July 2019

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

Family Care Office
Summer 2019

Themes and Insights: Design Thinking Summary

FAMILY CARE OFFICE

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARIES

innovationhub
deepening collaboration

Table of Contents

Introduction

Student parents are a growing group of students at the University of Toronto (U of T) facing unique challenges that appear invisible to those who do not share their experiences. In 2018–19, the Innovation Hub partnered with the Family Care Office to investigate the experiences of student parents and identify the tensions and barriers they face at U of T. This work found four main themes pertaining to student parents' experiences: **finding belonging, navigating systems, emotional pressure, and practical needs**. The current report will build upon these themes by identifying the improvements in policies, programs, services, and spaces that departments and divisions can undertake to be more inclusive of students who are also parents.

Departments and divisions at U of T can make many small and large-scale changes to alleviate the tensions and barriers that student parents face. While some solutions may require a big budget and structural changes, there are other solutions that require fewer resources and can immediately improve student parents' lives. To identify such solutions, the Innovation Hub hosted a design thinking ideation event with student parents on June 19th, 2019, to answer the following questions:

- **What simple things can U of T do to be more family-friendly?**
- **What resources and support systems would create a more inclusive culture?**
- **How can we take concrete steps to address some of the issues identified in the 2018–19 inquiry?**

This report provides a brief overview of the 2018–19 findings to contextualize the specific issues that must be addressed to make a more family-friendly U of T and the methods used to expand upon those issues in the current project. Feedback collected from the design thinking event formed our key themes and insights on how to address the needs student parents have expressed and the challenges facing them. From these themes, Innovation Hub designers also developed a set of design principles and a draft checklist that can guide departments and divisions in creating an inclusive family-friendly university.

Context of Design Project

Overview of 2018–19 Findings:

In 2018–19, the Innovation Hub conducted and analyzed semi-structured interviews with students who are also parents and with the staff who support them. The analysis revealed four overarching themes: *finding belonging, navigating systems, emotional pressure,* and *practical needs*. The data from the June 19th design event echoed these themes and amplified our earlier findings.

Finding Belonging:

Student parents commonly report a marked difficulty in finding a sense of belonging at the university, which impacts their ability to form meaningful interpersonal connections, cope with school and life challenges, and obtain comfort from knowing that they are not alone. A sense of belonging is fostered through visibility, socialization, and communities of understanding. Spaces and resources that increase the visibility of student parents, such as the Family Study Room at Robarts or pictures of families in handbooks, signal to student parents that their presence and experiences are acknowledged and normalized by the university.
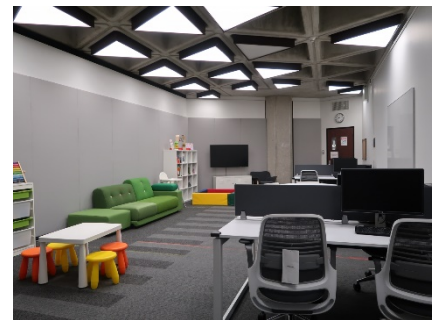

Figure 1. Family Study Room at Robarts Library

Navigating Systems:

Many student parents shared their frustrations with navigating access within U of T's different systems. While support is available at different levels of the university, there are significant barriers to accessing resources, such as lack of knowledge of existing services, burdensome requirements for access, and lack of integration between the student parent's academic department and student services. Making systems less burdensome to navigate, and specifically considering the significant time constraints faced by student parents, might allow them to access necessary services more efficiently.

Emotional Barriers/Challenges:

Students commonly face emotional and mental barriers, including stress, guilt, and discomfort with disclosing that they have children. This can affect their academic success and contribute to feelings of isolation. Many student parents think that their needs as parents will work against them in their department and are uncomfortable with asking for help or disclosing that they have children. This discomfort, based on the idea that one's progress and 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 they may face. The individualistic model of success causes many student parents to view the challenges of integrating family and school responsibilities as individual shortcomings, as opposed to symptoms of unequal opportunities.

Support for Practical Needs:

Student parents have many practical needs, including time, financial flexibility, and childcare. Constantly having to find ways to meet these needs hinders student parents' ability to better integrate their dual responsibilities as parents and students, limits their available time and resources, and negatively impacts their mental health.

These four themes guided the Innovation Hub in designing an event that worked strategically with parents to ideate what a family-friendly university could look like and helped to inform the methods, activities, and themes that will be presented.

Methods

Building on information collected during the 2018–19 inquiry, the Innovation Hub and Family Care Office hosted a design thinking ideation event where student parents contributed potential solutions to the challenges they face. The event was organized around the question: **"What simple things can U of T do to be more family-friendly?"** The event included 12 participants, 2 undergraduate and 10 graduate students, across different departments and divisions, which provided a range of experiences and perspectives.

Innovation Hub Methods:

The Innovation Hub uses students' stories to gain insight into their experiences. We strive to understand the university experience as felt by students and to allow that understanding to inspire design, rather than beginning with preconceived ideas. To this end, we engage students through activities such as interviews, discussion groups, and interactive exercises, which reveal their world to us in their words. While our projects are motivated by data on student issues—the "what"—we delve into the experiences that underlie these issues—the "why." Thus, we focus on depth and diversity rather than strictly number of participants; we also supplement the analysis for each project with the bank of narratives we have collected from hundreds of U of T students, which reveals themes common among them.

