The RAPID Survey:

An Innovative Tool for Elevating Parent and Provider Voices in Early Childhood

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Abstract

This article describes RAPID survey as a methodology to elicit and amplify the voices of adults in young children's lives – parents and child care providers. Born out of the COVID-19 pandemic, RAPID subsequently evolved into a platform that gathers actionable data to advance science and inform data-driven, evidence-based early childhood policy, practice, and systems. We describe the overarching architecture, key principles, and conceptual model of RAPID and provide a summary of published findings from RAPID national surveys from 2020–2024. We conclude the paper by describing the myriad ways where RAPID is used after the pandemic, being implemented in state and local contexts around the United States and elsewhere as a tool for early childhood systems redesign. RAPID's overarching goals are to foster a paradigm change in early childhood developmental and educational research, to contribute to mitigating structural and systemic disparities, and to promote healthy, equitable environments for young children to reach full developmental potential.

The RAPID Survey: An Innovative Tool for Elevating Parent and Provider Voices in Early Childhood

This paper describes a methodology for eliciting and amplifying voices of adults in the lives of young children: the RAPID survey. RAPID is an efficient platform to inform early childhood policy, practice, systems change, and scientific advancement. The RAPID national household survey was launched at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020; a second RAPID survey focused on early care and education providers was launched in March 2021. RAPID has subsequently evolved into a tool that is also being deployed in state and local contexts. This paper covers three topics: (1) the overarching architecture and methodology, key design principles, and conceptual model underlying RAPID; (2) a review of the main published findings from national RAPID household and provider surveys from 2020–2024; and (3) ways in which RAPID is currently being used in systems reform efforts in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Overarching Structure, Key Design Principles, and Conceptual Model

RAPID Survey Structure

RAPID is structured as a 20-minute survey administered frequently via a web-based survey platform which can be completed on any device with cellular service or Wi-Fi connectivity. Items are available in English and Spanish. We employ state-of-the-art methods for identifying and excluding invalid or fraudulent responses. Participants are compensated for each survey they complete with a $5 gift card that is delivered electronically. For additional details, see Zalewski et al. (2022).

Key Design Principles

Design Principle 1. Elevate the Voices of Adults in the Lives of Young Children

RAPID design embraces *design thinking* methods (Micheli et al., 2019),which were originally developed in the fields of engineering and business in the 1950s (Auernhammer & Roth, 2021) and emphasize design of products and services to meet specific needs of the end user. Similarly, in early childhood research, policy, and programs, there has long been recognition of the need to incorporate the voices of potential beneficiaries (Wesley et al., 1997). A variety of approaches – many derived from community-based participatory research (CBPR) (Minkler, 2005) – are employed to these ends (Powell, 1990), including focus groups (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2009), structured interviews (Hilado et al., 2013), and advisory committees.

Although each of these approaches has unique strengths, they also have limitations. Gathering information using interviews and focus groups can be time-consuming and costly. Selected participants may not be an accurate representation of the population of interest, especially in contexts where information is being sought from the most marginalized individuals. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, power dynamics have the potential to play out between researchers and participants and limit candor and openness.

Brief surveys are an alternative approach to obtaining user-centered input that have several advantages. First, they enable information gathering from large numbers of individuals. Second, they allow for anonymous participation and are therefore less likely to elicit the sort of power dynamics described above. Third, they facilitate rapid data acquisition, in multiple languages, and at low cost. These advantages informed the initial design of both our RAPID national household and provider surveys.

Design Principle 2. Use High-Frequency Mixed-Methods Approaches to Provide Real-Time, Actionable Insights

RAPID distributes surveys to participants at frequent intervals. The two RAPID national surveys (household and provider) followed a weekly cycle at the beginning of the pandemic when circumstances were highly volatile and shifted to monthly as situations stabilized. Expedited processes are employed to allow survey design, data collection, data analysis, and result dissemination to be completed over a short period of time.

To assess participants' experiences across multiple domains, RAPID survey questions are organized into modules. Core modules comprise five key domains: material hardship (i.e., difficulty paying for basic needs), adult (i.e., parents or child care providers) well-being, child well-being, healthcare, and child care. These questions are included in every RAPID survey, allowing us to continuously track changes and make relevant policy and program recommendations (e.g., Zalewski et al., 2022). Additional varying content is included in add-in modules to enable flexibility and adaptability. Example topics of add-in modules include monitoring the impact of policies like the Child Tax Credit, examining COVID-19 vaccine attitudes and adherence, and documenting perceptions of the effects of climate change on child well-being.

