



innovationhub
deepening collaboration

Understanding the Experience of Student Parents at the University of Toronto

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary
April 2019



Prepared for the Family Care Office,
University of Toronto

table of contents

Introduction	3
Finding Belonging	4
Navigating Systems	7
Emotional Barriers/ Challenges	10
Support for Practical Needs	13
Suzy's Story	16
Ananya's Story	17
Nikita's Story	18
Limitations	19
Conclusion and Next Steps	20
Appendix: Persona Visualization	21
Student Contributors	22

introduction

The Family Care Office offers support to the University of Toronto's students, staff, and faculty for family-care issues. To better understand the experiences of students with family-care responsibilities, the office partnered with the Innovation Hub over the past six months to collect reliable and definitive data about the tensions and barriers faced by student parents. The following report summarizes the Innovation Hub's analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted with student parents and Family Care Office staff. These interviews highlight the challenges that students face as they navigate their dual responsibilities at the University of Toronto. The analysis reveals four themes: **Finding Belonging, Navigating Systems, Emotional Pressure, and Practical Needs.**

What follows is a summary of the **main themes**, the **specific insights** within each theme, **quotes that bring the insights to life**, and **questions that emerged** out of the findings. At the end of the report, **three personas** provide a general snapshot of student parent experiences at the University of Toronto. These personas are created based on the data we gathered, while maintaining confidentiality through anonymization.

themes

Finding Belonging

Finding belonging is an aspect of university life that every student is encouraged to do—and whether through joining sports teams or joining clubs, many students find a form of camaraderie at university. However, a reoccurring theme with student parents is a marked difficulty in finding a similar sense of belonging. A sense of belonging is important for forming meaningful interpersonal connections, better coping with school and life challenges, and obtaining comfort in knowing that one is not alone.

Insights

- 1) **Visibility:** Students appreciate spaces and resources created with student parents in mind, such as the family study room at Robarts Library, departmental lounges with toys, the Family Care Office's workshops, and counselling spaces. These areas give student parents a sense of belonging at the university. In addition, they increase parents' visibility and acknowledge their presence within the larger student population.

Spaces and resources that increase the visibility of student parents show that their needs are recognized by the larger university body, as opposed to being rendered unseen and invisible. Seeing oneself represented, for example in a picture of a family within a university handbook, is seen as an acknowledgment and normalization of student parents' presence and experiences. Visibility fosters a sense of affirmation of student parents' identities and can help enhance positive feelings of self-worth and belonging. Furthermore, this increased visibility will allow for the larger university body to become more aware of the presence of student parents and better understand their experiences. In turn, this will create a more inclusive culture at the University of Toronto.

Key Data Points

"I use the family room at Robarts semi-regularly. And I was thrilled when that came into existence [...] It acknowledges student parents, and that's huge actually, mentally speaking. And it gives a space to them. And the days that you don't have childcare figured out, but you still want to be even pretending to work in that space. [...] Like, you know, the days that you feel like you are balancing too many balls in the air—like, everything's sort of crashing down [...] And so, acknowledging that student parents exist and are possibly feeling the same way and putting some stuff in place for them. Yeah, I think that's important."

"It does just really feel like visibility of student parents is starting to rise. And I guess the visibility of a lot of issues surrounding parenting—and especially motherhood—I think is on the rise. And that's really been helpful. Just talking about invisible workloads, and relationships, and families and stuff. And so all of these things,

coupled with the university providing spaces and programming and stuff does make me feel really lucky to be here now."

"Why I chose U of T was because there was infrastructure that provided family care and day care. Also, the law school gave me a handout book, and it features a picture of a family."

- 2) Community of Understanding:** An integral part of belonging to any community is a sense of connectedness, be it in terms of shared goals, priorities, interests, life experiences, or needs. However, implicit in any form of community is a sense of inclusion and exclusion. For many student parents, while they do belong to the larger University of Toronto community, they sometimes feel isolated from their peers, because their experiences, needs, and concerns are different. Instead, they feel more connected to other student parents, who share similar experiences. Therefore, having a community of student parents, where they feel understood, supported, and connected, is an important need.

Forming this community allows many students to view their experience of integrating family-care and student responsibilities in a new light: the challenges are no longer viewed as individual challenges, but rather as experiences that are shared among the members of their community.

