



Screening for Housing Instability in Early Childhood Service Provision: Technical Report

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This pilot builds on work completed at the University of Connecticut's Center for Applied Research in Human Development by Anne Farrell, Preston Britner, Kate Dibble, Kellie Randall, and others to develop and validate the Risk and Assets for Family Triage and adapt it into the three-item Q-RAFT in partnership with The Connection, Inc.

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Abstract

This report describes an adaptation of the Quick Risk and Assets for Family Triage (QRAFT) screening instrument piloted in an early childhood setting. Family caseworkers completed the QRAFT-EC with a sample of 922 families with a child enrolled at one of 14 participating ABCD, Inc. early learning sites in Connecticut. Family caseworkers indicated that 32 (3.5%) clients had significant or severe housing needs. On average, clients with high housing needs also exhibited higher needs on each of the other seven QRAFT-EC items (e.g., employability, social network, parenting) and reported substantially lower income than other families. Focus groups and interviews suggest that the QRAFT-EC poses low administrative burden, is accessible and efficient, and serves as a useful tool to structure caseworker reflection on family needs.

Introduction

The development of the QRAFT is rooted in decades of research revealing a relationship between family housing stability/condition and child development.¹ This research clearly shows that children who experience overcrowding, doubling up, utility shutoffs, poor housing conditions, and related problems are at risk for poorer outcomes than their peers. Additionally, there is evidence that families experiencing material hardship also struggle with additional family hardships (including physical and behavioral health challenges), and that small changes in income are not sufficient to remedy hardships.² Families who experience housing problems are at increased risk for child welfare involvement and relatively poor child welfare outcomes.³ Literal homelessness has a sustained impact: the earlier and longer a child experiences homelessness and related adversities, the greater the toll on his or her brain and body functions and the greater the likelihood he or she will experience a stress-related chronic disease later in life.⁴ Recent research on the neurobiological changes emerging from experiences of toxic stress is furthering our understanding of the importance of managing children's exposure to early life stress.⁵ Taken together, these bodies of literature suggest a need for interventions both to prevent housing crisis and to intervene promptly and effectively when it occurs.

The QRAFT was developed as an abbreviated version of the Risk and Assets for Family Triage (RAFT) to focus screening on family housing needs. The RAFT is a longer assessment instrument originally designed to assist TCI, as the supportive housing (SH) service provider for a federal demonstration project (*Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing (SH) for Families in the Child Welfare System*)⁷, to tailor supports to level of family need. That is, within the supportive housing program at TCI, workers recognized that families have an array of needs. The agency experienced a corresponding desire to scale family assets and needs at intake and assign families to levels of service intensity based on the initial screening. Initial data from the RAFT suggest adequate content, construct, and criterion/predictive validity.⁸

¹ Leventhal, T., & Newman, S. (2010). Housing and child development. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 32(9), 1165-1174.

² Sullivan, J. X., Turner, L., & Danziger, S. (2008). The relationship between income and material hardship. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 27(1), 63-81.

³ Courtney, M., McMurtry, S., & Zinn, A. (2004). Housing problems experienced by recipients of child welfare services. *Child Welfare*, 83, 389-392; Dhillon, A. (2005). *Keeping families together and safe: A primer on the child protection-housing connection*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

⁴ Sandel, M., Sheward, R., and Sturtevant, L. (2015). *Compounding stress: The timing and duration effects of homelessness on children's health*. Center for Housing Policy/Children's Health Watch.

⁵ Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.

⁶ Shonkoff, J.P. & Garner, A.S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129, 232-246.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2012). *Partnerships to demonstrate the effectiveness of supportive housing for families in the child welfare system*. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/hhsgrantsforecast/index.cfm?switch=grant.view&qff_grants_forecastInfoID=38683

⁸ Farrell, A. F., Randall, K. G., Goodrich, S. A., & Britner, P. A. (2016). *Initial validation of the Risks and Assets for Family Triage (RAFT) instrument*. Manuscript under review. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

The QRAFT consists of three housing-focused items from the original RAFT: Current Housing, Housing Condition, and Housing History. The items are scored on a 0 (not a barrier, or presents as asset) to 4 (severe barrier) scale.⁹

This pilot was a collaboration between Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (Chapin Hall), The Connection, Inc. (TCI), and Action for Bridgeport Community Development, Inc. (ABCD). Building on the work and relationships formed through the federal SH in child welfare demonstration, during this pilot we adapted the QRAFT and tested its initial suitability for use in early childhood settings.