In addition to quantitative items, RAPID also includes open-ended questions. These data can often clarify ambiguities, provide accurate explanations, and identify opinions that researchers have not considered before (Pietsch & Lessmann, 2018). The advantage of this mixed-methods approach is particularly evident for topics that require high sensitivity to detect real-time changes (Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2021, pp. 172–191). We use structural topic

modeling to analyze the open-ended responses (Weston, Shrylock, Light, & Fisher, 2023).

Design Principle 3. Employ Empirical Pragmatism in Research Procedures

RAPID embraces the concept of "empirical pragmatism" – optimizing the balance between practicality and scientifically rigorous, empirically validated approaches in order to achieve the practical goal of documenting and addressing real life problems (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). As described below, this principal manifests in all RAPID research procedures, from survey content development and data collection to analysis and result dissemination.

Development of Survey Content. RAPID survey content is intentionally as streamlined as possible. Shortened or trimmed assessment tools are used to efficiently capture participants' experiences while avoiding fatigue or attrition. For survey domains with no validated or appropriate measures, questions are developed by the research team with external consultation. This provides maximum flexibility to capture critical experiences in young children's lives and respond to major sociocultural events and policy changes while also maintaining adequate rigor, even when validated measurement tools are not available.

Sampling Strategy and Data Collection. To address the high cost, participant fatigue, and attrition in traditional cohort-based longitudinal research (Watson & Wooden, 2009, pp. 157–182), RAPID employs a multi-baseline longitudinal sampling design. RAPID sampling uses two types of surveys – an initial recruitment assessment (i.e., baseline) and ongoing follow-up assessments. Baseline surveys, which create an ongoing participant pool, serve the purpose of screening, consent, enrollment, and initial assessment. For each ongoing follow-up survey, a subset of participants (e.g., 2,000 in the national household survey) is randomly selected from the participant pool and invited to answer the survey questions, with an anticipated response rate of 40–50 percent. In follow-up surveys, stratified sampling is applied based on participants'

sociodemographic information (e.g., race/ethnicity, income) to increase demographic diversity and representativeness.

Data Analysis. RAPID incorporates an accelerated data analysis process, ensuring that data are cleaned and analyzed within one to four weeks after each assessment. Quantitative analysis includes descriptive and inferential statistics to describe participants' experiences, compare differences across socio-demographic groups, and examine associations across study constructs. Socio-demographic comparisons are chosen in line with the prevailing structural inequalities that predispose certain groups at disproportionally high risk for negative pandemic impact (Gauthier et al., 2021; Morales et al., 2021). In national household surveys, disparities by race/ethnicity, income levels, family structure, children's disability status, geographic regions, and rural/urbanicity are examined. In the national provider survey, additional comparisons are conducted by early care and education (ECE) workplace characteristics such as the type of care.

Descriptive results inform the need for further inferential analyses such as correlation, regression, and structural equation modeling (SEM)-based analyses. For example, RAPID descriptive results of a matching trend between family material hardship and parental emotional distress prompted us to test a "chain of hardship" hypothesis using an SEM mediation model. We found that family material hardship indirectly increased child distress through its direct impact on elevated parental emotional distress (Liu et al., 2024).

Analyses of open-ended survey responses are used to complement quantitative findings. These responses (or "quotes") are sometimes directly cited as supplemental information in dissemination products such as fact sheets or webinars. As noted previously, we also employ structural topic modeling (STM) (Roberts et al., 2013) to extract converging main themes from open-ended responses and merge the prevalence of these topics with other quantitative data for

statistical modeling. For instance, our STM analyses on over 50,000 responses to the question "What are the biggest challenges and concerns for you and your family right now" discovered 23 topics, with the three most prevalent topics being struggles with balancing work and child care, emotional distress, and finding stable employment (RAPID Study, 2022). By modeling socio-demographic covariates, STM analyses further revealed the structural inequalities and highlighted the disproportional material hardships and employment/income insecurities among families of lower-income, Black, or Latino(a) backgrounds (RAPID Study, 2022). Utilizing these mixed-methods approaches allows us to leverage participants' powerful voices to explore questions that otherwise would be difficult to assess with quantitative only data.

Results Dissemination. In addition to publishing results via traditional peer-reviewed academic journals, RAPID findings are disseminated through fast-track online fact sheets and blog posts, media coverage, and webinar presentations. The fast-track online publication process typically takes two to four weeks after analyses, allowing us to convey the latest critical information in a timely manner. RAPID findings have been further disseminated through hundreds of news reports and dozens of webinar presentations, which greatly enhance the impact of these data in public conversations.

