

# ISSUE BRIEF

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## TRENDS IN DATA COLLECTION METHODS

### Meaning in the Method: Pretesting Methods for a Diverse Population

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*Parent ratings of young children's behavior are often used to assess social-emotional development. However, parents from different cultural and language backgrounds may vary in their (1) perceptions of the importance of different social-emotional indicators, (2) willingness to discuss particular behaviors, and (3) ability to understand certain words and phrases. This brief presents findings from the Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study, which examined a diverse group of Los Angeles preschoolers. The study integrated three strategies—card sorts, focus groups, and cognitive interviewing—to look at how children's social-emotional behavior could be reliably and validly assessed through parent reports. Rather than identify one piloting strategy as more valid, we stress the importance of examining measures developed by and for clinicians and the implications of using these measures with diverse populations.*

#### Importance of Parent Ratings

A child's ability to develop relationships and connections with others, a sense of who he or she is in the world, and an ability to control impulses and emotions are at the core of social-emotional development. In early childhood, parent reports are one of the most common methods for assessing this type of development. Because parents observe their children in multiple settings, they can provide valuable insight

## ABOUT THE STUDY

In spring 2007, Mathematica's team embarked on the Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study (UPCOS), a study of the Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) program for First 5 LA. Parent interviews required a measure that provides a culturally sensitive assessment of children's social-emotional competence, because Los Angeles is home to a culturally diverse population.

into two components of social-emotional behavior: (1) social skills, and (2) problem behaviors.

However, parents from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds vary in their perceptions about behaviors and their relative importance. For example, one study found differences in ratings related to a parent's employment status, as well as preschooler's gender and language level. Looking at how one item relates to other items on a scale, researchers find the reliability for parent reports is often lower than for teacher reports. More work is needed to examine the reliability and validity of parent ratings of children's social-emotional development across various cultural groups. There is a need to examine how culturally and linguistically diverse parents (1) understand items relating to children's social and emotional behaviors, and (2) perceive the importance of different social skills and problem behaviors.

#### Clinical Tools, Diverse Audiences

As part of the instrument design for UPCOS, we identified a battery of parent-reported items to assess children's social-emotional development with a sample of parents of culturally and linguistically diverse preschoolers. We selected four commonly

used measures that had been used with diverse populations and had established norms. We then conducted focus groups, card sorts, and cognitive interviewing, all described below, to shed light on how parents understand the items in these measures.

There are several important facts to consider when selecting measures of social-emotional development. Most measures were developed by clinicians to be used with parents or teachers, not for use in large-scale surveys. They do not include definitions of terms or examples of behaviors, and the wording of some items may be difficult to interpret. For example, our review found that some items contain double negatives when used in combination with the response scales. Survey researchers often use the measures with parents who have varying levels of education and come from a variety of backgrounds (such as different countries of origin or language backgrounds). These individuals may have little understanding of clinical jargon that might be familiar to parents with more education.

### Getting Group Insights

In May 2007, we conducted six focus groups with parents of preschool-age children from varying racial/ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Focus groups enable a small group to discuss a topic under the direction of a facilitator who guides the discussion. Individual focus groups consisted of parents who were Filipino (n=13), Korean (n=8), Chinese and Cambodian (n=10), African American (n=9), Latino Spanish-speaking monolingual (n=10), and Latino bilingual or English-speaking monolingual (n=7). We provided interpreters for members of the Filipino, Korean, and Chinese focus groups, as necessary. We conducted the Latino Spanish-speaking monolingual focus group in Spanish, and the other Latino focus group in English. The majority (63 percent) of parents participating in the focus groups had at least some college education. One-quarter were born in the United States. Most parents spoke English (51 percent) and/or Spanish (23 percent) as the main language at home.

The focus groups enabled parents from diverse racial/ethnic and linguistic backgrounds to highlight and discuss social skills and problem behaviors that concerned them and were of most importance to

#### SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

“What does it mean to you when you say your child is well behaved?”

“What social skills do you think going to preschool will help your child have?”

“Are there questions about your child’s behavior or well-being that you do not want to be asked about in an interview?”

them. Parents also shared what they thought preschools should do to help their child’s development in these areas. All focus group discussions, including the card-sorting task, were audiorecorded. Then coders reviewed the tapes and highlighted themes and behaviors that were important to families. This process also identified common themes across parent responses in all focus groups. For example, “respect for adults” and “manners” were mentioned in several groups as important skills for children. We considered these cross-cutting themes when selecting items and areas for discussion in subsequent cognitive interviews.

