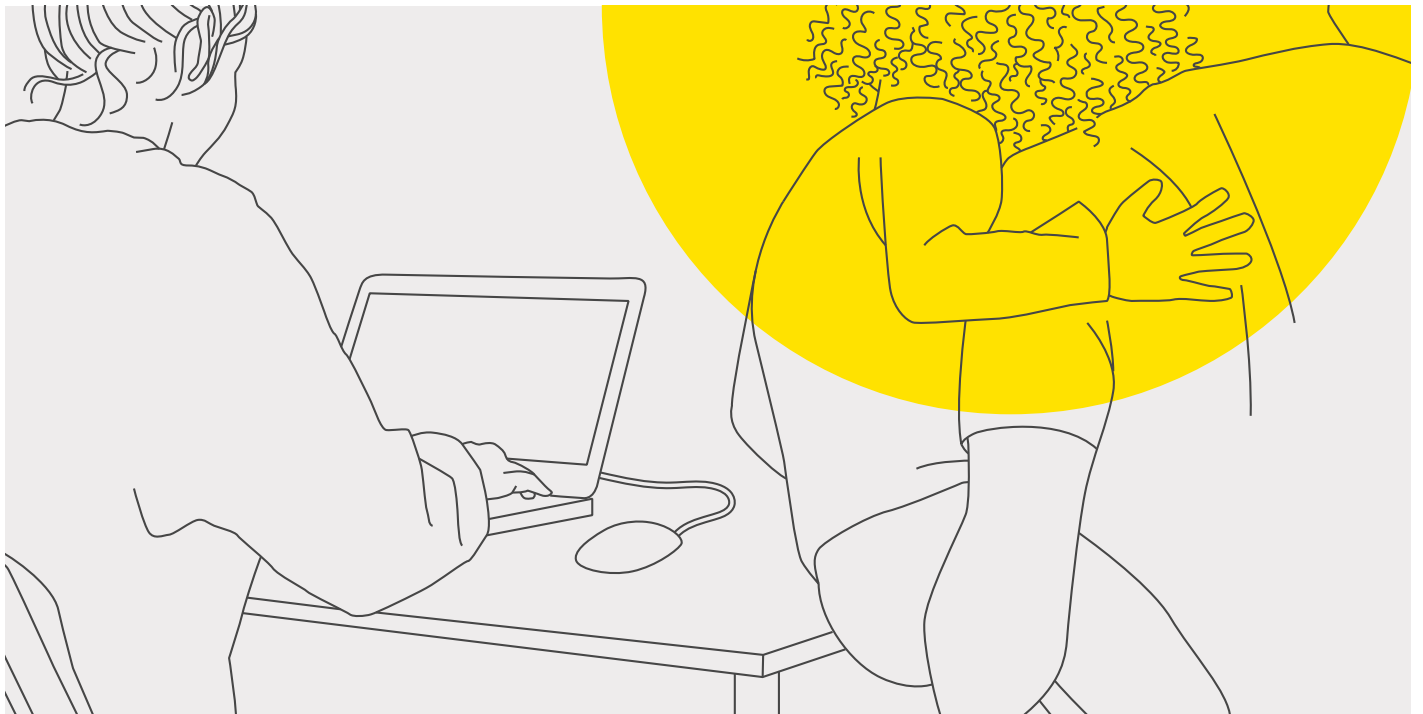


# IN THEIR OWN WORDS: WHAT PARENTS SAY IS HELPING THEM MOST

Clear patterns emerged in what parents said has been helping them and their families. The factors that families found helpful varied considerably across income levels.

In every RAPID survey going all the way back to May 19, 2020, we have invited parents to provide written answers to open-ended questions about their families' experiences. We have received over 200,000 answers to these questions, where parents have used their own words to tell us about their challenges, triumphs, and what day to day life is like with young children.



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We have used an innovative approach called Structural Topic Modeling to identify the most commonly occurring themes in parents' responses. First, we looked at what parents have found to be their biggest challenges during the pandemic and found that balancing work and child care, struggles with well-being and emotional distress, and difficulty finding stable employment have been particularly hard for parents. When we looked at parents' descriptions over time, we found that their struggles are continuing to get worse.