We address four research questions (RQs) in this report:

RQ1: What is the prevalence of barriers to family well-being among families whose young children are enrolled in an ABCD early childhood program?

RQ2: Does the experience of significant to severe housing challenges relate to other family characteristics?

RQ3: How did family workers utilize the QRAFT-EC? What is the perceived burden and utility of use?

RQ4: What are common challenges that (a) case managers and (b) families face in the pursuit of housing and related supports?

⁹ Farrell, A. F., Dibble, K. E., Randall, K. G., & Britner, P. A. (2017). Screening for housing instability and homelessness among families undergoing child maltreatment investigation. *American Journal of Community Psychology*,

Methods

This section describes the adaptation of the QRAFT-EC from the earlier version used in child welfare and the preparation and training that preceded the pilot study.

Procedure and Instruments

Developing the QRAFT-EC Adaptation. We collaborated with ABCD and TCI to adapt the QRAFT for use by family case workers at 14 out of the 15 sites in the Early Learning Division at ABCD. The adaptation included an addition of seven items from the RAFT which were selected by ABCD. The adaptation also included a re-wording of the housing items to align with the McKinney-Vento Act's definition of homelessness, and a re-wording of the Substance Abuse (Substance Use) item to reflect current language recommended by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

The adapted instrument was tested by five family case workers and fine-tuned prior to launching data collection through a REDCap form. The resulting instrument, which is referred to in this report as the Early Childhood QRAFT (QRAFT-EC), included demographic variables, a housing voucher eligibility calculation, the 10 QRAFT-EC items, and a referrals section. The 10 QRAFT-EC items included:

- Current Housing
- Housing Condition
- Housing History
- Physical Health (Parent)
- Substance Use
- Employability/Education
- Income Management
- Social Network
- Parenting
- Head Start Attendance

The QRAFT-EC items are scored on a 0 (not a barrier) to 4 (severe barrier) scale. Family case workers completed data collection at the end of a service period, and were instructed to complete the QRAFT-EC while thinking about each individual family in their caseload rather than completing the instrument with a family present. If a QRAFT-EC item indicated the need for a referral, the referral section (populated with referral suggestions from a resource manual published by ABCD) for that item appeared at the end of the form.

Training. Before launching data collection, family case workers attended an initial presentation about the project followed several weeks later by a training session. At the first presentation, the Director of the Early Learning Division at ABCD provided family case workers with a description of the partnership between ABCD and TCI and background information about the effects of homelessness and housing instability on children. The presentation explained the impetus for ABCD sites serving as a pilot for the QRAFT-EC and encouraged family caseworkers to 'buy in' to the process. For the training session, the Principal Investigator from Chapin Hall travelled to Connecticut (2/9/17) to introduce family case workers to the instrument and practice using the tool.

Weekly Summary Data Reports. Data collection officially began on April 18, 2017 and was planned to run for 4 weeks and close on May 12, 2017. However, the data collection was extended and the last

record was submitted by a family case worker on May 25, 2017. Weekly summary data reports were compiled and shared with ABCD to enable our team to monitor progress and address any data quality issues, and to give ABCD staff insight into the results as they came in. These weekly reports pulled data from a raw output from REDCap into two spreadsheets: “Weekly Summary Report” and “Aggregate Report”. Each of these sheets contained the same two tables and formulas, but were differentiated by data collection period – a single week or the entire data collection period. The first table on each sheet listed the number of forms submitted, housing voucher eligibility, and positive screens (a score of 3 or 4 on each item) broken down by site. The second table listed referrals indicated as completed under each item, again broken down by site.

