

Improving Mental Health of Student Parents: A Framework For Higher Education

OVERVIEW

This overview outlines key findings from *Improving Mental Health of Student Parents: A Framework For Higher Education*, the first report focusing specifically on the mental health status and needs of college students with children. The report combines data analysis and policy recommendations to provide a framework for higher education institutions to better address the mental health needs of their parenting students.

Student Parents Experience Greater Strains on their Mental Health, but Have Access to Fewer Resources

To better understand the current mental health status of student parents, The Jed Foundation and Ascend at the Aspen Institute conducted original survey research and an analysis of existing national data on the emotional well-being of undergraduate students, including the [Healthy Minds Network Study](#), the American College Health Association's [National College Health Assessment](#) national survey, and the Hope Center's 2020 [#RealCollege Survey](#); in addition to an original mixed-methods research study looking at the unmet needs of this student population.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THIS ANALYSIS INCLUDE:

Student parents experience high rates of mental health stressors

- 43% of student parents reported feeling stressed all or most of the time, 40% reported feeling overwhelmed, 28% reported feelings of depression.
- 38% said that they had considered dropping out of school within the previous 30 days, compared with 25% of nonparenting students. Among those receiving financial aid, this figure was 50% and among 18-29 year olds it was 45%.
- Four in ten student parents describe the experience of attending school while raising a child as extremely or very challenging.
- A sizeable minority (roughly one quarter to one third) of student parents suffer adverse effects on their emotional and mental health, including panic attacks and severe anxiety, which often leads to thoughts of dropping out of school. Those experiencing these more severe emotional and mental health challenges are disproportionately female, non-White, and recipients of financial aid.

Financial stress and feeling isolated on campus are top stressors for student parents

- More than one in five parents (21.3%) describe their financial situation as "always stressful," a much higher rate than among nonparents (14.5%). (HMS dataset)
- Parenting students are also nearly three times more likely to work full-time than nonparents (18.31% of parents, compared with 6.69% of nonparents). (HMS dataset)
- Parenting students are twice as likely as nonparenting students to have been unable to pay or underpaid rent or mortgage in the past 12 months (38% versus 19%) and nearly twice as likely to have often worried that food would run out in the past 30 days (19% versus 11%). Furthermore, parents that had difficulty covering their basic needs all had significantly higher rates of depressive and anxiety symptoms than parents who did not experience these stressors. (#RealCollege Survey)
- More than half (54%) of student parents said they have been made to feel less than welcome on at least one occasion. The figure was even higher (67%) among younger student parents ages 18-29. Only 37% of student parents said that they felt their college or university was supportive of student parents. (JED/Ascend survey)

While younger student parents often struggle with feelings about their future, older student parents show a strong sense of life purpose

- While just 20% of student parents age 18-24 strongly agreed with the statement, "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life," a much higher share (32%) of parents 25 and older strongly agreed, which was the highest rate among parenting and nonparenting students. (ACHA dataset)
- Parents in the 25 and older age group were also more likely than their non-parent counterparts to strongly agree with the statement "I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others" (31% versus 22%) as well as with the statement "I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me" (32% versus 26%). (ACHA dataset)
- Younger parenting students (age 18-24) are three times as likely as older parenting students to report having felt nervous all the time in the past 30 days, 4 times as likely to report feeling hopeless, and 5 times as likely to report feeling worthless.
- Younger student parents are almost twice as likely as older student parents to report feeling that they lack companionship, twice as likely to report feeling left out, and almost twice as likely to report feeling isolated.

Parenting status is associated with several mental health advantages, particularly around substance abuse

- Parenting students report being less likely to have seriously considered attempting suicide than nonparents (11.5% parents versus 14.7% nonparents). (HMS dataset)
- Recalling the last time they drank alcohol, parenting students are 2.5 times less likely than nonparents to report having been drunk (16% of parenting students versus 40% of nonparenting students).
- Student parents were about half as likely as nonparenting students to report doing something they later regretted while under the influence of alcohol.
- *Student parents face barriers to receiving mental health support when they need it*
- Less than half (46.65%) of parenting students are aware of mental health outreach efforts on campus, compared with 57.47% of nonparents. (HMS dataset)
- Parenting students are more likely to report having trouble paying for mental health care, 15.5% of parenting students finding it at least somewhat difficult to pay for mental health care, compared with 10.3% of nonparents.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO SUPPORT THE MENTAL HEALTH OF STUDENT PARENTS

The following recommendations are meant to help undergraduate institutions prioritize the unique needs of parenting students. This population constitutes a significant portion of the overall student body (over 20%), and there is good evidence to suggest that they face unique challenges, with younger student parents facing especially high rates mental health stressors. Data suggests that student parents may be more at risk of mental health issues and may face greater barriers to seeking care than their non-parent counterparts. Therefore, it is imperative that undergraduate institutions implement specific strategies to support these students.