In order to delve into the experiences of student parents and collect this type of data, we engaged participants with three types of activities that are used by the Innovation Hub to encourage reflection and creative ideation:

1. **Discussion-based activity:** Participants responded to the question: "What simple things can U of T do to be more family-friendly?"
2. **Creative activity:** Participants drew a picture of a family-friendly space that was not intentionally designed for families, then discussed the elements and principles that they considered essential for a family-friendly space (see Appendix B for drawings and brief descriptions of each).
3. **Role-playing activity**: Participants role-played a scenario that they encountered as student parents and brainstormed possible solutions, with the benefits and drawbacks for each.

Key Findings

By designing an event that was collaborative and family-friendly, these activities produced engaging discussions about the issues that affect student parents and possible solutions they would like to see. This data, along with previous insights from the 2018–19 report, formed themes and insights that communicate student parent needs and their lived experiences at the university. These findings were also used to develop design principles and a draft checklist that articulate how departments can become more family-friendly, designed to be shared across the university as a tool to consider next steps.

Four main themes emerged from the event data and from the findings in the first report. These themes provide a greater focus on the challenges that student parents face and potential solutions to them by addressing:

1. **Developing Connectedness**
2. **Changes to Communicating Information and Accommodations**
3. **Creating Spaces and Providing Resources**
4. **Increasing Inclusivity and Visibility**

Each theme covers a different facet of the student parent experience, but all interconnect. In the provided model, the themes from the 2018–19 findings are visualized in the external four circles. The design thinking ideation event showed how these needs intersect further into the bolded sections, which cover the Summer 2019 findings.

Figure 2. Model of Fall/Winter 2018–19 & Summer 2019 Findings

To explore these needs in a more finite matter, the design team curated ten design principles that foster inclusivity and empathy for student parents and their needs, along with a set of draft practical solutions to consider as next steps in different areas of the university, which are embodied in the central four icons. As a result, this model exemplifies that a truly inclusive and family-friendly university requires all connections working in tandem rather than being mutually exclusive.

Themes and Insights

Theme One: Developing Connectedness

Student parents described how a lack of connectedness makes them feel isolated at the university, because the majority of other students do not have the same facet of family responsibilities or share their experiences. They discussed solutions wherein the university provides them with more resources to socialize and network with each other.

Socialization

Participants said that current opportunities for meeting other student parents mainly consist of parenting workshops, whereas they would like opportunities to connect with each other specifically on a social level:

> "When I see the parent group, [it] is often like, 'We'll talk about sleep training,' and you're like, 'I just want to meet parents and socialize.' I have the Internet; I am a researcher. My partner is in child psychology; we're good in that department; I just want to meet parents and socialize."

Networking and Information Exchange

Participants discussed how social connections can address some of the other challenges they face as student parents. They raised the issue of inadequate childcare several times and discussed how a student parent network could help them to exchange information with each other about childcare and to organize childcare provided by other student parents. One participant suggested that student parents could look after other student parents' children during class:

> "If there was a group that connected all the U of T parents, then when I'm in class, you guys could take [the children]; when you're in class, I can. In most program[s], it's not 9 to 5, so if there's a group, then we can coordinate."

These networks would also enable student parents to share information about family events on campus, about which some would otherwise be unaware. Participants said that some family events and programs on campus are sparsely attended due to poor communication between organizers and student parents. They suggested that a student parent network would enable student parents to message each other about these events:

"We used a lot of the student family-housing activities, and oftentimes, we'd be the only ones there. We also found that when we would text parents with kids [our son's] age that we know and say, 'Hey, [we're] going at 4 today,' then other kids would show up. Even for the Family Care Office activities, [which were better attended,] when we coordinate, I think that we can bring in people who aren't necessarily coming."

The lack of connectedness felt by student parents, both as university students and with each other, negatively affects their experiences at U of T. They currently lack opportunities to socialize and network with each other, which prevents them from exchanging important information about student family resources. To solve this problem, they suggested that U of T create student parent groups and facilitate more social events for them, where these networks could be formed and this information could be shared.

Theme Two: **Changes to Communicating Information and Accommodations**

Student parents expressed frustration with the current way that policies are communicated and the lack of accommodations for their needs. In particular, communication about financial issues often occurs only after students start financial planning. Also, student parents find it difficult to receive the accommodations they need, because their needs are often not viewed as accessibility issues. When they are given accommodations, they generally receive a single type of accommodation that does not necessarily fit their specific situation. They would like to have a range of different accommodations that better suit their particular needs and the needs of their families.