Focus Groups and Interviews. In order to determine the utility of the QRAFT-EC as a tool to apply a housing lens in an early childhood service setting, the evaluation included two focus groups with family caseworkers and an informal interview with the Director of the ABCD Early Learning Division and the Senior Coordinator of Site Management.

Focus groups and interviews were completed at ABCD on June 27, 2017. Each focus group lasted between 60-90 minutes and included 5-6 family case workers, each of whom had completed the QRAFT-EC on the families in their caseload. The focus group guide was designed to illicit discussion around several areas of interest:

- Ease of using the QRAFT-EC and adequacy of the training provided
- Differences and similarities of the QRAFT-EC versus existing screening and referral processes
- Experiences of ABCD client families with homelessness and housing instability
- Utility of the QRAFT-EC in working with families

In contrast, the protocol created for the informal interview with the Director of the ABCD Early Learning Division and the Senior Coordinator of Site Management focused on the value of using the QRAFT-EC at the organizational level and their experience working with Chapin Hall and TCI to rollout this pilot project.

Sample Characteristics

A total of 922 completed forms were submitted during the data collection period. This represents roughly 89% of the 1031 children enrolled at the 14 participating ABCD sites. Each site, with the exception of the therapeutic program site, completed a QRAFT-EC on at least 80% of enrolled children (see Figure 1).

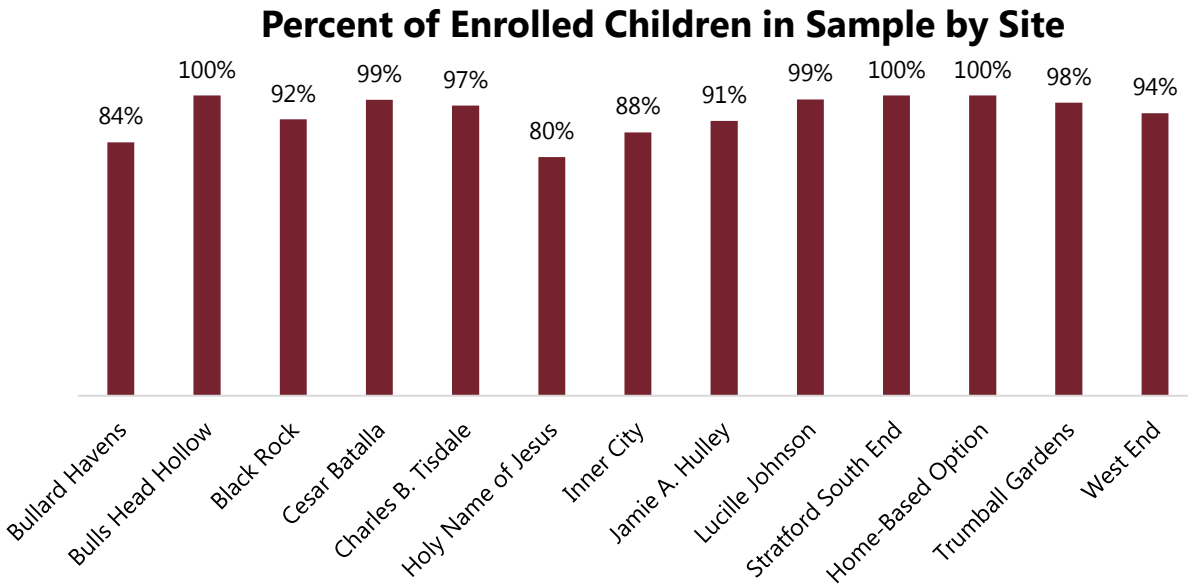


Figure 1: Percent of Enrolled Children in Sample by Site
Note: The therapeutic program site is co-located at Inner City.

The QRAFT-EC included a family demographic section reporting race/ethnicity, highest level of education of primary caregiver, number of adults and number of children in household, ages of children in household, household size (calculated field), and annual household income. The household size and income fields were used to calculate a family’s eligibility for a housing voucher. Families are eligible for a housing voucher if their household income falls below 50% of the median area income based on household size. Families whose income is less than 30% of the median area income receive preference for a housing voucher (75% of Housing Choice Vouchers are reserved for these families).