Key Data Points

"I actually used more of the Family Care Office when I was pregnant. I went to all the workshops and meetings they had on pregnancy Because I felt like, normally at school, you're the only one that is pregnant. So, I felt I didn't have anyone to share or to talk about in school [...] It was a moment where I could meet other pregnant girls [who are] in the same situation and share like experiences [...] It was a good place to make friends and also hear other stories about the same experience that you are having."

"Well, there's potentially a competitive aspect to programs and things and so, you know, you don't want to be comparing yourself to others, who are [going through a different experience]—You've taken a year off and sometimes it takes time to get back into just being able to read and write and do all that stuff. So, that's where I think being able to connect with other students who have done that process, or are in that process—just as a support."

"I'm sure there are more of them [student parents] than I think there are, you know? I mean ... it's me alone, there are few students that I know, but they are not parents, and then there are lot of people [who are] like 20 years younger than I am. Their life experience is very different—the financial pressure[s] that they are facing are different than the ones that I'm facing, and the stuff they are struggling [with] is very different, so it can sort [of] be a little bit isolating in that way."

- 3) **Socialization:** Being able to socialize with one's cohort or department is not only an emotional need, but also a step that allows for student parents to feel closer to their peers. However, the time constraints on student parents—especially since many social gatherings happen after child-care hours—make it difficult for student parents to feel connected to their departments. These constraints contribute to their larger feelings of isolation from their department or cohort.

Key Data Points

"Sometimes I felt I was missing social elements. You know, I am friendly to people, I made friends in law school, but it is not like we socialize [outside of school]. I like to share experiences, but I share experiences with my family more than my class."

"Within the department, I know a lot of people here, but it's very hard to have a social aspect to it when a lot of stuff goes on in the evening [...] My day ends at 4:30, cause I go pick up my daughter from daycare. And [...] then we're home, we do family stuff in the evening. And on the weekends, we don't get a whole lot of time together during the week, so on the weekends, it's family time, right?"

"It is very hard to balance—it is hard to balance and hard to get into sort of a group of people here without having to—having known people [beforehand]."

Discussion Questions

- 1) How can the Family Care Office and the University of Toronto increase the sense of belonging for student parents?
- 2) How can the Family Care Office support departments and student bodies in creating more inclusive programming that fosters socialization for student parents?
- 3) How can the visibility of student parents within the University of Toronto student population be increased? How might the University of Toronto intentionally welcome students with family responsibilities into more spaces?

themes

Navigating Systems

Many student parents shared their frustrations with navigating access within the University of Toronto's different systems. Support and services may be available (or unavailable) at different levels of the university, such as the Graduate Student Union, the Family Care Office, the department, or individual faculty members. However, there are significant barriers to accessing these resources, starting with lack of knowledge of the existence of different services. In addition, each service may have different, and at times burdensome or time-consuming, requirements, and there is a lack of integration between the student parent's academic department and student services. The burden of navigating and negotiating between different bodies at University of Toronto has led many to seek external support or individual support in their department, as opposed to consulting the larger existing resources at the University of Toronto.

Insights

- 1) **Finding Time to Navigate:** Many student parents lack the time to investigate complex administrative systems so they can access services. As a result, they express a need for many resources without being aware that these services already exist. While they may be aware of other resources, such as the Family Care Office, they may be unable to access them due to time constraints. Working within and around these constraints, and making systems less burdensome to navigate, could allow student parents to access these services more efficiently.

Key Data Points

"I probably haven't taken advantage of the Family Care Office. I know that there are also some like lecture series and stuff that go on, and I have attended a couple of them. And I just at some point, due to time, I stopped, I stopped going, but [...] there was a mindful parenting session that I attended that have sort of carried, carried stuff with me from it."

"[The reason I haven't used Family Care Office resources:] One is time and I'm working full time. Also [it] is too far from me so if it can be like online chatting group. [“They do have online stuff.”] Oh, yeah, I really should check that. Yeah, okay."

"I didn't even, while pregnant, think that I should be getting on waitlists, while I was pregnant. Nor did I know that you could while you were pregnant. Um, that just, I guess, didn't come up unprepared—I was more focusing on trying to get certain milestones for school and work completed, before [my daughter] came and not really thinking about that aspect."