Communicating Policy

Student parents felt that communication from their departments about critical services and responsibilities, such as financial arrangements and work assignments, should occur in a timely manner. Late announcements about awards and scholarships currently make financial planning difficult:

> *"I've been back and forth with [the division] on when the money comes in, and sometimes [it's] actually like six weeks later than they say. That was frustrating, just the timing financially."*

They also experience additional stress because Teaching Assistantships are often not announced until right before the semester starts, which is too late for student parents to incorporate them into their schedules, as they have already made arrangements for childcare that cannot be changed:

> *"One of the structural things that's been frustrating for me in terms of knowing my schedule in advance: [it] is not just [for] classes, but specifically for Teaching Assistantships. You have to apply for these positions, but my childcare schedule was locked for the semester."*

Expanding Accommodations

The challenges that student parents face are often not recognized as accessibility issues. As a result, it can be difficult for them to receive accommodations, and often the university does not offer the type of accommodations they need. For example, participants discussed the lack of flexibility in their program schedules, which is incompatible with their parental leave and childcare. They described instances where they were not given extensions for their work to accommodate their family responsibilities, and thus their work timelines were shifted.

Although some departments did provide accommodations, these policies often did not match the specific needs of each student parent. For example, accommodations often involve taking time off and decelerating their studies, even though some students would prefer to accelerate their studies before their child is born:

> *"During the time that I was giving birth and going through post-partum, when I met with my school, they said, 'You can [take] up to a year maternity leave off,' but I think for someone like me who is going to professional school, I think my goal is actually making use of my maternity leave. I want to accelerate instead of taking time off, but the support wasn't there. They don't realize that for some women who are willing to and able to, they would rather accelerate instead of taking time off."*

Communicating policy more effectively and offering more types of accommodation were suggestions from student parents for how to make U of T more family-friendly. Specifically, this would include providing them with information about financial arrangements and jobs earlier, which would allow them to incorporate their family responsibilities into their plans. Student parents would also like to have different accommodation options available to them to address their individual goals, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach.

Theme Three: **Creating Spaces and Providing Resources**

Student parents described how they are inconvenienced by the lack of family-friendly spaces on campus and the inaccessibility of the spaces that do exist. In most campus buildings, there are neither spaces specifically designated for families nor general spaces that are family-friendly, making it difficult for student parents to bring their children to campus. Participants suggested adding small play areas to buildings and a playground in a central location. They also mentioned problems with the accessibility of the Robarts Family Study Room, specifically its current inaccessibility to their family members who assist with childcare. Finally, they discussed the time-consuming process of accessing the nursing rooms on campus and potential improvements.

Play Areas

The lack of family-friendly spaces was highlighted as an issue for student parents on campus, which might be alleviated by turning part of the Grad Lounge into a family-friendly space and adding high-chairs to eating areas. Student parents also suggested repurposing unused spaces in buildings to create themed play areas for each department, which would provide children with opportunities to participate in their parents' and the university's activities:

> *"We have a science center that is designed for kids. We have a lot of scientists here and science buildings here, why can't we make one little one?"*

Much of the discussion about family-friendly spaces centered on the need for a playground on campus. Currently, the nearest playgrounds are off-campus and inconvenient for student parents. Participants were especially frustrated because there is seemingly enough space on campus for a playground and U of T is one of the few Canadian universities that does not have a campus playground:

> *"I think this particular thing of not having a park or a playground, this really [annoys] me because I have been to multiple campuses within Canada and just about every campus does have that kind of a park. The only hope was Queen's Park, but that's been being renovated forever. It's taking forever."*

Accessibility

Although U of T has a family-friendly study space, located in Robarts Library, and nursing areas, student parents often encounter problems using these spaces. The study room requires a student card to enter, which makes it inaccessible to partners, other family members, and caregivers, and causes inconvenience to student parents and their families:

"My husband has taken my daughter to school with me because I need to nurse her during the break. But when I was in school, he was fine, as long as he has a place to hang out and have a place she can play. My husband is also a student, not at U of T, so he cannot get in here."

Accessibility was mentioned as a barrier to using nursing rooms. One participant described the complicated ten-minute process required to access the nursing room in her building and suggested using different locks to simplify this procedure:

"In my building, the nursing room requires you to go to the front desk to get the key, open and go back to the other side of the building to use, get up the stairs, open the door. Then when you're done, you need to go all the way back up to return the key, then go back. And often, we have all-day classes, and the only time we can pump is during breaks, just that 10 minutes is only enough to get the door opened and closed. I don't know why we can't use a password, or there are so many types of locks. And it's just an easy solution."

Student parents contributed several suggestions for creating family-friendly spaces at U of T. These included such simple ideas as adding high-chairs to eating areas and creating play areas in existing spaces such as the Grad Lounge. Play areas could be themed, which would provide educational and interactive opportunities for children. Participants also stressed that adding a playground in an accessible location on campus would greatly benefit them, and that minor changes to existing spaces, including the Robarts Family Study Room and nursing rooms, would increase accessibility for student parents and their families.

Theme Four: **Increasing Inclusivity and Visibility**

An overarching theme that emerged was that student parents feel a lack of inclusivity and visibility at the university. They perceive that other students, faculty, and staff are often unaware of their presence on campus and their experiences. Many of the solutions they suggested are meant to increase inclusivity and visibility: these include using family-friendly spaces as visual demonstrations of the presence of families on campus and hosting university events for families.