RAPID peer-reviewed academic journal publications cover topics such as pediatric healthcare (Liu, Lombardi, et al., 2022; Weston et al., 2021), early experience unpredictability (Liu, Zalewski, et al., 2022), parental mental health (Zalewski et al., 2022), family resilience (Liu et al., 2024), and racial/ethnic inequity (Ibekwe-Okafor et al., 2023). These findings are reviewed below. Overall, our diverse communication strategies allow RAPID findings to be accessed and utilized across different fields and domains, both academically and in public policy and program decision making.

Design Principle 4. Prioritize Adaptability of Content Informed by Strategic Multi-Sector Partnerships

With RAPID's high-frequency approach, survey contents can be adapted quickly to assess parents' and providers' experiences in response to unfolding events and new policies. Content adaptability is made possible through multi-sector partnerships with researchers, educators, non-profit organizations, policymakers, and community leaders from different fields who leverage their unique expertise to provide feedback on data from the previous cycle and make recommendations for future survey changes.

The core of the RAPID partnership approach is comprised of a national advisory committee, a policy working group, and collaboration with researchers who are focused on understanding and reducing structural and systemic inequities. The RAPID national advisory committee convenes a group of early childhood researchers, advocates, policymakers, parent and provider representatives, and philanthropic funders. This group meets monthly to advise on the overall strategic study direction and survey contents, review data prior to publication, and assist with result interpretation and dissemination. To enhance RAPID's impact on informing policy, monthly meetings also occur with a policy working group (consisting of policy directors in national and state-level organizations, advocacy organizations, and social/public policy researchers) to provide policy-related feedback on survey modules and advise on dissemination strategies to policy and advocacy audiences.

To achieve the objective of promoting equitable early childhood development, it is also critical for RAPID to highlight the unique experiences of Black and Latino(a) families and ECE providers. We thus engage in close collaboration with two groups – the Researchers Investigating

Sociocultural Equity and Race (RISER) network and a Latine working group – to ensure that RAPID data are used responsibly to describe Black and Latino(a) children's experiences and maximize their impact on racial justice. In these collaborations, RAPID receives expert consultation in participant recruitment, specific survey content design (e.g., racism, discrimination, cultural wealth), and result interpretation; reciprocally, the partnering scholars can rely on RAPID data and analysis support to provide valuable insights on the pandemic, racism, and resilience among Black and Latino(a) children (Ibekwe-Okafor et al., 2023; Iruka et al., 2021). This type of mutually beneficial partnership allows us to pass the torch back to Black and Latino(a) scholars, who can use equity-centered lenses to influence policy decision making and foster marginalized children's optimal development.

Conceptual Model for RAPID

Integrating the four aforementioned design principles, the RAPID survey conceptual model is presented in Figure 1. As shown, the outside loop illustrates the key features of high-frequency mixed methods research methodologies of the RAPID platform (i.e., principle 2), which is enabled through the "empirical pragmatism" principle (i.e., principle 3). The middle layer indicates RAPID's strategic multi-sector partnerships (i.e., principle 4). The center of this conceptual model represents RAPID's focus on young children and critical adult/contexts in their lives (i.e., principle 1), reflecting the community – family and child care providers – children conceptual framework (Lombardi, 2008).

Main Published Findings from RAPID National Surveys, 2020–2024

RAPID national surveys data have provided a living record of the pandemic and its immediate aftermath. In the context of the core domains assessed, RAPID data revealed main challenges facing parents, child care providers, and young children. This section summarizes key

published findings during the first four years of RAPID.

The first key conclusion is that households with young children consistently reported high levels of material hardship throughout and after the pandemic, which had direct negative impact on parent and child emotional well-being. RAPID monthly tracking of material hardship rates shows that between 23 percent and 46 percent of parents in a given month indicated difficulty paying for at least one basic need. Findings from Liu et al. (2024) provide evidence of a "chain of hardship" in which material hardship indirectly increased child distress through parents' elevated emotional distress.

Second, RAPID findings highlight that the experiences of unpredictability had additive, above-and-beyond negative effects on parent and child well-being (Liu, Zalewski, et al., 2022; RAPID Study, 2021a, 2021b). While controlling for the mean levels of the material hardship, we found direct effects of hardship unpredictability on elevated emotional distress among both parents and young children (Liu, Zalewski, et al., 2022). We also identified a significant partial mediation role of disrupted family routines on the links between material hardship unpredictability and worsened well-being outcomes.