As parents described their difficulties with work, child care, emotional well-being, and other challenges, we also invited them to answer the following open-ended question: **What is helping you and your family the most right now?**

Clear patterns emerged in what parents said has been helping them

and their families. We provide many examples of their responses below. It was further evident from parents' responses that the factors that they have found helpful have not addressed all of the challenges that their families are facing. Parents described many ongoing challenges with material hardship. In fact, in September 2022, 41% of households reported difficulty paying for at least one basic need.

The factors that families found helpful varied considerably across income levels. Compared to higher-income parents, lower-income parents placed a much greater emphasis on having assistance with meeting basic needs. They said that support from informal networks of family and friends and support from government assistance programs have both been helpful in enabling them to meet their families' needs for food, housing, child care, and other essentials.

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## GETTING SUPPORT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND BEING ABLE TO WORK FROM HOME ARE HELPING FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

**Across all parents' responses, the topic that parents described as most helpful to them and their families was support from family and friends**

As we see in the quotes from parents below, family and friends have provided

a wide range of support, including financial help, emotional support, food and housing, social interaction, and child care so that parents can work. Family and friends are not just there for each other emotionally—they are helping each other through the challenges of meeting basic needs and getting through each stressful day.

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**Family and friends are not just there for each other emotionally—they are helping each other through the challenges of meeting basic needs and getting through each stressful day.**

42%

of parents said support from family and friends was helping them and their families.

“Leaning on family, especially my parents, who give us meals and help watch the children [has helped us the most].” **Parent in Illinois**

“We have finally found a supportive, like-minded network of parents with young children. We felt very isolated during the pandemic because we didn’t have many friends and no family in the area. My son also just received his first vaccination shot, which is huge.” **Parent in Virginia**

“My family has graciously given us a place to live at a very affordable price. We also have the support of both sets of parents nearby in helping care for our daughter.” **Parent in Florida**

“Interacting with a small number of family friends on a weekly basis. The social support for the parents and social interaction for the children has been very good.” **Parent in Massachusetts**

## A second factor that parents said was particularly helpful was having the ability to work from home

Parents’ responses suggested that their work situations were still far from ideal. Many parents described working from home and

simultaneously caring for their young children. But having the flexibility to work from home seemed to be allowing parents to keep their jobs even when they could not access child care.

38%

of parents said that being able to work from home was helping them and their families.

“My husband has a great job that pays him well and allows him to stay home with his family.” **Parent in North Carolina**

“I am able to work from home and watch my 4 year old while I work. My wife has her own business and has a flexible working schedule. The pause on student loan repayment [have all been the most helpful for our family].” **Parent in Texas**

“Work from home flexibility [has been the most helpful]! I honestly have no idea how anyone was a parent before Covid.” **Parent in Virginia**

“Both my wife and I work from home full-time. Just before the pandemic, I quit my job and became a full-time self-employed consultant, with 0% travel and no stress about working in the evening or weekend. This has really given us plenty of time with our kids to be with them, work with them on school, and just not be stressed about anything.” **Parent in Maryland**

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**Having the flexibility to work from home seemed to be allowing parents to keep their jobs, even when they could not access child care.**

## HAVING SUPPORT AND BEING ABLE TO WORK FROM HOME DID NOT ELIMINATE CHALLENGES BUT REDUCED EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

Additional survey data where parents rated their and their children's emotional distress allowed us to explore the positive impact of having support from family and friends and being able to work from home.

Consistent with their open-ended responses, parents who said that having support from family and friends or being able to work from home were helpful had lower ratings of emotional distress. Children in these families also had lower emotional distress because of their parents' lower levels of emotional distress. In addition, parents who described either support from family and friends or being able to work from home as helpful were less likely to experience emotional distress when they faced material hardship.

### Lower-income families found assistance with basic needs from both the government and family and friends to be particularly helpful

Like parents in other groups, parents from lower-income families said that having support from family and friends was helpful. But lower-income parents placed a stronger emphasis on food assistance, the expanded Child Tax Credit (CTC), and stimulus payments than did families from other demographic groups.

Families across all demographics found these government supports helpful, but more lower-income parents said these assistance programs were helping them and their families than parents from any other group.

