



# Under Pressure: Basic Necessities and Emotional Distress Put Strain on Families Who Use Home-Based Child Care and Have a Child with Special Needs

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## Insights From the Stanford RAPID Survey Reveal Widespread Socioeconomic and Psychosocial Differences Across Income Levels

This data insight highlights that families who use home-based child care (HBCC) and who have children with special needs (e.g., mental health or physical needs) report greater challenges meeting basic necessities (e.g., utilities, food, and housing) compared with families of children without special needs. These families also report higher levels of emotional distress, such as anxiety or depression for themselves and their children, compared with families of children without special needs. Differences are found across income levels, including for higher-income families, where having a child with special needs presents additional layers of challenges compared with families of children without special needs.

The data in this report come from the RAPID Survey Project at the Stanford Center on Early Childhood. RAPID is an early childhood family wellbeing survey designed to gather essential information in a continuous manner regarding the needs, health-promoting behaviors, and well-being of children and their families. This data highlight is based on surveys distributed between April 2020 (which coincided with the COVID-19 outbreak) and July 2025 to 24,468 families of children ages birth to 5.

Of the families who completed this survey, over one-third (8,859) report that they use HBCC for their children. Among these families who use HBCC, 14% report having at least one child with special needs. (RAPID defines a special need as something that makes it harder for children to do everyday tasks at home or school and as something that might affect a child's body or mind.)<sup>1</sup> By comparison, the 2019 data from the Household Survey of the nationally representative National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) indicate that 22% of families who use unpaid HBCC and 2% of families who use paid HBCC report having a child with a special need.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>The RAPID survey asks the following question regarding children with special needs: Does your child have any of the following disabilities? (Select all that apply). According to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a "person with disability" is someone who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limited a major life activity: a) has a record of such an impairment; b) is regarded as having such an impairment (blind or serious difficulty seeing even when wearing glasses; serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs; disabilities due to physical, mental or emotional problems; other disabilities; no disabilities); c) does not wish to disclose.

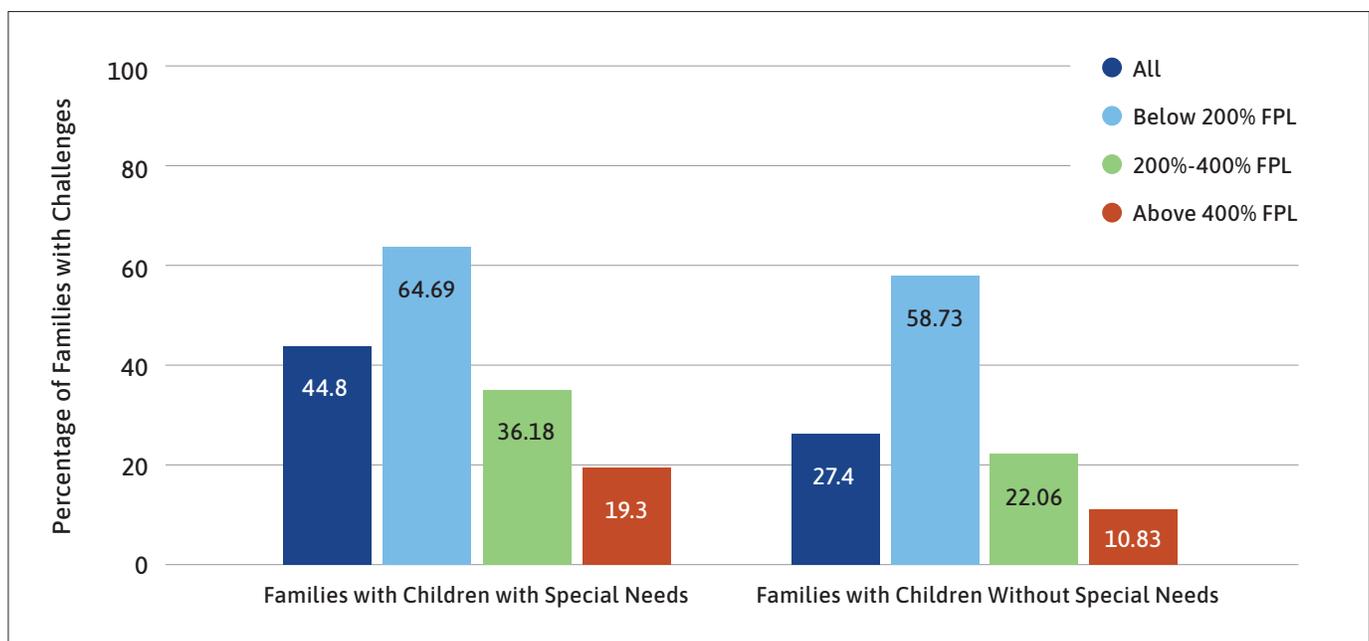
<sup>2</sup>McDoniel, M., Richards, C., & Madill, R. (2025). *Child care and early education for children with conditions that affect their care*. (OPRE Report #2025-095). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/2025-095-CCEE-for-Children-with-Conditions-snapshot.pdf>



