader economic pressures translate into increased parental stress and child emotional distress.

### **Transitional Kindergarten as a Structural Support**

Within the context of widespread hardship and emotional strain, the findings related to TK highlight how families perceive early learning programs as potential supports for managing both financial pressures and caregiving demands. Although awareness of the program varied across income groups, parents across demographic groups expressed strong interest in enrolling their children in TK. For many families, particularly those facing high child care costs, access to free early learning programs may provide both developmental benefits for children and financial relief for parents. These findings suggest that families interpret early learning programs not only as educational resources but also as strategies for managing material hardship.

At the same time, parents' responses suggest that implementation factors may influence the extent to which families can fully benefit from TK. Concerns about program schedules, availability of after-school care, and limited program capacity were commonly reported barriers among families who were eligible but not enrolled. These findings suggest that expanding access to wraparound care and

ensuring adequate program capacity may be important considerations as California continues to expand TK statewide.

### **Implications for Early Childhood Development**

These findings are particularly concerning given the importance of stable and supportive caregiving environments during early childhood. The early years represent a critical period for brain development, emotional regulation, and the formation of social relationships. During this stage, children’s developmental trajectories are highly sensitive to the conditions of their home environments, including the stability of family routines and the emotional well-being of caregivers.

Persistent material hardship may disrupt these conditions in several ways. When families experience ongoing economic pressure, caregivers may face increased psychological stress, uncertainty about meeting basic needs, and reduced time or emotional resources available for caregiving. These stressors may influence parent–child interactions, family routines, and the overall emotional climate within the household. Over time, such disruptions may be associated with increased emotional and behavioral challenges among young children.

At the same time, access to supportive early learning environments may help buffer some of these pressures. Programs such as California’s TK are designed to provide structured learning opportunities and social environments that support children’s cognitive and social-emotional development while also offering families a stable caregiving setting during the school day. In the present study, parents expressed high levels of interest in enrolling their children in TK and described the program as supporting children’s learning while easing financial pressures associated with child care costs. These findings suggest that early learning programs may play an important role in supporting both children’s developmental experiences and family stability during periods of material hardship.

### **Policy Implications for Supporting Families**

The results underscore the potential role of social policies in supporting family stability. Evidence from the broader RAPID research program suggests that periods during which families received expanded economic supports, such as pandemic-era relief programs, including stimulus

payments, expanded tax credits, and enhanced nutrition assistance, were associated with lower levels of reported material hardship and emotional distress. Although these patterns do not establish causal relationships, they suggest that policies designed to alleviate material hardship may play an important role in supporting both economic stability and family well-being.

In addition to direct financial supports, policies that expand access to affordable early childhood care and education may also help address the challenges identified in this study. The high levels of interest in California’s TK program observed in the present findings suggest that families view publicly funded early learning programs as valuable supports during periods of economic pressure. Parents frequently described TK as helping reduce child care expenses while providing their children with opportunities for early learning and social development.

At the same time, the findings also highlight implementation considerations that may influence the extent to which families benefit from these programs. Parents noted barriers such as limited program hours, lack of after-school care, and limited space in some TK programs. Addressing these challenges—for example, through expanded wraparound care or increased program capacity—may help ensure that early learning investments fully meet the needs of working families.

Taken together, the findings highlight the interconnected nature of economic conditions, family well-being, and access to early learning supports among families with young children in California. Persistent challenges meeting basic needs, combined with high levels of emotional distress among parents and children, point to the importance of coordinated policy approaches that address both families’ material needs and the broader supports that promote healthy development during early childhood. In particular, policies that reduce the cost burden of basic needs such as child care, including the publicly funded early learning programs like TK, may play a dual role in supporting families’ economic stability and reducing stress within the household.

## Limitations

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the RAPID California Voices Survey relies on self-reported data from parents and caregivers. Self-reported measures may be subject to reporting bias or differences in how respondents interpret survey questions. For example, caregivers’ reports of their own emotional well-being and their children’s

behaviors reflect parents' perceptions rather than clinical assessments. Thus, prevalence estimates of emotional distress should not be interpreted as reflecting clinical levels of mental health conditions. In addition, the measure of material hardship reflects self-reported difficulty paying for expenses and may capture perceived financial strain rather than realized deprivation.

Second, although survey weights are applied to improve representativeness, the RAPID California Voices Survey is not a probability-based sample of all families with young children in California. Participants are recruited through online recruitment strategies and outreach through community organizations, which may introduce selection bias. Because participation is not random and may vary over time, observed differences across months may reflect changes in the sample as well as changes in family experiences. Thus, the findings may not fully generalize to the broader population of families with young children in the state.

Third, the analyses presented in this report are primarily descriptive and do not establish causal relationships between material hardship and emotional distress. While the findings are consistent with prior research linking economic hardship with parental and child well-being, the present analyses cannot determine whether material hardship directly causes changes in emotional distress.

Fourth, although the survey includes repeated cross-sectional data collected over time, the analyses presented here do not track individual families longitudinally. As a result, the findings cannot capture within-family changes in hardship or emotional well-being over time.

Finally, the measures used to assess material hardship and emotional distress are intentionally brief to facilitate rapid data collection. While these measures capture important aspects of family experiences, they may not fully reflect the complexity or severity of economic hardship and mental health challenges faced by families.

Despite these limitations, the RAPID California Voices Survey provides timely and large-scale data on the experiences of families with young children in California. The large sample size, repeated data collection, and inclusion of both quantitative and qualitative responses offer valuable insights into the economic and emotional challenges faced by families during a period of ongoing economic uncertainty.

## Conclusion

This study provides timely evidence that material hardship remains widespread among families with young children in California. Across the study period, large proportions of families reported difficulty meeting basic needs such as food, housing, healthcare, utilities, and child care. These challenges were observed not only among lower-income households but also among middle- and higher-income families, suggesting that the high cost of living in California may place economic pressure on a broad range of households. At the same time, substantial levels of emotional distress were reported among both parents and young children, highlighting the interconnected nature of economic conditions and family well-being. In particular, difficulty affording and accessing child care may represent a salient dimension of material hardship for families with young children, shaping both household material hardship and daily caregiving arrangements. Although the present analyses are descriptive, the co-occurrence of widespread hardship and emotional distress observed in this study is consistent with prior research suggesting links between material hardship and family well-being.

The findings also suggest that publicly funded early learning programs may represent an important support for families navigating these pressures. Parents across demographic groups expressed strong interest in California's TK program and described the program as providing both developmental opportunities for children and financial relief for families facing high child care costs. Within this context, families' responses suggest that early learning programs such as TK are perceived not only as educational opportunities, but also as practical supports that may help families manage material hardship and caregiving demands, particularly those related to child care affordability. However, parents also identified barriers related to program schedules, availability of after-school care, and limited program capacity, suggesting that continued attention to implementation may be important as the state expands TK access.

Taken together, these findings underscore the importance of policies and programs that help families maintain stable access to essential resources while supporting children's development during early childhood. Policies that reduce the cost burden of basic needs, particularly child care, may play an important role in supporting both economic stability and family well-being. In this regard, publicly funded early programs such as TK may represent one policy-relevant approach to alleviating financial and caregiving pressures faced by families with young children. As California continues to address

affordability challenges and expand early learning opportunities, ongoing monitoring of families' economic conditions and experiences with programs such as TK will be important for informing policies aimed at strengthening family stability and promoting healthy child development.

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