### Top three supportive factors emphasized by lower-income families:

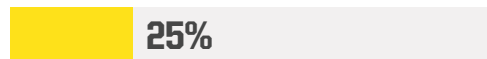
1 Support from family and friends



2 Food assistance



3 CTC and stimulus checks



Many parents specifically described how government assistance programs have helped them and their families.

“The child tax credit helped us quite a bit, but since that has ended we’re watching our budgets much more closely. We’ve had to dip into what little bit of savings we had to help make some ends meet and pay for unexpected expenses.” **Parent in Nevada**

“Well I would say the child tax credit payments [are the most helpful] but those just stopped. They were essential for helping us pay for

Parents who said that having support from family and friends or being able to work from home were helpful had lower ratings of emotional distress. Children in these families also had lower levels of emotional distress.

diapers, food for the kids, and/or daycare expenses. It was a huge help.”

**Parent in Oregon**

“The stimulus checks and being able to get the full child credit as a tax refund, and SNAP/free meals at school/daycare [have been the most helpful].”

**Parent in Georgia**

“The things that help me and my family the most right now are food stamps and housing benefits.”

**Parent in California**

“The most helpful thing for me and my family right now is free food through pantries and food banks and free or low cost lunches through the school breakfast lunch Assistance program.”

**Parent in California**

From these parent voices, we can see that government assistance programs have helped parents to meet their families’ basic needs. When parents talked about the importance of having support from family and friends (see examples earlier in factsheet), it was clear that those social networks were also allowing parents to meet their families’ basic needs. Family and friends provided food, housing, and child care for families—daily essentials similar to those provided by government programs like food assistance, the CTC, and stimulus payments. All types of support for basic needs—from family and friends and from government programs—have been crucial for lower-income families.

Another notable difference between lower-income families and those from other demographic groups was that lower-income parents did not describe being able to work from home as a top supportive factor. This is likely because working from home is not possible for many working parents—particularly those with lower paying jobs. While working from home may help offset the burden of daily challenges for some parents, for others it is simply not an option.

## Other demographic groups

Responses from higher-income parents were similar to what we found overall—having support from family and friends and being able to work from home were described as most helpful for them and their families.

White, Latinx, and Black families were also largely consistent in what they said was helping them and their families. Parents from all three of these groups said that having support from family and friends and being able to work from home were helping them and their families the most. The third most helpful factor varied across groups—White families cited the CTC and stimulus payments, Latinx families named food assistance, and Black families talked about prayer and reading the Bible as being helpful.

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**Lower-income parents did not describe being able to work from home as a top supportive factor. This is likely because working from home is not possible for many working parents—particularly those with lower-paying jobs.**

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## SUMMARY

- Parents with young children have important things to say about what has been helping them and their families during the challenges of the past two and a half years.
- Overall, parents said that having support from family and friends and being able to work from home were the most helpful to them and their families.
- Parents who said they were helped by having support from family and friends or being able to work from home had lower levels of emotional distress, and which in turn reduced emotional distress among their children. These parents were also less likely to experience emotional distress in the face of material hardship.
- Parents' descriptions of what has been helpful varied across income levels. Lower-income parents said that having support from family and friends and government assistance programs were most helpful to them and their families largely because these supports allowed them to meet basic needs.
- Parents have made it clear that the last two and half years have been incredibly challenging. But they have also shown us the key factors that have helped them keep their families afloat and find resilience in the face of these challenges.

# ABOUT THE RAPID PROJECT

Data presented in this fact sheet are based on RAPID household surveys. Analyses are based on 37,361 valid open-ended survey responses collected from 9,371 caregivers between May 2020 and April 2022. These caregivers represent a range of voices: 8.88% are Black/African American, 16.16 % are Latinx, and 34.15% live at or below 200% of the federal poverty level. Proportions/percentages are calculated based on the item-level response rates, not on the total sample. The data for these analyses are not weighted.

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 1,000 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](#).

RAPID is under the direction of Philip Fisher, PhD, Director of the Center on Early Childhood at Stanford University

**1,000**

surveyed monthly

**109**

surveys

**17,000+**

households

**50**

US states