Normalizing the Presence of Families on Campus

During the discussion about creating family-friendly spaces, participants mentioned how this would increase inclusivity and visibility. Upon seeing these spaces, other students, faculty, and staff would become aware of student parents' presence on campus. This aligns with U of T's mission to represent the diversity of its student body:

> *"I think for a lot of the other students who might not expect to see young kids, I think that's good for them to realize that when we talked about diversity on campus, that's partly what we mean."*

Rethinking Events and Scheduling

One parent described a positive experience with a family-friendly event hosted by her department that was open to all families on campus and suggested that other departments could use this as a model. Others agreed that this would be a good idea and that they would like to attend such events, which would foster connectedness among student parents:

> *"OISE hosted this amazing event last year, which was at the skating rink, where they invited all of the student families, and it could be anybody across U of T. I think different departments should take that initiative of having an annual event for just everybody in the community. A lot of the networking that we're talking about can actually happen there."*

Throughout the event, student parents emphasized the lack of inclusivity and visibility they felt at U of T. While discussing solutions to other challenges, they often mentioned how those solutions would also increase inclusivity and visibility. For example, creating family-friendly spaces would increase awareness and normalize the presence of families on campus. Inclusivity could also be fostered through family events and opportunities for student parents to socialize and network with each other.

Design Principles

The solutions offered during the ideation event allowed the design team to identify ten design principles that foster inclusivity and empathy for student parents and their needs. These principles are designed to inspire and guide staff, departments, and divisions as they think through their programming, services, and spaces, and the overall inclusivity of U of T.

It's About Inclusivity	Families are Welcome	Student Data Empowers	*With* Parents, not *for* Parents	Start with Empathy
Be Mindful of Time	Streamline Communications	It Takes a Village	Caregivers are Welcome	Build Practical Support Networks

1) *It's About Inclusivity:* Creating a family-friendly university aligns with U of T's commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity, justice, and excellence. It is important for departments and divisions to lead by example by designing a university that incorporates a genuine understanding of student parents' concerns and needs. This can also help the university relate to future students and influence other institutions to be family-friendly.

2) *Families are Welcome:* A truly family-friendly university has student parent needs woven into the very fabric of programs and services. This normalizes the presence of families at the university and sets a standard for all spaces, learning environments, scheduling, and even socializing on campus. This can foster a sense of belonging among student parents and benefit the community by showcasing what diversity, inclusivity, and equity mean in practice.

3) *Student Data Empowers:* Student parents are a diverse group of individuals whose needs differ when family circumstances, gender, disability, social class, and ethnicity are taken into account.[1] Awareness and understanding is an essential step for assessing how institutional policies affect student parents as a group and as individuals.[2,3] Gathering data on student parents can also build a narrative that faculty and staff can empathize with. This, in turn, will influence university policies, including those that cover comprehensive training materials and accessible peer support.[4]

4) *With Parents, Not for Parents:* Student parents have unique needs depending on their support network, age(s) of their children, or access to resources. Their needs also vary based on campus or department, and not all existing services necessarily work in tandem with students themselves. Therefore, there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution; a process that prioritizes working with individual student parents to gather feedback and ideate solutions, rather than designing for a generalized student body, is integral.

5) *Start with Empathy:* While there are existing policies that address inclusivity, student parents still share experiences where they felt guilt, judgment, or that they were at a disadvantage when asking for or receiving accommodations. This difference between policy and practice highlights that there needs to be a shared responsibility, shouldered by both university bodies and students, to create functioning family-friendly services and spaces.[5] This can begin with ensuring students receive their accommodations with understanding, flexibility, and empathy from faculty and staff.

---

[1] Moreau, M. (2014). *Towards the family-friendly university: Research evidence on student parents and implications for higher education policies*. Leadership Foundation for Higher Education.

[2] Gault, B., Noll, E., & Cruse, L. R. (2017, March 20). The Family-Friendly Campus Imperative: Supporting Success Among Community College Students with Children. Retrieved from https://iwpr.org/publications/family-friendly-campus-imperative-supporting-success-among-community-college-students-children/

[3] Canada's Top Family-Friendly Employers (2019). Retrieved from https://www.canadastop100.com/family/

[4] Ibid.

[5] The Family-Friendly Workplace. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/perhe-ja-tyo/in-english/

6) *Be Mindful of Time:* Student parents want a sense of belonging with one another and the broader student body. Many express that their time is split between school and family responsibilities, leaving little room in their schedules to socialize or make connections. It is important to have events and programs that allow student parents to socialize, network, and form communities.[6] To achieve this, there needs to be a conscious effort to facilitate such events and design them to be child-friendly or hold them within childcare hours. Such a community will give student parents accessible opportunities to feel that they are part of the university as both student and parents, making it easier for them to bring their "whole selves" to school.[7,8]

7) *Streamline Communications:* Improvements to university communication can ameliorate student parent experiences at U of T by notifying them of deadlines, resources, and spaces in a timely manner that respects their time constraints. Providing earlier notice of deadlines for financial applications, as well as year-round communication regarding existing family resources and services, will increase community awareness. Communication could also make parental leaves easier by giving student parents information before their leave ends that helps them with their transition back to school.[9,10]