- 2) **Disconnect within the Institution:** There are many different institutional layers that student parents need to work with to manage their situations: for example, the Family Care Office and students' academic departments offer different resources. Students noted that disconnection between different bodies at the university caused difficulties for them. Such disconnects leave students with a higher administrative burden, requiring them to self-advocate and repeat their story to different bodies and departments within the institution. Many students find that they must go through many disjointed layers of the institution to seek accommodation and complete their studies. Since some university policies and services are not designed with student parents in mind, unique situations may arise, and the lack of communication between departments makes these situations difficult and time-consuming for student parents to resolve.

Key Data Points

"And so the Family Care Office people were very willing to problem solve it with me. And they were very kind and very supportive. But unfortunately, it wasn't enough to actually help solve [the] various complexities of the situation. So, there were like, a number of different people that I had to sort of work with, to do that."

"Mat leave, it's like you're partly on leave but you [are] still supposed to still have access to all sorts of services at the university. My [Research Ethics Board] ethics review was expiring, I needed to renew it. Very simple, just apply for renewal of my ethics so that I could continue my fieldwork [after maternity leave] [...] My access to that site was completely discontinued so I had absolutely no access. And so, I had to ask one of my supervisors to do the renewal for me and he ended up having a lot of trouble [...] The problem was also the ethics review board—[their] office wasn't familiar with this kind of situation. I guess they've never seen it before [...] Honestly, at that point, I was already on mat leave, like I'd already had the baby. I have, like I spent probably up to maybe 10 hours—and I'm not exaggerating here—on phone calls and emails while I had a baby nursing, talking with different offices at the university to try to figure it out It was like nobody was coordinated. They said, 'Okay, call the student office, call the register's office, call Arts and Sciences,' that's every person— 'Call your department.' I spoke to so many people, and nobody could figure it out. It was just this whole ordeal ... and the office couldn't figure it out, and nobody could figure out how to get me access. And there was no precedent; it even took us a long time to even figure out that was the reason I've been kicked out of the system."

- 3) **Individual Support vs. Institutional Support:** Many students seek individual accommodations from their departments or supervisors without becoming aware of the larger resources that exist. Sometimes, both students and their departments must learn through trial and error how changes to their student status (e.g., full-time to part-time, maternity leave) and other policies impact them. Some students feel positive about this individual support, but others feel disincentivized by this *ad hoc* approach, either because they think there is a limit to what they can ask for, or because they feel that they are already asking for too much.

Key Data Points

“The person is explicitly supportive, but then implicitly, like, they want their things done. So, I’ve TA’ed before where this happened, right? There were like, two separate situations where—one when my kid was sick, and the other I actually went through a miscarriage in between the two kids. And that was actually one of the most challenging times and they were, they were supportive, but also, like ... there was a limit to it. I took this [...] one extension and finished everything on time. But it was terrible. And I think—I don’t know—I’m not sure how much leeway they would have had either way, but I felt like they could have been more sympathetic.”

“I was out, like, a couple hundred dollars—which can sometimes be a huge amount—which I just assumed was being covered. And so, I think that was another random tidbit of information that I learned. The onus is really on you to try to find out. And I guess, the onus on faculties to support and make that clear to students who are coming back, from mat leave—or, whatever—to be able to have that communicated to parents so that there’s an understanding of the circumstances. [...] It’s nice to see that instead of you thinking, ‘Oh, well, the onus is on me to like, figure it out because this is my circumstance,’ which is not the norm or the typical, maybe. I have to figure it out, instead of realizing, ‘Oh, no, it should be part of the responsibility of the University of Toronto, too.’”

“My supervisor was one of my profs, so he kinda knew what was going on—like, knew it’d been kind of a tough adjustment for us [...] with my wife g—like, starting back to work after mat leave, and my daughter starting at daycare, and us moving and that kind of thing. But my other prof was really understanding.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) How can the Family Care Office work within the university structure to ease student parents’ struggles with navigating the many layers of bureaucracy?
- 2) How can the Family Care Office better connect to student parents who seek the many resources that it provides?
- 3) How can the Family Care Office support departments to ensure that their programming and policies consider students with family-care responsibilities?

themes

Emotional Barriers/ Challenges

While there are many resources available for student parents, they often face emotional and mental barriers. Common experiences include feelings of stress, discomfort with disclosing that they have children, guilt, etc. These emotional or mental challenges sometimes prevent students from wanting, and self-advocating for, more support. This can negatively affect their academic success and generally contribute to feeling isolated from the University.