### Identifying Response Difficulty

During the focus groups, participants took part in a card-sorting task. This involved looking at a group of index cards that each contained a single question about parent-reported measures of children’s social and emotional behaviors. We selected 51 questions from the standardized measures under consideration for the card-sorting task. Parents sorted each card into groups as follows: (1) easy to answer, (2) confusing and/or hard to answer, and (3) uncomfortable to answer, and put each group of cards into a labeled envelope. After items were sorted and envelopes collected, the focus group moderator asked parents to discuss the items that were confusing or made them uncomfortable. The purpose was to assess whether parents understood the intended meaning of the selected questions and whether they felt comfortable answering them. More broadly, the task examined the acceptability of different ways of asking about children’s behavior.

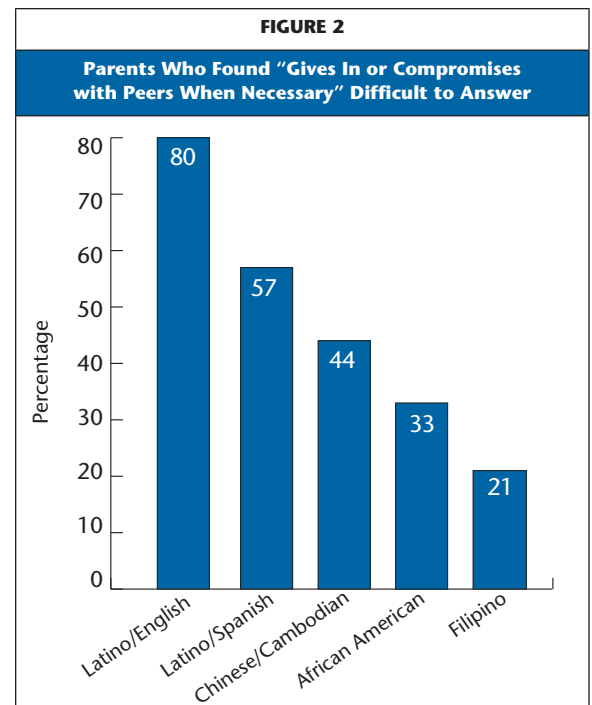
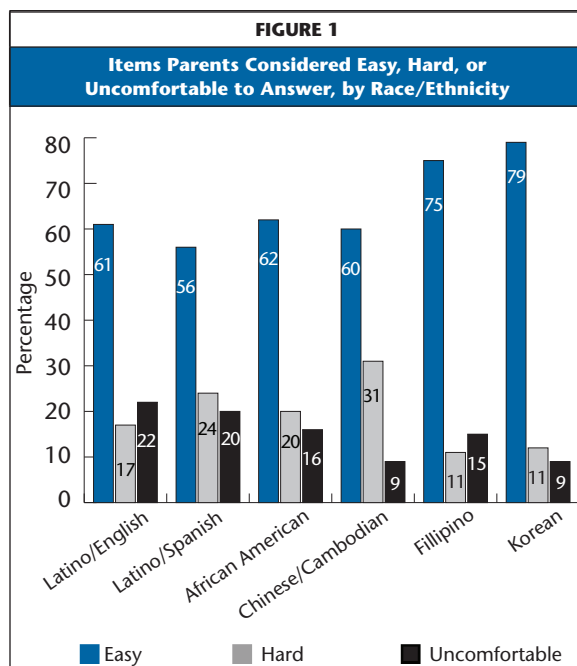
After the focus groups, we tabulated responses to the card-sorting activity to identify differences among

parents in each of the focus groups in citing various items as easy, hard to understand, or uncomfortable to answer. Figure 1 shows the results.

The findings suggested that we needed to adapt selected items for subsequent cognitive interviews and the final parent interview. Because the measures were copyrighted, we also had to think about whether the publisher would be willing to consider changes for use with our diverse sample.

In the end, we selected the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scale-2 (PKBS-2) for further piloting (Merrell 2003). We considered parents' grouping of PKBS-2 items as easy to answer, hard to answer, and uncomfortable to answer, along with publisher-reported factor loadings of items, when selecting material for the cognitive interviews. We excluded items with comparatively low factor loadings (that is, a low relationship between the individual variable and the overall construct it was measuring) on subscales. We also excluded items that multiple parents cited as hard or uncomfortable to answer.