8) *It Takes a Village:* Currently, the burden is on student parents to self-advocate, cobble together strategies, and hack their way into managing stress and competing demands. However, this burden can be shared among different actors and bodies at U of T by providing information and training on existing support systems that students require as they move through different stages of their studies and their child's growth. As research has shown, the more people are involved from different departments, divisions, and positions, the higher the likelihood of creating successful work-family integration.[11] This kind of participative process is an important way to create a positive institutional attitude towards families that extends beyond superficial and temporary acts.[12]

9) *Caregivers are Welcome:* A family-friendly university should recognize and accommodate non-student co-parents and caregivers when designing spaces, programs, and services. Many student parents rely on their co-parents, families, and other caregivers to support their children while they attend classes and study. However, these care providers cannot access resources that are restricted to students only. For U of T to be a family-friendly university, it needs to recognize the network of people that assists student parents. Examples granting non-student caregivers access to family study rooms and including intergenerational activities that involve grandparents.

10) *Build Practical Support Networks:* Among the most pressing needs that student parents expressed are lack of time, financial constraints, and difficulty in finding childcare. Large-scale improvements include financial assistance for student parents, childcare substitutes, and childcare drop-in services, while smaller measures include accommodating families in university spaces, creating play areas and breastfeeding areas, and having flexible timelines and policies. The limitations that childcare places on students in terms of their ability to continue their education, attend classes, and manage their mental and emotional stress cannot be ignored. While some student parents can piece together solutions based on their resources, many (such as international students) cannot necessarily build a network of support alone.

---

[6] Canada's Top Family-Friendly Employers (2019). Retrieved from https://www.canadastop100.com/family/

[7] Vozza, S. (2018, February 05). How Companies Can Really Make Their Workplaces Family-Friendly. Retrieved from https://www.fastcompany.com/40525237/how-companies-can-really-make-their-workplaces-family-friendly

[8] For example, in Estonia, Estonian Smart Work established a smart working center in a rural area where women shared their knowledge, jobs, and childcare duties with each other. In Germany, a government initiative provides firms with guidance on how to make it easier for employees to reconcile their work and family lives.

[9] Canada's Top Family-Friendly Employers (2019). Retrieved from https://www.canadastop100.com/family/

[10] Gault, B., Noll, E., & Cruse, L. R. (2017, March 20). The Family-Friendly Campus Imperative: Supporting Success Among Community College Students with Children. Retrieved from https://iwpr.org/publications/family-friendly-campus-imperative-supporting-success-among-community-college-students-children/

[11] Heikkinen, S., Lämsä, A., & Kangas, M. (2019). *Responsible Human Resource in Practice : Towards a Family-friendly Workplace*.

[12] Bloom, N., Kretschmer, T., & Reenen, J. V. (2010). Are family-friendly workplace practices a valuable firm resource? *Strategic Management Journal,32*(4), 343-367.

Draft Practical Solutions

These draft practical solutions are developed by considering the design principles, the four key themes, and insights provided in the previous report. These items may shift based on student group, department, and goals when considering how to make U of T a more family-friendly university.

1) **It's About Inclusivity:** *How can we embrace U of T's values in relation to student parents?*
   - □ Recognize a family-friendly university is an issue of equal opportunity, equity, and justice
   - □ View caring for student parents as a standard of excellence that elevates current students and attracts future students
   - □ Promote family-friendliness as a factor that makes U of T a leading educational institute

2) **Families are Welcome**: *Is the presence of families assumed, normalized, and planned?*
   - □ Create open spaces for play areas in building lounges
   - □ Create private nursing areas (preferably not in washrooms)
   - □ Include high-chairs in cafeterias and communal eating areas
   - □ Create outdoor play areas, such as a park on campus
   - □ Integrate children into the learning environment of the university (themed play areas based on the purpose of the building, e.g., physics-themed play area in the physics department)
   - □ Add a clause to syllabi that welcomes children when childcare is unavailable
   - □ Plan social and academic events (including classes) during childcare hours
   - □ Make convocations child-friendly
   - □ Allow student parents to attend classes and meetings via phone or Internet
   - □ Have student parent representatives on undergraduate and graduate student associations

3) **Student Data Empowers:** *Who are the student parents in your department?*
   - □ Survey and collect data on student parents, including the number of student parents, programs of study, demographics, and family circumstances
   - □ Collect data on student parents' retention and completion rates
   - □ Provide training and information to faculty and staff about the student parent population and relevant resources and services

4) *With* **Parents and Not** *for* **Parents**: *Are you working with student parents to find flexible solutions?*
   - □ Reach out to student parents to get feedback on their needs
   - □ Create a student parent task force or advisory board
   - □ Involve student parents in designing (and redesigning) spaces, policies, and services

5) **Start with Empathy:** *How can you work with student parents to provide more support?*
   - □ Be flexible with student parents regarding deadlines and timelines
   - □ Create formal childcare emergency leave days
   - □ Allow flexibility in the use of parental leaves
   - □ Advocate for better work-life balance for student parents (and all students)
   - □ Identify opportunities to normalize the presence of student parents at the university, including child-friendly spaces and syllabi clauses