Insights

- 1) **Stress and Difficulty Concentrating:** Integrating family responsibilities with schoolwork causes a lot of emotional stress for student parents, which can negatively affect their ability to focus on their academic work. Student parents also experience a constant need for their time and attention to be focused on either schoolwork or their family. The resultant stress affects both aspects of their lives. This stress is, in part, a by-product of some of the other themes and insights already highlighted in this report, including isolation, lacking a community of support, lack of awareness about existing resources, and time constraints.

Key Data Points

"I can't concentrate Every time, my day starts with crying Like, I cry with my baby. After that I come here. [For the] first half-an-hour or 40 minutes, I can't concentrate at all in my classes."

"I can't take the stress. Like two days ago, I'm speaking frankly [laughter], like two days before, I yelled at [my daughter] like for five minutes and then I got so guilty that I called my doctor for it. It's not her fault."

"[I've just been thinking over the] last few days, that a person—if he or she decides to study—they should first complete those studies and then have a child. You have to deal with a lot of anxiety and stress—with study, with child, with family, so [many] responsibilities."

"I have broken down a few times, and sometimes, I would break down and start crying. As a mother, I just started crying and felt like I could not finish it [the assignment]. What happens is, I would wake up at 5am or sleep at 3am [...] So, it has been a year and a half where I could not do work on the weekends. I try many times, but it just does not work; I try to take them to the library so that they read, and I try to do some work. But there are so many interruptions; at home it is the same—so many interruptions."

"But again, falling behind, I cannot take it very lightly—I get very stressed. I don't want to appear as someone who doesn't care. I think I do much more than what others in my program do. Like, I don't have 5-minute break in my day, but still you

don't really see this. I look like someone who is not keeping up and is not good enough in program."

- 2) Uncomfortable Asking for Help:** Many student parents feel that they are not supposed to ask for help—and that asking for help means that they are asking for favours. In fact, many student parents think that their needs will work against them in their department, potentially being interpreted as a lack of seriousness towards their academic pursuits, or an inability to meet the demands of their professors. This discomfort, based on the idea that one's success should be rooted in one's merit and individual hard work, contradicts the principle of equity, which maintains that all students should succeed despite the barriers and challenges that they face. This idea that success in university is based on meritocracy is sometimes internalized by student parents, but it is also sometimes conveyed by the faculty. This message leads many student parents to view the challenges of integrating family and school responsibilities as individual shortcomings, as opposed to symptoms of inequality in opportunities, thus preventing them from asking for help.

Key Data Points

"I don't want to go to professors and say that 'I have a child; I can't manage all the work properly.' Or that 'My grade can be lower than others.' I can't do that. Because I know it's---it's not like—I'm not feeling comfortable with that. Like, seeking help or something [...] I can't ask the favour from her. I'm not comfortable with that."

"For me, I personally, I hate doing that. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I have kids. I can't really do that.' But sometimes, that's what you should do. Even during this holiday season, I have some work to do with another like—different faculty members, some paper deadlines, everything—but I just let them know. You know, I just have to be upfront. [laugh] Yeah, I think that's maybe a strategy or a survival tip."

"I lost my voice, not a little bit, but completely, so I had to email my professor and say that I cannot do my presentation tomorrow; I literally—I will be there; I will attend the class; I will listen to other[s]; it will be impossible; I cannot even speak, and she basically sat me down and said, 'I have a seven-year-old too, and you have to manage it too. I'm not going to cut you any slack.'"

- 3) Guilt:** The challenge of integrating school and family responsibilities causes many student parents to feel guilty that they are unable to be a "good parent" and a "good student". Many student parents feel guilty for dedicating their complete time and attention to their children, while also feeling guilty when school is no longer their number one, or only, priority. These feelings of guilt are derived, in part, from ideals of what a "good parent" and a "good student" are, ideals that lead many to place even higher expectations on themselves, with little time dedicated to self-care.