The third RAPID key takeaway highlights the ongoing child care crisis, with evidence from both national household and provider surveys. Child care providers experienced high rates of hunger, material hardship, and employment disruption; meanwhile, limited access to high-quality child care fundamentally disrupted parents' ability to return to work. As the ECE workforce staffing crisis continues, we found that one-in-three providers had intentions to leave their child care jobs, which was directly rendered by their emotional distress (Liu et al., under review). Personal financial instabilities/insecurities and workplace disruptions were found to be significant sources of stress that contributed to providers' elevated emotional distress and,

subsequently, turnover intentions.

Fourth, RAPID highlights the longstanding inequities (e.g., based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, family structure, child disability status) that have persisted and grown more acute since the start of the pandemic. Several RAPID publications converge to suggest more severe and unpredictable hardship experiences among Black and Latino(a) families, lower-socioeconomic status households, and single-parent families (Liu, Zalewski, et al., 2022; Zalewski et al., 2022). The racial/ethnic economic inequities were found to reflect not only wage differences but also generationally accumulated wealth gaps, as Black and Latino(a) households reported more debt, more discrimination, negative income changes, and lower home ownership rates compared to their White peers with comparable income levels (Liu et al., in press). In Ibekwe-Okafor et al. (2023), we further discovered the negative consequences of racial/ethnic discrimination on young children's externalizing symptoms.

Finally, although the pandemic posed significant challenges for families with young children, and clear disparities were identified among Black and Latino(a) families with respect to economic and social determinants of well-being, there were also some indications of positive resilience. About half of RAPID families reported increases in appreciation of life, personal strengths, new possibilities, improved relationships, or spiritual growth relative to pre-pandemic times. Moreover, Black and Latino(a) families reported significantly greater increases in these domains than White families, demonstrating their remarkable tenacity in the context of disruptive, adverse socio-historical events (Liu et al., 2024).

Applications Beyond the Pandemic

Although RAPID was initially developed out of the U.S. COVID-19 pandemic context, it has wide applications beyond the pandemic and beyond the United States. RAPID can be a useful

tool for research activities in response to future large-scale, prolonged, and disruptive emergency events (e.g., environmental changes, geopolitical conflicts). As these emergency events are expected to occur more frequently in the future, research tools developed out of the pandemic context can be used in future crisis responses to provide real-time actionable data for policy and program decision making and community self-determination in a timely manner. RAPID is well-suited for these crisis response investigations because of its ability to gather large amounts of data from diverse national samples with frequent assessments to capture the volatile circumstances.

In addition, RAPID survey is a flexible, scalable tool for more general early childhood developmental and educational research. RAPID has been sought out and is being implemented by a growing number of states, counties, and municipalities as an effective data-driven approach to redesign or improve their existing systems pertaining to young children's learning, development, and well-being. These surveys, which we call RAPID Community Voices, are designed to support local, developmentally continuous, multi-sector systems in the context of both state policy and community programs in order to achieve equitable and optimal early learning and development.

RAPID Community Voices surveys can facilitate state and local early childhood ecosystem reformation and ultimately help establish an integrated network where different sectors share information, work together to identify the child's needs, and design tailored and continuous support for parents and child care providers. Through data collected from rigorously designed, science-based surveys, representative opinions are brought to community stakeholders to inform critical program and policy decision making. RAPID Community Voices is also well-suited to determine the effectiveness of newly developed programs or systems changes. This

data-driven approach to decision making has been documented to result in better policies and practices compared to relying on intuition (Veenstra & Kotterink, 2017). Incorporating families' and providers' voices directly in local community decision making can also create legitimacy and reduce community members' distrust toward the systems and agencies.

The partnership model between RAPID Community Voices and local community-based teams ensures equal community participation in research to address local communities' urgent needs (Thompson & Burke, 2020). The close research-community partnership also accelerates the translation of research findings to the design of effective and culturally tailored policies and programs that directly benefit community members (Cacari-Stone et al., 2014). Beyond the United States, our team is seeing global interest in adopting this model for national and local surveys. Together, we hope to influence the paradigm change in early childhood developmental and educational research, which has the potential to dismantle deep-rooted structural disparities and promote healthy, equitable global environments for young children to reach their full developmental potential.