## MEETING BASIC NECESSITIES FOR FAMILIES WHO USE HBCC AND HAVE A CHILD WITH A SPECIAL NEED

Access to basic necessities such as health care, utilities, food, and housing is essential for children’s healthy development.<sup>3</sup> Among families who use HBCC, significantly higher proportions of families who have children with special needs report challenges meeting their basic necessities (45%) compared with families of children without special needs (27%) (see **All** in Figure 1). Significant differences in experiences between the families who have children with special needs and those who do not are also observed across income levels within the group of families who use HBCC. For example, among families with low incomes (families making below 200% of the federal poverty level [FPL])<sup>4</sup> who have a child with special needs, almost two-thirds (65%) report experiencing challenges meeting their basic necessities compared with 59% of families with low incomes whose children do not have a special need (see Figure 1). Among families with higher incomes (families making above 400% FPL), 19% of families with children who have a special need report challenges meeting basic necessities compared with 11% of families of children without special needs.

**Figure 1. Percent of Families Using HBCC Who Reported Challenges Meeting Basic Necessities, by Child Special-Needs Status and Family-Income Level**



<sup>3</sup> Casey Family Programs. (2025, January). *Safe, strong, supportive: How do economic supports benefit families and communities?* [https://www.casey.org/media/25.07-QFF-TS\\_Economic-Supports.pdf](https://www.casey.org/media/25.07-QFF-TS_Economic-Supports.pdf)

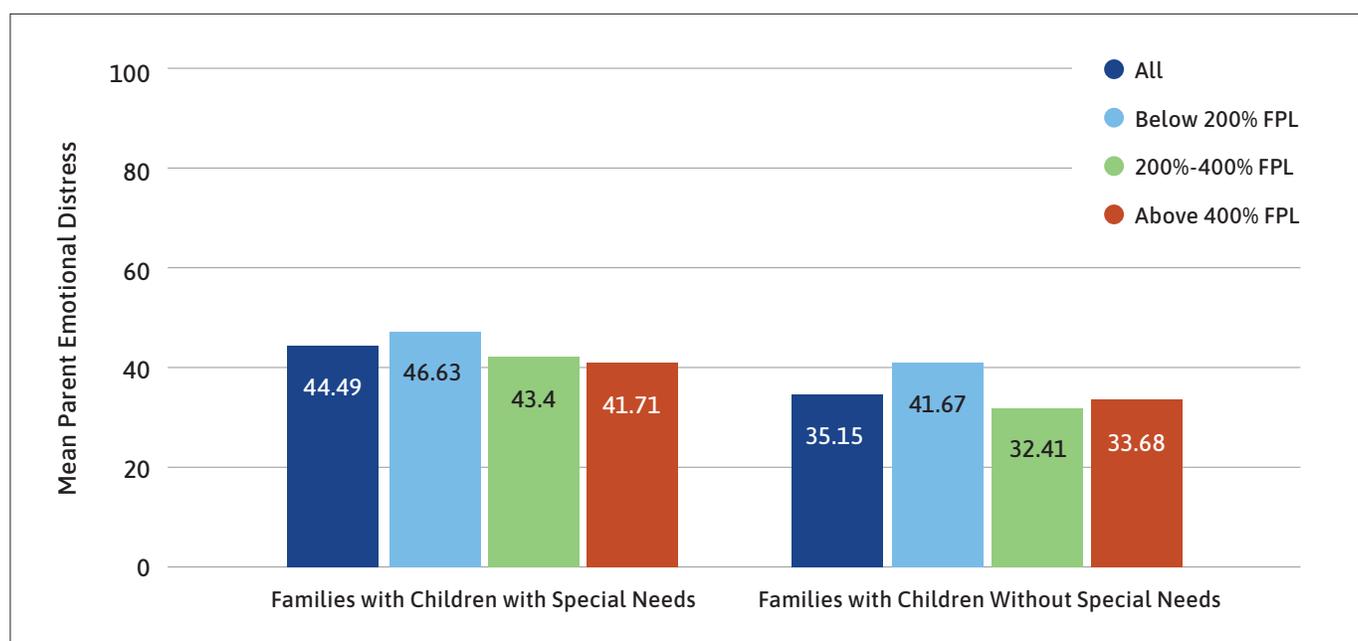
<sup>4</sup> The federal poverty level (FPL) is a measure of income issued annually by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to determine eligibility for various federal, state, and local assistance programs, and it varies based on household size and state of residence. The FPL serves as a baseline to assess whether a household’s income is sufficient to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and health care. As of 2025, the FPL for a family of four is approximately \$31,200 per year. Families below 200% of the FPL earn less than \$62,400 per year, families between 200% and 400% of the FPL earn between \$62,400 to \$124,800 per year, and families above 400% FPL earn more than \$124,800 per year.