Recommendation #1:

Train counselors and other on-campus mental health providers on unique stressors faced by student parents and specifically in trauma-informed care. Train faculty and staff in understanding and being sensitive to the unique stressors faced by parenting students to allow for a culture shift whereby parenting students are fully factored into professorial and staff decisions and policies.

Recommendation #2:

Create spaces on campus that meet the specific needs of student parents and help foster a sense of belonging among these students. This accommodation includes encouraging creation of spaces and activities for children at all school events.

A common theme in our research with parenting students is this sense of not belonging on campus or somehow being invisible, which we have discussed throughout these recommendations. As mentioned previously, a sense of belonging and community is often a strong protective factor against mental health issues, especially when other major stressors, such as housing and financial insecurity, are also present. One way to increase the sense of belonging and make student parents feel more "visible" on campus in a somewhat concrete manner is to establish spaces on campus that are tailored to student parents' unique needs.

Recommendation #3:

Facilitate affinity groups and mentoring programs for older and younger parenting students.

Parenting students express a strong interest in meeting and supporting each other through the process of attending school while parenting, but very few have a sense that such opportunities exist on campus and do not know how to meet other parenting students. There is also an important opportunity for schools to facilitate mentorship programs or student clubs, particularly ones in which older parenting students mentor younger parenting students.

Recommendation #4:

Create policies that allow for flexibility for parenting students in the classroom.

Our research indicates that parenting students are much more likely to live off campus (and sometimes quite far away) than their nonparenting peers, and they are also much more likely to work a full-time job (sometimes more than one job). These factors along with the fact that many of them do not have reliable childcare make it difficult for parenting students to abide by rigid class schedules and faculty policies such as hard copies of assignments needing to be delivered in person.

**“I was able to handle being a full-time student and parent before this pandemic
but now I feel really overwhelmed these days.”**

– virtual focus group participant

Recommendation #5:

Regularly collect data on students who are parents - their mental health, their needs, their utilization of on-campus services, their feelings of connectedness and belonging on campus - in order to inform how to best support these students.

Slightly more than one in five undergraduate students are parents, but this fact almost always comes as a surprise to most people. While national surveys such as Healthy Minds and the National College Health Assessment ask about parenting status, many schools do not collect data on parenting students and often are unaware of how significant a portion of the student population they are. Even when schools collect data on parenting status, additional information isn't collected to assess the unique needs of student parents, specifically about how much they feel connected to campus and sufficiently accommodated. Because this is a population that is at high risk of attrition, it is in the universities' best interest to understand the challenges that these students face and how best to support them.

Recommendation #6:

Schools should create purposeful plans to help address the basic needs of parenting students.

As noted previously, parenting students often face unique stressors when it comes to basic needs, such as adequate housing, financial support, and childcare, among other things. While schools are not always in a position to provide a wide range of services directly to students, there are actions they can take to help students obtain the necessary supports they need, including creating an information hub on resource, providing guided application support, or facilitating referrals to off-campus services.

Recommendation #7:

Identify strategies to ensure that parents have reliable access to childcare, including on-campus childcare options.

Roughly 53% of student parents leave college without attaining a degree, a significantly higher rate than among their nonparent counterparts. One intervention that can make a big difference in this rate of noncompletion is the availability of convenient childcare, most notably on-campus childcare. For example, at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, student parents who used the on-campus childcare center were nearly three times as likely to graduate as those who did not utilize these services.

**“Not having enough money, not being able to have another or different job due to lack of childcare,
not knowing if I will be able to completed my internship and degree due to lack of childcare,
not having any support system are sources of stress for me.”**

– virtual focus group participant

Recommendation #8:

Make parenting students feel more “visible” by representing them on campus materials and creating customized orientation materials.

Across the board, parenting students report feeling less welcome on their campuses than nonparenting students. Since a sense of connection and belonging have a strong impact on mental health, it is extremely important that schools address this as part of any effort to support the emotional well-being of parenting students.

“I definitely feel like more of an outsider.”

– virtual focus group participant

Parenting students make up a significant portion of the general undergraduate student body in this country, but they are often overlooked. This group demonstrates a great deal of resilience and an ability to handle an overwhelming amount of pressure and competing demands. In some ways, their status as parents is protective against emotional distress, but there is also abundant evidence to suggest that parenting students may experience high levels of anxiety, stress, and depression. This distress is compounded by frequent struggles with basic needs (adequate food, affordable housing, etc.) and a general feeling of isolation and lack of connection to campus. There are many ways that universities can support the mental health of student parents, including everything from better understanding their needs to helping them find affordable childcare. By supporting parenting students, schools will also be supporting their children, thus fostering the well-being of the next generation of students.