6) **Be Mindful of Time:** *Are your department's events and programs family-friendly?*
   - ☐ Shift happy-hour events to breakfast or lunch events that fall within childcare hours
   - ☐ Plan family-friendly events, where student parents can bring their children while they socialize and network
   - ☐ Host Bring Your Child to School events to make families feel welcomed and visible

7) **Streamline Communications:** *How can U of T provide student parents with the information they need?*
   - ☐ Provide early and clear information about financial matters, such as award payment schedules and job postings (including Teaching Assistantships)
   - ☐ Find ways to communicate existing U of T student parent resources and services effectively
   - ☐ Provide information to student parents during their parental leave that will ease their transitions back to school

8) **It Takes a Village:** *How can your role at U of T help lift the burden off of student parents?*
   - ☐ Train faculty and staff on student parents' challenges and needs
   - ☐ Train and inform faculty and staff on how to make their departments and classrooms more family-friendly
   - ☐ Involve staff, faculty, and student bodies from different levels of administration in creating and updating practices and policies for student parents in each department
   - ☐ Undertake cross-departmental discussions, information sharing, and meetings on student parents' issues, relevant training, and family care initiatives

9) **Caregivers are Welcome:** *Do programs, spaces, and services acknowledge non-student caregivers?*
   - ☐ Provide co-parents and other care providers with access to family spaces (e.g., Robarts Family Study Space)
   - ☐ Plan for a variety of caregivers and not only co-parents
   - ☐ Plan programs that directly involve non-student family members, such as intergenerational activities for grandparents and children

10) **Build Practical Support Networks:** *How can some of the practical issues and limitations for student parents in your department be addressed?*
   - ☐ Provide childcare subsidies and financial assistance to student parents
   - ☐ Provide an extension policy and flexible timelines for student parents
   - ☐ Make space for parents to bring their children to school
   - ☐ Provide hourly childcare on campus for events, emergencies, and after-childcare-hour classes
   - ☐ Create networks for student parents to share their knowledge, work, and childcare duties with each other

Limitations and Next Steps

There are limitations to the data and findings in every project, and it is important to consider how the analysis may fall short or require follow-up. Suggestions for next steps recommend inquiries or actions that may be incorporated into future work related to this project.

Limitations:

There are three main limitations in the sample of participants that formed the basis of our findings. First, the data pool does not provide a strong representation of undergraduate student parents. Second, the majority of the participants were students of St. George campus; thus, the data collected does not represent the wider experience of student parents across the tri-campus university. Last, participants did not include a strong representation of the nuanced experiences of underrepresented groups, such as fathers and LGBTQ+ student parents. While the nuanced experiences of the diverse community of student parents at U of T were not entirely captured by the issues and concerns documented in this report, the project does address the general tensions and barriers that are common among this community. Future events that focus specifically on underrepresented student parents and their experiences will be an important supplement to this report and ensure that U of T is a family-friendly environment for all.

Note that this project aimed to identify simple and feasible solutions that can be easily implemented. However, many of the challenges faced by student parents are related to structural issues. Future inquiries that address these structural limitations will further alleviate and resolve the issues faced by student parents at U of T.

Next Steps:

There are several steps to consider in the next stages of this project and to make U of T a family-friendly environment. These include:
- Circulating the report to a range of U of T communities
- Discussing the findings and design principles with partners and stakeholders at the university
- Developing plans for how departments can connect with student parents and uncover their needs
- Implementing the practical solutions, guided by the design principles, to assess the effectiveness of these measures

Each of these steps will help create awareness around issues faced by student parents and build momentum in creating a more family-friendly university in effective and meaningful ways.

Conclusion

This project identified potential solutions to challenges faced by student parents at the University of Toronto. These solutions include **developing connectedness, changes to communicating information and accommodations, creating spaces and resources, and increasing inclusivity and visibility**. By continuing to gather feedback from student parents through a design thinking ideation event, the themes and insights were also able to produce design principles that can be used as guidelines for improving student parent experiences at U of T. Each design principle includes practical solutions that showcase how these principles can be incorporated, whether through large-scale projects, policy changes, shifts in programming and scheduling, communications, or other methods. We hope, through these changes, U of T can meet the needs of student parents and their families and become an inclusive, supportive, and dynamic family-friendly university.

Discussion Questions:

- What resources, collaborations, and infrastructure are needed to make U of T a family-friendly university?
- What are some of the possible barriers to implementing these solutions and how might they be addressed?
- What can your departments and divisions do to foster greater inclusivity of student parents?