Limitations

Like all empirical methods, utilization of the RAPID survey should take its limitations into consideration and make those limitations transparent. Even though we strive to ensure sample representativeness through stratified sampling in the ongoing follow-up assessments, the stratification was only based on race/ethnicity, income levels, and geographic regions. Other factors such as digital inequality and participants' digital capabilities may still affect the sample representativeness and the generalizability of study findings. In addition, RAPID data may bear reporting biases because assessments are limited to caregivers' or providers' self-report, and many assessments were conducted through trimmed questionnaires and team-developed

questions without prior establishment of validity and reliability. This limitation was a trade-off for the survey's enhanced ability to track unique, real-time experiences in an unprecedented time, the benefits of short survey and better retention, and its flexibility and stability. The key principle is empirical pragmatism, which investigators can rely on to determine the best practices for their assessments and achieve the balance between practicality and research rigor.

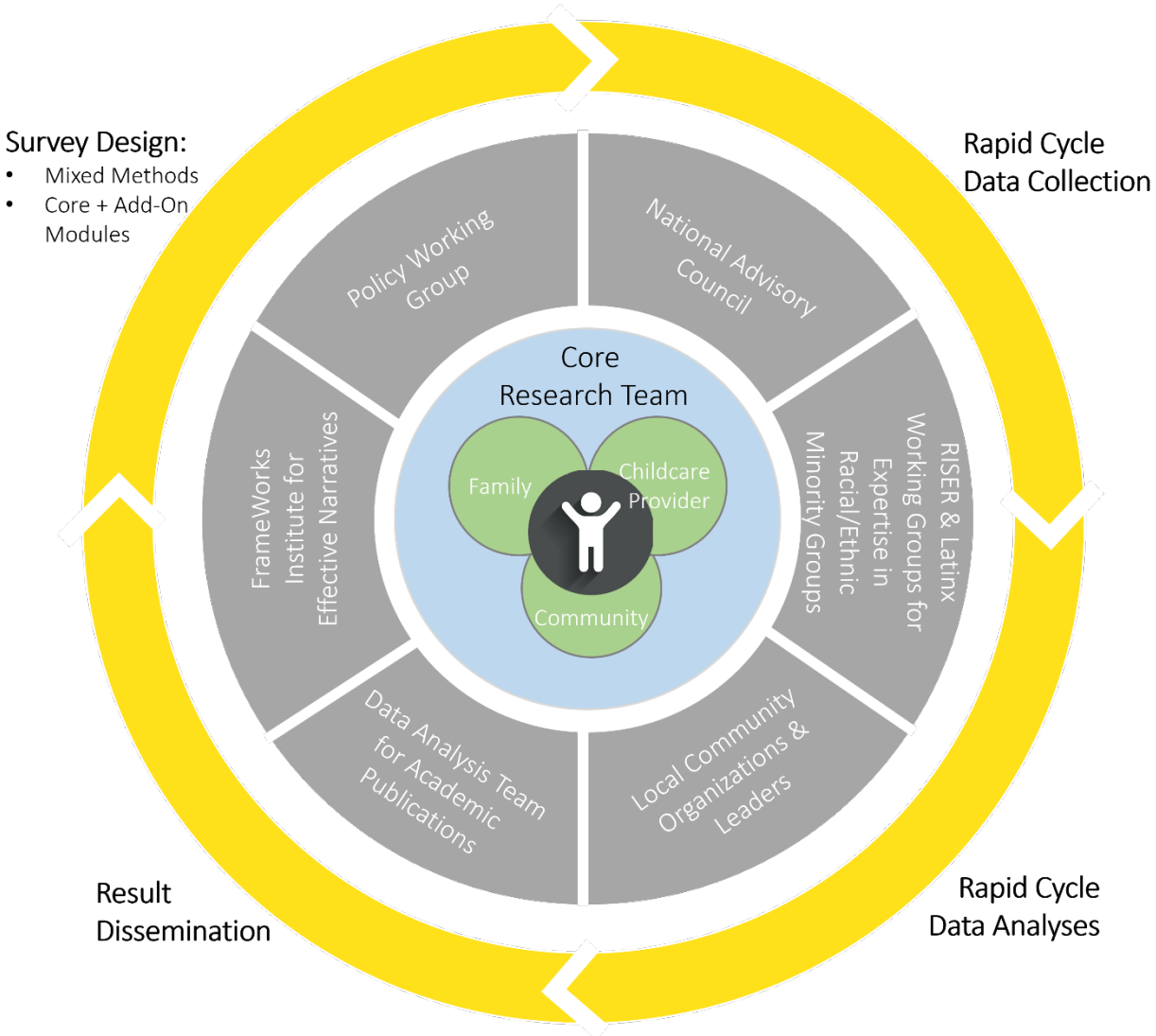


Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of RAPID Survey*

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