## EMOTIONAL DISTRESS OF FAMILIES WHO USE HBCC AND HAVE A CHILD WITH A SPECIAL NEED

Family members' emotional distress (e.g., depression, stress, loneliness, and anxiety) may be harmful for children's well-being.<sup>5</sup> Among families who use HBCC, those who have a child with special needs report significantly greater emotional distress levels (44.5%) compared with families with a child without special needs (35.2%) (see **All** in Figure 2). Significant differences between families who have children with special needs and those who do not are also found across income levels within families who use HBCC. Families from middle- and upper-income households with children with special needs reported higher levels of emotional distress (43.4% and 41.7%, respectively) compared with their counterparts who have children without special needs (32.4% and 33.7%, respectively).<sup>6</sup> This represents an 11-point difference for middle-income families and an 8-point difference for upper-income families. Differences among families with low incomes were not significant but trend in the same direction (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Mean Child Emotional Distress Levels for Families Who Use HBCC, by Child Special-Needs Status and Family-Income Level**



Note: The scale for emotional distress ranges from 0 to 100 and is calculated as the mean score of four symptoms — depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness — each converted to the range of 0–100 before the overall mean distress was calculated.

<sup>5</sup> Risi, A., Pickard, J. A., & Bird, A. L. (2021). The implications of parent mental health and wellbeing for parent-child attachment: A systematic review. *PLOS ONE*, 16(12), Article e0260891. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0260891>

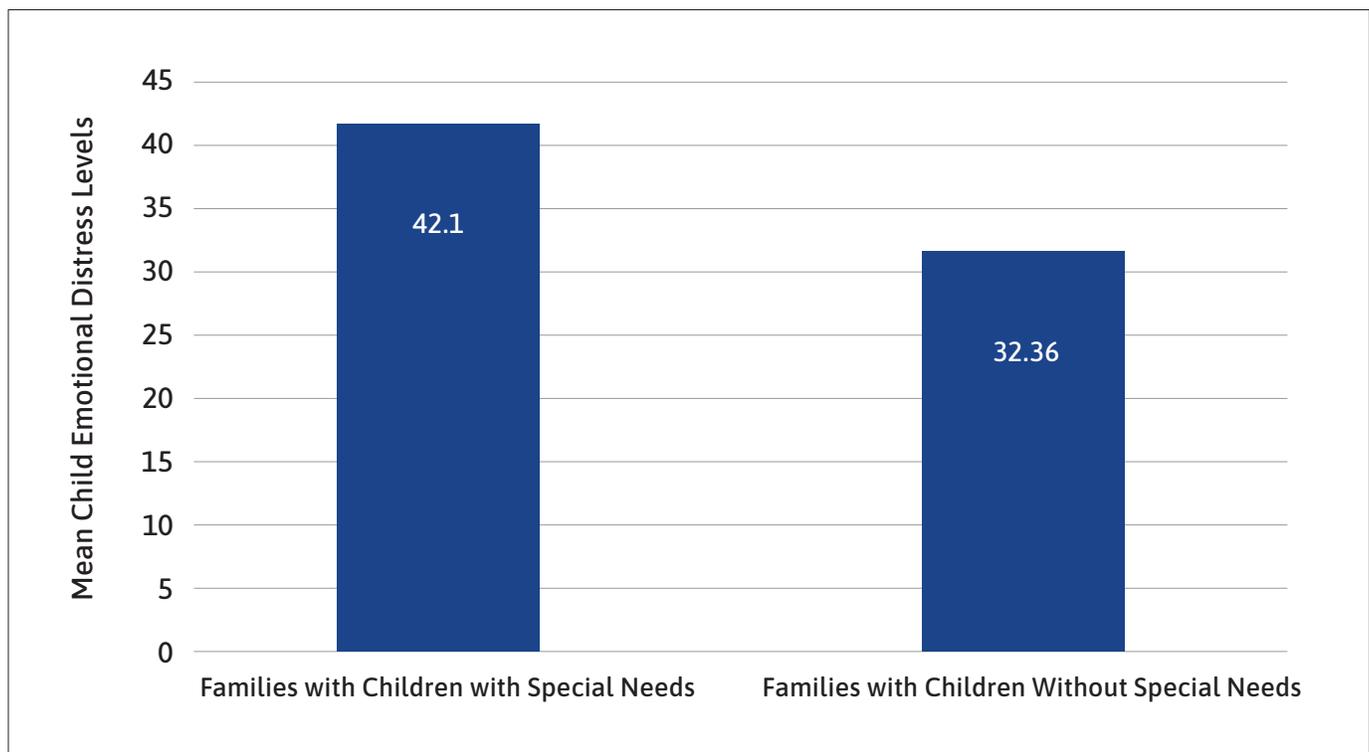
<sup>6</sup> The scale for parents' emotional distress ranges from 0 to 100 and is calculated as the mean score of four symptoms — depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness — each converted to the range of 0–100 before the overall mean distress was calculated. When looking at the mean distress scores, the reported pre-pandemic level is 26.9 (out of 0–100; SD = 17.51), and the monthly mean scores during the pandemic range from 29.1 to 42.3, with a mean level of 36.71 (SD = 22.89).



