



Student-Parents Caring for Children



References

Students who are parents or guardians of children are often “invisible” on post-secondary campuses. The lack of explicit recognition and consideration for their unique situation often leads them to be overlooked in wellness and academic spaces.^{1,2} Data from the 2020 National Post-Secondary Student Aid Study indicates that in the United States, nearly one in five undergraduate students and nearly one in three graduate students are student-parents.^{3,4} Among these student-parents, 74 per cent are mothers and 55 per cent are students of colour.^{3,4} In Canada, the most recent data comes from a 2011 study analyzing survey results from 1976 to 2005, which showed that 11-16 per cent of post-secondary students had at least one dependent child.⁵ This percentage has likely increased since then.

In addition to fulfilling familial and parental duties, student-parents must also juggle academics, work and financial obligations.⁶ Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the landscape has shifted, with parents adapting to the challenge of having their children at home full-time while gradually adjusting to a return to in-person learning. For these students, balancing family responsibilities with schoolwork can be particularly challenging.⁷

Students who are parents and guardians face unique struggles. Some of these challenges include^{8,9,10,11,12,13}

➤ Time management

For example, a lack of time or the feeling of being pressed for time can create competing demands, making it challenging to balance academics with family responsibilities such as taking care of their children.

➤ Financial stress

For example, the absence of affordable and accessible childcare can prevent students from attending classes at specific times and make it harder to complete school assignments.

➤ Commuting from home

For example, some student-parents may commute alone and if they live far from campus, they may arrive home late, limiting their ability to attend on-campus events or participate in extracurricular activities.

➤ Difficulty finding a sense of belonging on campus and forming meaningful interpersonal connections with fellow students

For example, student-parents may feel isolated and socially excluded from campus events due to scheduling conflicts and a lack of programs specifically designed to welcome them and their children. They may also struggle to find peers who understand or can relate to their unique situation.



➤ Lack of resources tailored to student-parents

For example, some older student-parents can feel that they lack academic skills because of the time that has passed since their last schooling, believing that their age makes the learning process slower.

For example, a lack of affordable and accessible childcare can act as a barrier to taking classes at certain times. This can be especially challenging for international students to navigate due to limited support networks and unfamiliarity with local resources.

➤ Structural barriers

For example, post-secondary institutions often lack support and flexibility in class schedules and alternative learning options, such as online courses and do not offer enough on-campus programs designed to accommodate the needs of student-parents.

For example, childcare services on campus can be too costly, lack flexibility (such as only offering drop-in care for a single class) and have long waiting lists.

➤ Stigma

For example, student-parents, especially fathers, may experience stigma due to young parents often being perceived as irresponsible or not committed to their education or career.

For example, student-parents may feel that their status as parents affects the professional opportunities available to them, as faculty members may assume they cannot juggle academic responsibilities with parenting.

For more information on supporting international students, please refer to this Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health (CICMH) toolkit.



➤ Health conditions

For example, some student-parents who have recently given birth can develop postpartum depression, which is a form of depression that occurs after childbirth.

For example, the need to make time to study and manage childcare often leads to insufficient or poor-quality sleep, resulting in fatigue, stress, burnout and sleep-related disorders.

For more information on burnout, please refer to CICMH's infosheets ([Stress and Burnout for Front-line Staff Info Sheet](#) and [Burnout Recovery: 3 Solution-Focused Steps](#))

These challenges can negatively impact the mental health of student-parents, potentially affecting their academic performance, overall wellbeing and family life.⁸

Common mental health challenges experienced by student-parents include anxiety, depression, isolation and role strain.^{14,15}

What is role strain?



Developed by sociologist William J. Goode in 1960, the theory of role strain explains how individuals experience stress when they are expected to fulfill multiple roles simultaneously, leading to strain.¹⁶ For example, a student-parent may struggle to balance the demands of being a student and completing academic work with the responsibilities of being a parent and caring for their children.