As Figure 2 shows, parents from different groups viewed the sensitivity of the item, "Gives in or compromises with peers when necessary," differently. While the item was intended to capture a positive trait, some parents felt that "giving in" was not positive and therefore had difficulty responding to this item. This was especially true for Latino parents. As



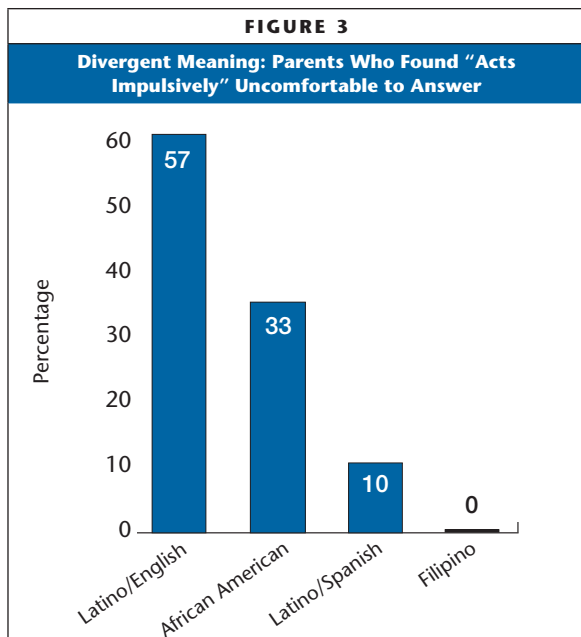
a result, we excluded it from subsequent cognitive interviews and the final parent interview.

Latino-English speaking parents and Latino-Spanish speaking parents differed sharply in their answers to a question on their child's impulsiveness, as Figure 3 shows. We explored the reason for divergence such as this in the cognitive interviews. If the divergence was the result of differential understanding of the item, it was modified or excluded.

### Thinking Aloud: Cognitive Interviews

In June 2007, we conducted a series of cognitive interviews with a different group of 53 parents to understand their process and rationale for answering items about their child's social skills and problem behaviors. The cognitive pretests were limited to parents who spoke English or Spanish. The interviews included items about how cultural differences are addressed in preschool. Interviewers took extensive notes and revised drafts of the survey according to parents' comments. Revised drafts were then used in the next round of interviews.

The majority of parents participating in the cognitive interviews (60 percent) had at least some college education. Many were born in the United States (43 percent). In addition, most spoke English (66 percent) or Spanish (25 percent) as the main language at home.



During the interviews, parents filled out a sample questionnaire containing demographics and the PKBS-2 social-emotional items. On the PKBS-2, parents rate social skills and problem behaviors on a 4-point response scale from never to often. We used both English-only and Spanish-English bilingual versions of the questionnaire, so if a bilingual parent did not understand a term in English, he or she could refer to the Spanish translation. Then we asked parents questions similar to those posed during the focus groups. For example, we asked whether any of the PKBS-2 items were difficult to understand or otherwise confusing. We also asked them to explain what they thought individual items meant and to provide examples of observed behaviors that informed their responses to items. Interviewers probed items that parents rated at either extreme.

From these discussions we identified a handful of PKBS-2 items in English and Spanish that had ambiguous meanings or that included Spanish words not commonly used in Los Angeles. We then added

additional items to the questionnaires to test alternative wordings and explored how parents interpreted them. Only a handful of items, usually involving technical or clinical language, needed wording or translation changes before the final pilot. For example, one item that posed difficulty for parents included the phrase “clings to parent or caregiver.” Some parents interpreted this as a positive behavior (offering “when my child is excited” as an example of when it occurs). This item was replaced with two items: “Holds onto a parent or caregiver when strangers are around,” and “Stays very close to a parent or caregiver for a long time in a new place.”

### The Meaning of Words

We concluded that, before using established measures in a study—especially measures developed for other purposes or audiences—it is critical to ensure that potential respondents understand the intended meaning of all items. Researchers cannot assume that respondents who speak English fully understand the concepts we are asking about in English—words have multiple meanings, and subtle differences in meaning can lead to misunderstanding of the question and skewed results. Clarifying these subtle differences in the understanding of a word or a phrase ensures that research provides the best measure for the population being studied.

The full report on which this brief is based, “Los Angeles Universal Preschool Programs, Children Served, and Children’s Progress in the Preschool Year: Final Report of the First 5 LA Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study,” is available at [www.first5la.org/research/UPCOS](http://www.first5la.org/research/UPCOS). Authors are John Love, Sally Atkins-Burnett, Cheri Vogel, Nikki Aikens, Yange Xue, Maricar Mabutias, Barbara Lepidus Carlson, Emily Sama Martin, Nora Paxton, Margaret Caspe, Susan Sprachman, and Kathy Sonnenfeld. For more information, contact senior fellow and survey researcher Susan Sprachman at [ssprachman@mathematica-mpr.com](mailto:ssprachman@mathematica-mpr.com).

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### Reference

Merrell, Kenneth W. “The Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales-Second Edition.” Austin Texas: PRO-ED, 2003.

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