Appendices

Appendix A: Data from Post-it Note Activity

- Allow caregivers (non-U of T students) to have access to the Family Room at Robarts when the student is in class on campus
- Set up a drop-in daycare on campus for emergency daycare support
- Offer more family support for students not living in student housing
- Playground on campus
- Longer to study – program extensions
- High-chairs in the food court
- Family allowance
- Show professors how to make their labs and departments family-friendly
- Events for student parents (leisure, nature walks, etc.)
- Make kid-friendly workspaces
- Parent groups to meet more student parents and socialize
- Have a standard for nursing rooms and require every building has one
- More dad-focused events
- Intergenerational activities (grandparent-friendly)
- Volunteer opportunities (integrated FCO activities)
- Culturally specific events (for Ramadan, LGBTQ)
- More rec activities (try fencing, try track and field, etc.)
- A group connecting parents at U of T (to co-plan childcare/coordinate scheduling, Facebook?)
- Recognizing signs of autism in your child training
- Childcare on campus for activities held on Saturdays/Sundays
- Workshops or info sessions about TDSB or schooling process in Canada
- Invite a neighbour or family activity to bring families who haven't experienced FCO/SFH activities
- Hourly childcare options on campus (especially for events/emergencies)
- Hart House doesn't allow kids under 16!?
- Transition out of study (family focus, not career)

Appendix B: Drawings of Family-Friendly Spaces

Within the design thinking ideation event there was a create activity where participants drew out and brainstormed what family-friendly spaces might look like on campus. Some reposes were more focused on logistics, whereas others were purely visual and express what participants and their families would like to see.
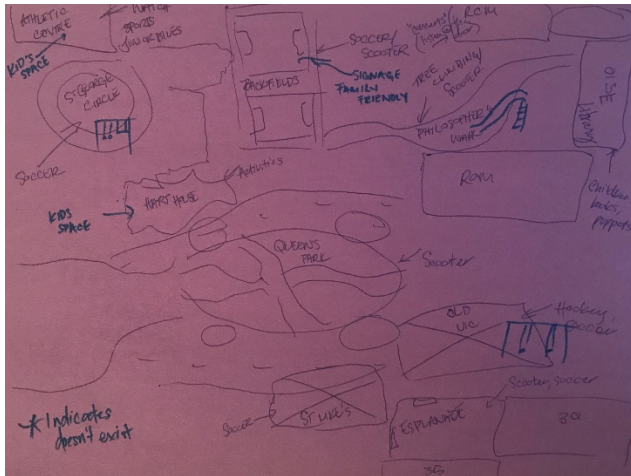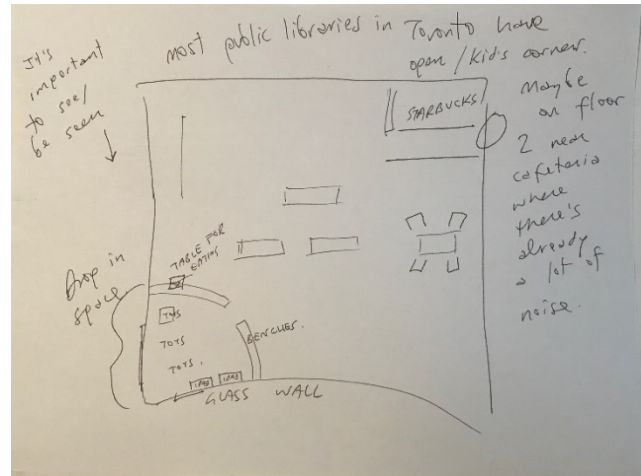

Illustration of St. Georges Campus that shows areas that stand out as landmarks of the university community – the areas in blue indicates additions to infrastructure where campus could be more child-friendly (e.g. swing sets, kids spaces, signage of places that are family-friendly).