Key Data Points

"I think that I probably feel guilty in both ways. I probably feel more guilty from the parent aspect to be honest, and the student aspect only because I've made a conscious choice that like—as much as I'm committed to my studies and I'm interested in them and they're important—that my responsibility to my daughter has to come first. But I feel like, as much as I can say that in my mind and try to work to that, I definitely—I would be a better parent to her if I had a better work-life balance than I do."

"I also do not want my kids to suffer; even when I have stuff to do, I want my kids to have a good life and do everything that other children do. I still want to make them happy."

"Every little thing that comes up with your kids, like, [my kid] has been really late to potty train and there's issues there. So, you know, a lot of that is me being like, 'Oh, if I were at home with them consistently would that change things?' [...] I don't know."

Discussion Questions

- 1) How can the Family Care Office and the University of Toronto make it easier for student parents to ask for help?
- 2) What are some ways to address the unique emotional and mental pressures of student parents?
- 3) How can the Family Care Office help student parents feel empowered to solve their own problems?

themes

Support for Practical Needs

Student parents have many practical needs, and lack of support for these needs puts further limitations and stress upon them. Many student parents feel stressed by lack of time, financial constraints, and difficulty in finding childcare. Constantly having to find ways to meet their practical needs hinders student parents' abilities to better integrate their dual responsibility as parents and students.

Insights

- 1) **Lack of Childcare:** Childcare in Toronto is difficult to find and expensive, but crucial in allowing student parents to pursue their studies while caring for their children. The childcare system in Toronto leaves many student parents uncertain as to whether they will be able to continue full-time studies, and even those who have reliable, full-time childcare find that there are gaps on the weekend or after hours that prevent them from participating in campus life as much as they would like.

Key Data Points

"So I know that some students would like to spend more time on campus, maybe on a weekend to work on [a] group project or maybe to participate in workshops or something like that. But there's no childcare being offered [at that time]."

"So, in [the] first year of my Master's, I had to bring my son with me to university during classes—[the] babysitter was supposed to babysit my kid outside of the classroom, but she did cancel—so I had to bring my boy into the classroom at some point. It is not reliable—so it is always stressful. [The] instructor was very welcoming; [they] allowed it. On that day he was very well-behaved, but then I know that having a three-year-old can go either way in a fraction of a second. He did behave, but it is not something I want to repeat because I could not concentrate."

"Yeah, so, if, if we hadn't have gotten full-time daycare, probably what would happen, was we would have had to find a daycare that would take daily or, like, uh, part-time, um, and so, I would stay home with my daughter on the days—Like, we would go two days or three days a week, or whatever would work, and then I would just stay home with her on those other days, so m—my wife could work full-time."

"Somehow, I manage to realize to get my son onto the waiting list the first time, and he did not start until one year. For the first year, I went for part time, he stayed at home for one year with two of us, so we just manage between two of us."

"I think the most challenging period of time is some things like now [winter holidays], you know, everything is closed: they don't go to school; we don't have day care. I wish there was some kind of support during that kind of period."

- 2) **Lack of Time:** Student parents have many time-consuming, competing demands and responsibilities. While they often become experts in time management out of necessity, many feel squeezed by the lack of time they have. To cope with the demands of school and parenting, they cut their sleep and personal time. The lack of rest, combined with the time pressures, puts a toll on parents and often negatively impacts their mental health.

Key Data Points

“Number one, what I do to organize my time, actually use project management software, and I sit down at the beginning of the semester and I try to think of any important things [that] have to be done, with my kids, with my finances, um, the stuff with my parents happens usually, when they call me say, and I just fit it in, I don’t.”

“Yeah. short on time, or short on hand. Like if we had like, we try not to do groceries or cleaning things like that when our daughters in daycare, because that’s kind of like precious work time. It’s very, very precious work time. And we really try to hold on to that. Because if we start doing groceries and cleaning during when she’s at day care, then neither of us will get any work done.”

“So, like, you just have to cut the hours of your sleep. That’s the only way you can get through, you know, get some work done if you need extra time.”