### EMOTIONAL DISTRESS OF CHILDREN IN HBCC AS REPORTED BY FAMILIES WHO HAVE A CHILD WITH A SPECIAL NEED

Among families who use HBCC, those who have a child with special needs report that their child has significantly higher levels of emotional distress, especially internalizing problems such as fussy behavior, compared with families whose children do not have special needs (42.10 vs. 32.36)<sup>7</sup> (see Figure 3). No significant differences were found by income levels.

**Figure 3. Mean Child Emotional Distress Levels Reported by Families Who Use HBCC by Child Special-Needs Status**



Note. The scale for emotional distress ranges from 0 to 100 and is calculated as the mean score of four symptoms — depression, anxiety, stress, and loneliness — each converted to the range of 0–100 before the overall mean distress was calculated.

<sup>7</sup>The scale for child emotional distress is based on a scale of 0–100 based on the mean of fussiness/defiance and fear/anxiety variables. The before-pandemic mean is 21.31 (SD = 20.24), and the post-pandemic mean is 33.87 (SD = 24.37).



## — SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Over one-third of families surveyed in the RAPID Survey use HBCC. Higher proportions of families who use HBCC and have a child with a special need report experiencing challenges meeting basic necessities, such as food, housing, or other essentials and report mental health challenges for themselves and their children, compared with families of children without special needs.

While the greatest difficulties with meeting basic necessities are seen among lower-income families of children with special needs, these challenges are not limited to those with fewer economic resources. Higher proportions of families with higher incomes who have a child with special needs also report challenges in meeting basic necessities and increased emotional distress compared with higher-income families with children without special needs. This pattern underscores the broad impact that having a child with special needs can have on family well-being, regardless of income level, for those who use HBCC.

## — LIMITATIONS

While RAPID data offer timely and valuable insights into the experiences of families with young children, they are not nationally representative. The survey relies on voluntary participation and is conducted online, which may exclude families without reliable internet or those less likely to engage with digital platforms. Additionally, the sampling strategy is designed to enhance responsiveness from a range of families with young children rather than to mirror the national population. As a result, the descriptive findings reported in this data highlight should be interpreted as indicative of trends within the sample and are not representative of all U.S. families.



## — IMPLICATIONS

The experiences of families who use HBCC for their children with special needs — particularly those with lower incomes — underscore the critical role these settings can play in supporting children with varying developmental, physical, and emotional needs. Furthermore, findings from these data may inform efforts to equip HBCC providers with resources for supporting families who face economic hardship and stress.

Recent federal policy efforts have emphasized the importance of family choice in child care, including attention to empowering families to select learning environments that best meet their children's needs and encouraging flexibility at the state and local levels.<sup>8,9,10</sup> While existing research suggests that some families of children with mental, emotional, and behavioral challenges may prefer HBCC, particularly informal relative care settings,<sup>11</sup> the RAPID data set was not designed to explore those preferences directly. Additional research can increase understanding about families' preferences for child care and the factors that may influence their decision making, such as program characteristics, economic needs, their own emotional distress, as well as the developmental needs of their children.

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<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2025). *President Trump's first 100 days: Education in America*. <https://www.ed.gov/about/initiatives/president-trumps-first-100-days-education-america>

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2025, March 20). *Statement on President Trump's executive order to return power over education to states and local communities*. <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/statement-president-trumps-executive-order-return-power-over-education-states-and-local-communities>

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Education. (2025, August 21). *U.S. Department of Education issues equitable service school choice guidance*. <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-issues-equitable-service-school-choice-guidance>

<sup>11</sup> Booth-LaForce, C., & Kelly, J. F. (2004). Childcare patterns and issues for families of preschool children with disabilities. *Infants & Young Children*, 17(1), 5–16. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00001163-200401000-00004>