The majority of families with children enrolled at ABCD sites identified as Black/African American (46%) or Hispanic/Latino (44%). On average, families lived in households with 2 adults and 2 children. Only 8% of primary caregivers held a bachelor’s-level or higher college degree. The majority (48%) had a high school diploma or GED and 25% had not completed high school. Average family income was reported at \$17,000 per year. Relatedly, 87% of families met income eligibility for a housing voucher. Thirty-percent of families met minimum eligibility criteria (50% of median area income) and an additional 57% met preferred eligibility criteria (30% of median area income).

Approach to Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the QRAFT-EC data was limited to descriptives and informal comparisons by risk/asset level. Analysis of sub-groups was limited to examining the sub-group of families scored as having a significant or severe housing risk (a score of a 3 or 4 on any of the three housing items) against the remainder of the families.

Notes from the focus groups and interviews were synthesized and reviewed for key themes. The notes were then organized under each theme, including specific illustrative comments where applicable.

Results

RQ1: What is the prevalence of barriers to family well-being among families whose young children are enrolled in an ABCD early childhood program?

The QRAFT-EC has 10 items: 3 housing items and 7 other items related to family well-being. Descriptives for all QRAFT-EC items are included in Table 1. The mean scores for most of the items are relatively low, falling below 1 (mild barrier or asset) with the exception of income management (1.27).

Table 1: QRAFT-EC Item Statistics: Means and Standard Deviations

QRAFT-EC Item	Mean (SD)
Current Housing	0.54 (0.79)
Housing Condition	0.53 (0.78)
Housing History	0.37 (0.63)
Physical Health (Parent)	0.16 (0.49)
Substance Use	0.04 (0.24)
Employability/Education	0.95 (1.09)
Income Management	1.27 (1.17)
Social Network	0.64 (0.80)
Parenting	0.40 (0.71)
Head Start Attendance	0.26 (0.61)

Housing Items. Thirty-two out of 922 families were reported to have significant housing risks (scoring significant (3) or severe (4) on the Current Housing, Housing Condition, or Housing History items)¹⁰. This is approximately 3.5% of the sample meeting that threshold for risk, e.g., being literally homeless or otherwise meeting at least part of a federal definition of homelessness. We can compare this result with the result in the QRAFT pilot completed with a child welfare population. In that pilot, 9.1% of all child welfare clients met that threshold: 8.1% of unsubstantiated cases; 5.4% of FAR (differential response) cases; and 21.4% of substantiated cases¹¹.

Approximately 40% of families reported at least mild (scores of 2-4) housing barriers in current housing or housing condition (see Table 2). Thirty-percent of families reported mild housing barriers in their housing history. Housing risk was constant across most family demographic groups with the exception of income. Families who met the significant to severe threshold for housing risk reported substantially lower income on average (\$4,445.54) in comparison to families not facing housing risk (\$17,644.10).

¹⁰ These figures are consistent with the referral threshold that includes a positive indication on any of the three housing items.

¹¹ Farrell, A.F., Randall, K.G., Britner, P.A., & Reynolds, J.A. (2015). *Universal Housing Screening of Families Undergoing Child Welfare Investigation: Technical Report on CT's Pilot of the QRAFT*. Storrs, CT: UConn Center for Applied Research in Human Development. Technical report prepared under Partnerships to Demonstrate the Effectiveness of Supportive Housing for Families in the Child Welfare System, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, HHS-2012-ACF-ACYF-CA-0538.

RQ2: Does the existence of significant to severe housing challenges relate to other family characteristics?