“But as a student, I think it’s important [...] to admit that your time is limited, and you can’t just ... like you don’t really have the extra time that other people have. So, either you have to give up on some extra achievements that you might be able to [do] without kids, or you should, you should let others know that you are a parent, and maybe lower the expectation.”

“I can’t pull all-nighters. I mean, I can pull all-nighters, but I have to take care of a person, a little person who needs me very badly, need[s] [...] a lot of my time and my energy. [...] I haven’t watched a movie [...] since I think I was pregnant. I don’t have time for things like that. Like, I don’t, it’s ... every moment is either working or like, taking care of my baby, or our family. Or like, our apartment, like things that need to get done. They can’t be like, like, we haven’t had a holiday or like, relaxed or something for a very long time.”

- 3) **Financial Constraints:** Toronto is expensive for everyone, but student parents have additional dependents that increase their financial constraints, because they must find affordable childcare and housing while relying on OSAP, graduate funding, or their partners’ income. The financial pressures often lead student parents to take on more TA-ships and GA-ships in their departments, which further limits the time available for their own studies and parenting duties.

Key Data Points

“Honestly, like, financial [stresses] would be the biggest thing. Like, [if] the School of Graduate Studies, or the university or the department had some kind of [...] some top-up to the City of Toronto subsidy [...] that would be a huge—it would make a huge difference. The other thing, too, is ultimately like [...] Toronto is becoming unliveable, it’s so expensive.”

“I would say the number one issue is housing here. You know, childcare is complicated, but housing is a super issue, and I would actually say that—looking at Toronto—I almost didn’t come here because of the cost of the city.”

“I think what we need the most is time [laugh] and maybe financial support. Yes. So that [...] we can eat; we can order in more [...] It’s really hard, like cooking just takes time and dishes—like washing dishes They don’t allow us to have dish washers in this building. So you have to have to do [it] manually, and it’s just a lot time-wise, but I wouldn’t [...] I don’t think it’s really reasonable to expect a large sum—like the amount of money be for the parents [...] I don’t know, like a little could help.”

“And it’s financially also hard [...] If there was some—like a little more, like, financial support. We could spend that money to save some time by ordering in some food, or by hiring someone to do the cleaning. Or even some daycare or baby care ... a babysitter. Yeah, for on the weekends, even for a few hours...”

“I feel very lucky that again, like I would like to go back to my supervisors who are aware and accepting of the fact that the PhD is gonna take me longer and I feel lucky. But that’s no—I mean, it’s going to cost me more. I have to pay for extra probably few years of tuition, which really sucks. The financial part is really stressful. Very, very stressful.”

Discussion Questions

- 1) Considering the time and financial constraints on student parents, is there a way to streamline access to family care funds?
- 2) Are there any available resources that can be repurposed to address student parents' practical needs?
- 3) What support can the Family Care Office offer to student parents to assist them with childcare and time constraints?

personas
Suzy's
Story

**Graduate Student
with a Young Child**



I'm a PhD candidate in the social sciences with a two-year-old child. I have the support of my partner who works full time, as well as other family members who are able to care for my young daughter sometimes.

I was unsure if I'd be able to come back to work from my maternity leave last year, since I'd been having difficulty finding a subsidized daycare space, even though I had put my name on the list as soon as I became pregnant. Luckily, things worked out, and I was able to find a space at a daycare near campus.

Most weekdays, I drop my daughter off at daycare, and I work on my research during the day, while my partner works outside. I also have TAing and RAing responsibilities. In the evenings, I find it difficult to do any additional work after my partner and I feed our daughter and play with her, so work is limited to what I can do during the day. Sometimes, on the weekends, my sister or partner can take care of our daughter, which helps free up some precious hours of work time. I can't even imagine if I didn't have a partner ... and family support.

Even with the support of my partner and family, I feel a lot of time pressure and stress trying to balance my research and domestic responsibilities. Although I am productive during the day, I am not able to meet strict deadlines like before. My advisor has been understanding of my family responsibilities, but I still feel guilty for my loss of productivity and often feel like I should not disclose the fact that I have a child to colleagues and professors—I don't want to make excuses. If my daughter gets sick and I need to stay home, I need to make informal arrangements with other TAs to cover classes.