Parenting and studying often conflict with societal norms. Parents are expected to be mature and stable, while students are seen as young and free from external responsibilities. Student-parents are balancing both roles and it can be seen as irresponsible, despite the immense time and emotional effort it requires.¹⁷

Student-parents often worry about their children's health; a concern not experienced by students without children.⁷ Additional challenges have been identified for equity-deserving and immigrant student-parents, who might face a lack of stable employment, language-learning difficulties, financial insecurity and small or non-existent family support networks.¹⁸ However, studies have shown that certain protective factors such as good marital relationships, strong social support systems, family harmony and having student-parents' own parents have no history of mental illness can help mitigate the mental health challenges faced by student-parents and play a role in supporting their mental wellbeing and overall ability to cope with depression, anxiety and stress.^{19,20}

"More effort has to be invested in helping student-parents find each other and building a community of support and the accommodations already in place need to be better advertised. For student-parents, the stakes are very high and academic failure is not an option."²¹ - Rana Haider, PhD Student at the University of Toronto

Support strategies^{22,23}



Flexible scheduling

For example: Evening or weekend classes;
allowing student-parents to join classes online;
providing extension policies and flexible timelines



♥ Create spaces for families

For example: Play areas; private nursing and breast pumping areas on campus; more family-friendly classrooms

♥ Childcare resources and services

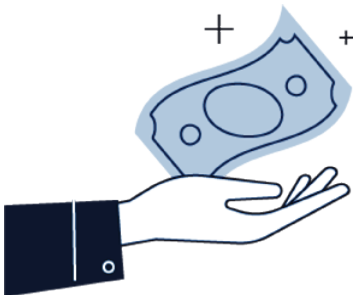
For example: Drop-in services; extended hours; childcare emergency leave; counselling services; partnerships with community organizations (e.g., [Waterloo region's first Indigenous-led and licensed child-care centre](#))

♥ Peer support groups

For example: Creating networks and spaces for student-parents to connect and share their experiences

♥ Financial support that considers the unique needs of student-parents

For example: Sharing award payment opportunities (e.g., [Liz Henriques Award for Single Parents](#) (George Brown College), [GSA Student-Parent Award](#) (Carleton University)); advertising job postings



♥ Create an inclusive environment where student-parents feel welcomed and encouraged to be active members of the academic community

For example: Creating networks and spaces for student-parents to connect and share their experiences

♥ Inform faculty and staff on the unique challenges student-parents face to ensure they are aware of student-parents' responsibilities and are accommodating to their specific needs

For example: Allowing for accommodations/modifications


♥ Include student-parents in the development of policies


For example: Involving student-parents in the creation and updating of policies; collecting data from student-parents to develop comprehensive training materials and offer accessible peer support


Campus spotlights




Many Ontario campuses already have resources to serve student-parents and some institutions even have offices dedicated to supporting them. Below are some examples.


 Student Health and Wellness Services at **Lakehead University** have a list of tips on how to balance being a student-parent. Tips include creating a designated study space where you can leave your school and work materials, creating healthy boundaries and responsibility sharing if you are parenting with a partner.

 **Seneca College** organized an information session for international student-parents to share resources and services that are available on campus as well as resources on childcare, housing and community.


 The **University of Toronto** has a Family Care Office where they offer strategies for balancing academics with family caregiving and provide resources on financial assistance, family-friendly spaces and childcare assistance. They also have peer mentorship programs and workshops to assist students with families.



 **Toronto Metropolitan University (TMU)** has a Global Learning Program, which allows students to learn or work abroad. For participating student-parents, TMU offers a list of FAQ that gives insight into whether this program would be a good fit for them.

 **Fanshawe College** has a blog post featuring a list of childcare resources available in various regions of Ontario. It includes links on how to approach a childcare provider and a step-by-step guide to assist student-parents in selecting the right childcare options.

 The **University of Guelph** offers dedicated events, family-friendly spaces, resources, workshops and contact information for various campus advisors, including those for financial, wellness, counselling support and more.

 The Wellness Centre at **Tyndale University** offers family psychotherapy sessions for students and their family members.