We compared QRAFT-EC scores on the remaining seven items between cases of families who met the threshold for housing risk (N=32) and those who did not (N=890). QRAFT-EC scores are on average consistently higher for families in the housing risk sub-group, as shown in Table 2 below. There were substantial differences (greater than one risk level higher) between these groups on two items: Income Management (Housing Risk 3-4: M=2.84, SD=1.27; Non-Housing Risk 0-3: M=1.21, SD=1.12) and Social Network (Housing Risk 3-4: M=1.88, SD=1.29; Non-Housing Risk 0-3: M=0.59, SD=0.74). The Income Management item includes not only budgeting and spending skills but also sufficiency of income. As discussed above, families who met the housing risk threshold also reported lower household income. The Social Network item, however, stands almost entirely apart from income. It focuses on the presence of stable and reliable social support ranging from “Stable or expanding network (partner, family, friends); stable household” at the Asset/Not a barrier level (a score of 0) to “Lacks support; abuse (domestic violence or child abuse) or neglect present/recent” at the Severe barrier level (a score of 4).

Table 2: QRAFT-EC Item Scores for Homeless and Near-Homeless and Lower Risk Families

QRAFT-EC Item	Subgroup	
	Homeless and Near-Homelessness*	Less Risk Subgroup
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Current Housing	2.87 (0.72)	0.46 (0.66)
Housing Condition	2.38 (1.04)	0.46 (0.69)
Housing History	2.19 (1.06)	0.30 (0.50)
Physical Health (Parent)	0.58 (0.89)	0.16 (0.49)
Substance Use	0.23 (0.77)	0.04 (0.20)
Employability/Education	1.29 (1.10)	0.94 (1.09)
Income Management	2.84 (1.27)	1.21 (1.12)
Social Network	1.88 (1.29)	0.59 (0.74)
Parenting	1.23 (0.88)	0.37 (0.69)
Head Start Attendance	0.58 (0.96)	0.25 (0.59)

*The housing risk threshold is a score of 3-4 on any housing item, in line with the referral threshold.

RQ3: How did family workers utilize the QRAFT-EC? What is the perceived burden and utility of use?

The overall impression of the QRAFT-EC was that it was “easy” or “very easy” to use and took approximately five minutes to complete. While family caseworkers overwhelmingly thought the QRAFT-EC items were structured well and thoughtfully worded, they found it challenging to capture dynamic elements of families’ situations such as frequently changing income. One specific suggestion was a re-wording of the current housing item to reflect the reality that housing can be safe, adequate, and unsubsidized but not affordable/sustainable and therefore not likely to be stable. Caseworkers also expressed some frustration over the income guidelines for housing vouchers as some families were rated as having a significant or severe housing risk but were nonetheless ineligible for a housing

voucher due to their income. In terms of the structure of the online form, caseworkers suggested removing the requirement to input a specific access code in order to submit responses on the online form.

There was some variability in how family caseworkers used the QRAFT-EC. Most of the family caseworkers completed the form on their own while reflecting on their engagement with families, which was the method outlined during the training session. One family caseworker had just been assigned a new caseload and was able to complete the QRAFT-EC while reviewing family case files and talking to teachers. She reflected that the QRAFT-EC helped her process the case files and understand more about each family's situation. Another family caseworker completed the QRAFT-EC with each of her families and reflected that she was able to ask more difficult questions about areas like a parent's physical health without it being awkward. She noted that she found out more about these families because of the QRAFT-EC even though she had been working with them for months.

During the first focus group, we learned from the family caseworkers that much of the information the QRAFT-EC captures is also included as part of a matrix assessment that is completed during the first 60 days (post-enrollment) of their engagement with a family. This assessment includes questions related to income, poverty guidelines, budgeting, use of state services (food stamps, etc.), mental health history and treatment, community involvement, legal history, education/training level, length of employment and more. Similar to the QRAFT-EC, the matrix assessment is scored on a scale that identifies critical needs and indicates referrals. The matrix assessment is also used to create family partnership goals based on high priority needs. Though some caseworkers thought the information collected was duplicative, the QRAFT-EC was still valuable to them as a tool for reflecting on their engagement with families. It reminded caseworkers about family needs and allowed them to follow up on referrals they had made many months prior.