I wish that student parents were more visible on campus, since my unique challenges as a parent and student aren't always recognized on campus or understood by my family. I feel like connecting with other student parents and building a community of peers would be helpful in finding "support and guidance" as a student parent.



I'm in a professional, course-based Master's program at U of T; I've been in the program for five years. I am a single mother with a four-year-old and an eight-year-old. While my children see their father every other weekend, I bear most of the parenting responsibilities. I also commute from Oshawa to attend classes downtown.

Due to many responsibilities, I am only able to attend school part-time—taking one or two classes a semester. As a part-time, rather than a full-time, student, I am often not able to access financial resources that would make life easier, such as a student discount for the train.

Bearing the majority of childcare responsibilities, along with my schoolwork and commuting, creates an extremely busy and tiring schedule for me. At the beginning of my studies, I found it especially difficult to finish final assignments due to unexpected things that would come up, such as my children getting sick. Over the years, I have learned to manage my time more efficiently and balance various commitments, but doing it all alone is still a major source of stress and has negatively impacted my mental health.

I have found mixed supports at the University. I've taken advantage of some of the supports the Family Care Office offers, such as their webinars, and have found them very helpful. However, within my own faculty, I have not felt supported. One professor mentioned that they were not going to "cut me any slack" for being a student parent when I could not complete an assignment. There was one time when I could not provide the requisite documentation to prove my child was seriously ill, which led to me failing a course and set back my part-time studies.

Despite the difficulties that I've faced as a single student parent, I have learned through my studies how to manage my schoolwork along with my family care responsibilities so that unexpected events don't become "crisis situations". I have been motivated to persevere throughout my Master's. Ultimately, I will be able to obtain better employment that will help both my children and me.

I moved to Toronto, along with my husband and two daughters, almost five years ago to start a PhD program as an international student. My husband and I only learned about the waitlist for daycare when we arrived in Toronto, so my husband decided to delay his studies and take care of the children while I focused on school. But even when our daughters got into daycare, we found it very tough to adjust. They were having a hard time at daycare as they did not speak English and were not used to the food. Mornings would start with them crying and not wanting to go to daycare, and most days would end with more crying. This was the most challenging time for both my husband and me as we both felt very guilty for putting our daughters through this ordeal. I'm often unable to focus on my work because I'm constantly worried about my daughters and I couldn't sleep or study during this time. Thankfully, after a few months, they began getting used to the daycare and now happily leave the house every morning.

As an international student, I find that having children is much harder to manage than if I was a domestic student. Not only do I have no family support to rely on, but I feel obliged to maintain full-time status because it's confusing how the different benefits and policies change if I drop to part time. This was particularly challenging for our family when we had our third child during the third year of my PhD program. To maintain our subsidies, I could only take a one-month maternity leave and found it very difficult to place my one-month-old baby in daycare. Since then, we've adjusted to a new routine and I have become an expert in time management. However, to be able to manage all of my studies along with the shared responsibility for housework, I often find that I need to wake up very early in the morning to get some work done before sending the kids to daycare and leaving for work myself. This leaves no time for my husband and me to take care of ourselves or do anything together.

Although we make ends meet, financial constraints have placed a lot of limitations on our time and ability to seek external support. We don't have any family to help with the childcare, and we can't afford to pay for babysitters or any domestic help. We don't have any time for rest.

limitations:

This project provides an overview of the difficulties experienced by student parents at the University of Toronto. However, we should note some potential limitations in our findings.

First, during participant recruitment, we found undergraduate student parents much harder to reach than their graduate counterparts. Despite our best efforts, the data pool does not strongly represent undergraduate student parents, as our sample comprised mainly graduate students. The inability of undergraduate student parents to participate in this project may speak to the larger time constraints they face, as highlighted by staff and student counsellors at the Family Care Office and Woodsworth College. In fact, in the interviews with student counsellors, it became clear that many undergraduate student parents face even greater time constraints than graduate students as they often have part-time jobs, longer commutes, and less flexible schedules.

Second, the project was conducted primarily among student parents at the St. George campus, and thus, it is not necessarily representative of student parents across the tri-campus university.

Lastly, participants disproportionately identified as mothers who lived in heterosexual arrangements; therefore, our report does not incorporate the nuanced experiences that fathers and queer student parents face at the university.

conclusion and next steps:

The data gathered in this project demonstrate that student parents need a sense of belonging at the University of Toronto. Many of them feel disconnected from their department and appreciate meeting other individuals who share their experiences and challenges. Participants also emphasized the importance of increased visibility in normalizing and acknowledging the presence of student parents on campus. The data also demonstrated that, while the Family Care Office and other bodies at the University of Toronto offer many resources to support student parents, student parents do not access these resources due to time constraints, disconnection within the institution, and reliance on individual support within their respective departments. Third, student parents experience many emotional/mental challenges that curtail their ability to integrate their family and school responsibilities. These challenges include stress, difficulty concentrating, feelings of guilt, and discomfort with seeking help. Last, this project identified the practical needs that burden student parents, including financial needs, time constraints, and support for childcare.

Future projects with the Family Care Office on the specific experience of undergraduate students and students across the tri-campus university may reveal new themes and insights about the broader student-parent community at the university. Such findings will add texture to the varied needs of diverse student parents and can help facilitate the implementation of more inclusive policies at U of T.



We pose the following questions to generate a discussion about the implications of this data for future steps at the Family Care Office:

- 1) How might the Family Care Office better address and serve the needs of student parents who do not have the time to take advantage of already existing resources?
- 2) How can we create a better and safer environment where student parents are more comfortable with articulating issues and seeking help?
- 3) How can we create an environment where the needs and circumstances of student parents are valued and understood by the University community?

appendix: persona visualization

	 <p>"Telling my prof that I cannot conduct my tutorial because my daughter is sick may sound like an excuse, so it's better to make informal arrangements."</p>	 <p>"I just assumed that my department will be supportive given the situation..."</p>	 <p>"I hate telling people that I can't do certain things because of family care responsibilities, but there is no way out of this situation other than disclosing my situation."</p>
CONTEXT	Suzy's child gets sick and she cannot prepare to teach her tutorials.	Ananya asked for an extension on her final assignment to account for her child's surgery, but it was then postponed, leaving her with no documentation to support her claim	Nikita's 3 children are home on holiday break, but she has to finish work for her RAship
DOING	She asks her colleague to substitute for her, in exchange for her doing some of her share of grading later.	She asks for another extension for her assignment. She was preoccupied with her son's sickness and was not aware of UofT's bureaucratic requirements regarding formal documentation.	In absence of family support and daycare, she is preoccupied with entertaining, feeding, and taking care of her children. Public holidays are the most tiring and stressful time for her. She notifies her supervisor that she will not be able to finish the work on time.
FEELING	Stressed, guilty	Tired, stressed, feeling like she doesn't belong	Resigned ("what can I do?"), tired, guilty
BARRIERS	Feels like her family responsibilities are seen as excuses, wants more support, feels guilty for not being able to carry her TA work properly.	Feeling like her experience did not fit within the narrow bureaucratic requirements, felt unsupported by her department.	It was difficult for her to say that she will not be able to do her work during the break, with too many time constraints and family responsibilities.
TOUCHPOINTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colleague (wanted to limit her reliance on formal resources + processes) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professor • Administration • Faculty Dean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supervisor

An

Student Contributors

Shirin Gerami, 5th Year PhD Student, Socio-Cultural Anthropology

Danielle Lum, 2nd Year Master of Information, User Experience Design

Liza Brechbill, 2nd Year Master of Arts, Social Justice Education

Kaitlyn Corlett, 1st Year Master of Education, Adult Education and
Community Development

Student Volunteers

Vidhya Elango, Undergraduate Student, Anthropology

Ziyue (Amanda) Liu, Undergraduate Student, Neuroscience

Mulan Li, Undergraduate Student, Humanities

Jiayuan (Doris) Pan, Undergraduate Student, Mathematics and Economics

Yuan (William) Gao, Master of Science of Pharmacology and Toxicology

Siyi (Sue) Wu, Master of Education, Developmental Psychology and Education

Huaqing (Olivia) Zhang, Master of Information

Danju (Susie) Hu, Master of Education, User Experience Design



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

For more information, or to work with the Innovation Hub,
please contact Julia Smeed at julia.smeed@utoronto.ca or
416-978-8619, or visit our blog at uoft.me/innovationhub