The interview with senior staff also discussed what the value of the QRAFT-EC might be at the organizational level. A few points emerged from that discussion. Because almost all of the sites used the QRAFT-EC, they were interested in analyzing the results to determine variability of needs across sites and the extent to which family caseworkers were offering services to families based on indicated needs. They also found that the experience of using the QRAFT-EC highlighted a need for additional training for family caseworkers. They often expressed confusion about family eligibility for housing assistance based on income versus need. At ABCD, eligibility for assistance is assessed by another division. A training on family eligibility and appropriate referrals may be helpful to train family caseworkers to take appropriate steps to address family housing needs.

RQ4: What are common challenges that (a) case managers and (b) families face in the pursuit of housing and related supports?

Family caseworkers spoke at length about issues many of their families struggle to address. Many of their families have a difficult time securing steady employment and affordable housing because of limited employment opportunities coupled with high housing costs in the Bridgeport area. Further, they expressed that many of the families they work with have faced barriers to receiving assistance from local social service agencies. These barriers were both structural, such as challenges to meeting requirements

for assistance due to complex circumstances, and social, stemming from prior experiences where the family was judged harshly while seeking assistance. Another challenge for family caseworkers is the limited availability of housing services in the area. Often when referring their families to 211 (the central point of entry in Connecticut) or specific shelters there are no slots available for families.

Each focus group concluded with the facilitator asking the family caseworkers to envision what an ideal supportive housing program would look like in Bridgeport (see Figure 2). Family caseworkers were able to identify several needed housing services:

- Access to funds for first month’s rent and security deposits, which they noted are currently difficult to obtain as many organizations are hesitant to extend these funds.
- Housing support that is sustainable for families and available for an extended period of time to avoid families cycling back into homelessness.
- Increased availability at shelters, including increases in length of stay restrictions.
- A more affordable housing supply in the area.

They were also able to outline additional supportive services that would be helpful for their families:

- Friendly service environments that take into consideration each family’s particular situation
- Better service for child-welfare involved families, especially if assistance is available while a case is open but taken away when the case is closed.
- Affordable daycare
- Access to services like mental health counseling, case management, employment training

The one aspect of service provision that was particularly difficult for family caseworkers to discuss was the allocation of services for families. Use of the QRAFT-EC shifted caseworkers’ focus to housing need and highlighted the tough reality that there are few resources that are available for families. Even working families are struggling to make ends meet, and while many families are on the cusp of housing crises, caseworkers must focus their energy on families currently in crisis, meaning that prevention is not a priority. There was substantial discussion on the tension between providing prevention versus crisis services when there is limited funding available. Neither group was able to make a clear recommendation, but did express a desire for clear guidelines on prioritizing families for services.

Throughout the two focus groups, we learned that ABCD family caseworkers have struggled or are struggling with housing. The interview we completed with the Director of the ABCD Early Learning Division and the Senior Coordinator of Site Management revealed that this was one of the reasons they

What should a supportive housing program look like?	
	Clear Eligibility Requirements
	Friendly Service Providers
	Individualized Services

Figure 2: Illustration of an “ideal” set of housing supports for families

were interested in participating and wanted to get family caseworkers directly involved in the adaptation. Family caseworkers all attended an introduction to the project which described the relationship between ABCD and TCI and provided information about the effects of homelessness on children and families.

Discussion

Implications

Significant implications of this work include the need for and benefit to engaging families through housing interventions. A relatively small proportion of families in this sample demonstrated significant to severe housing instability and homelessness, however, given the evidence of the impact of these phenomena on child development, the need for intervention is clear.

Results of this pilot show that the QRAFT-EC is easy to use, has high acceptability among Head Start staff, and can both support family engagement and effective triage for housing concerns.

Recommendations

1. We recommend additional data collection along these lines in order to verify and provide greater confidence in the findings.
2. The QRAFT-EC shows significant promise as a first line screening tool to be used in early childhood programs, combined with additional assessment and case management functions.
3. Further validation work across EC programs serving low income families is warranted.
4. There is a need to further study the reliability and validity, in particular predictive validity, with a range of families.
5. Head Start staff offered valuable feedback for child- and family-serving systems; additional engagement of staff and of family members (parents) would enable further refinement.