Layout showing a drop in space with tables and benches, along with toys (bottom left). Top right is a Starbucks, where the participant noted how "Most public libraries in Toronto have open/ kids corner. Maybe [this type of space can be] on 2nd floor near cafeteria where there's already a lot of noise." – Another note is "It's important to see/ be seen"".
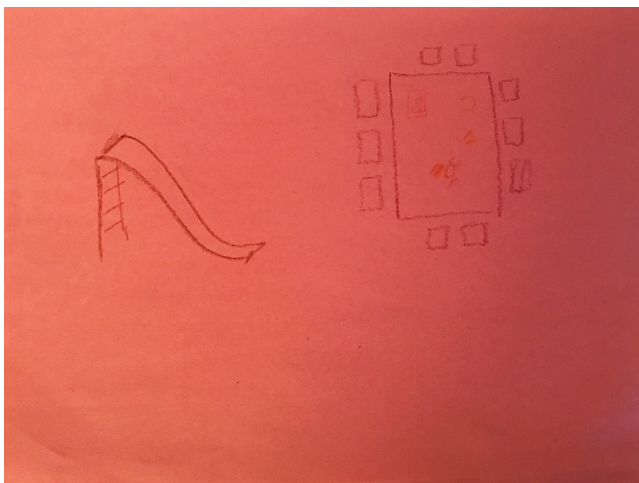
Drawing of what comes to the participants mind when they thought of family-friendly spaces on campus – showing a slide/ play equipment, and a communal working space/ table.
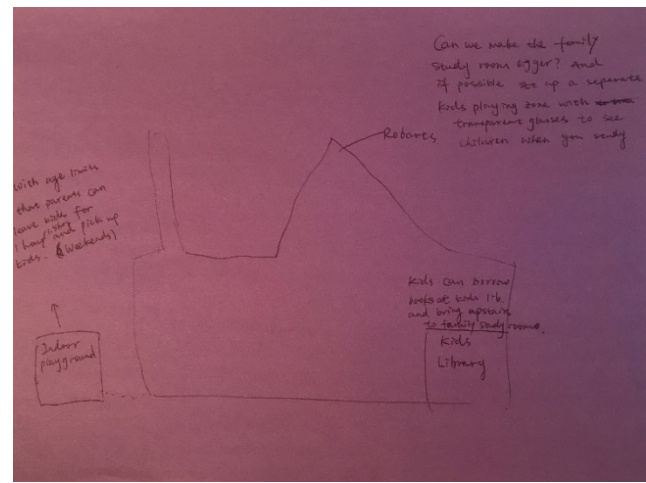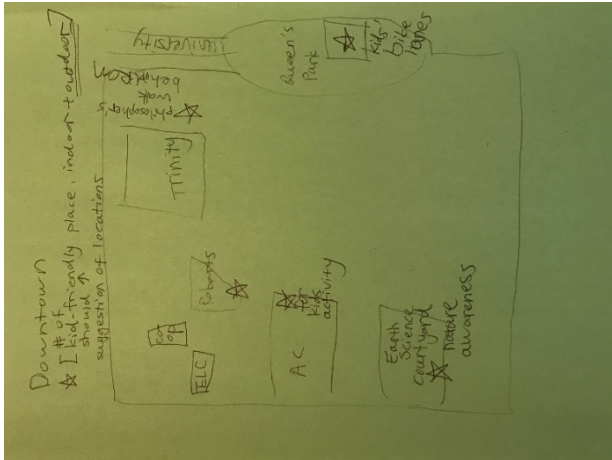

Illustration of Robarts library, with suggestions such as an indoor playground (with age limits or even a pick-up/drop-off system), a kids library, and a larger study room for families.

St. George campus buildings with stars where kid friendly places could go, such as Robarts, Philosophers Walk, Queens Park, Arts & Sciences Building, and Earth Science courtyard/ nature awareness.
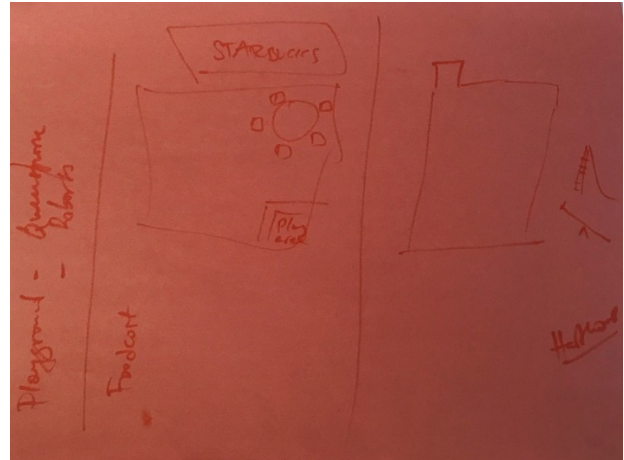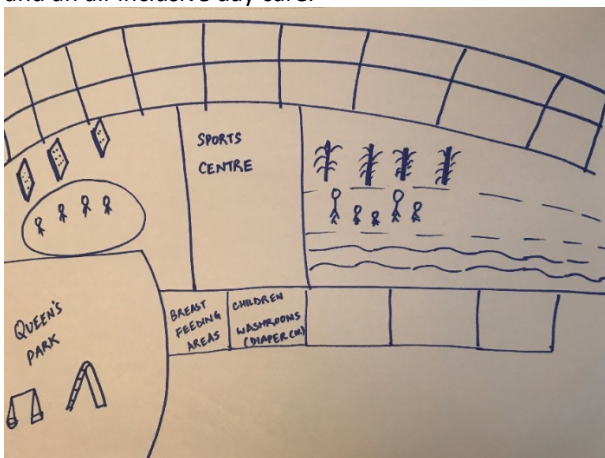

Drawing of a few places the participant noted as making it family-friendly, such as playgrounds on campus, food courts, and different spaces in buildings.
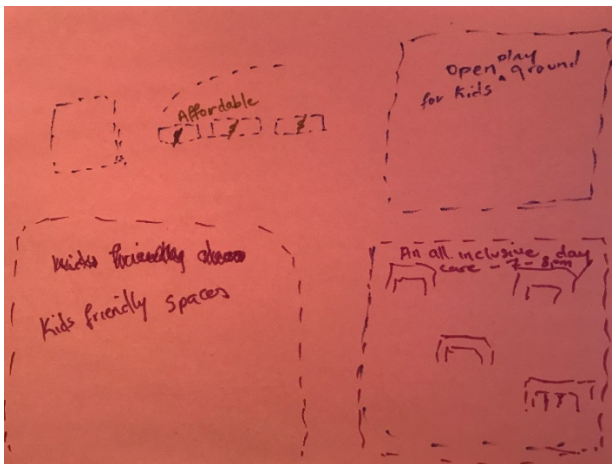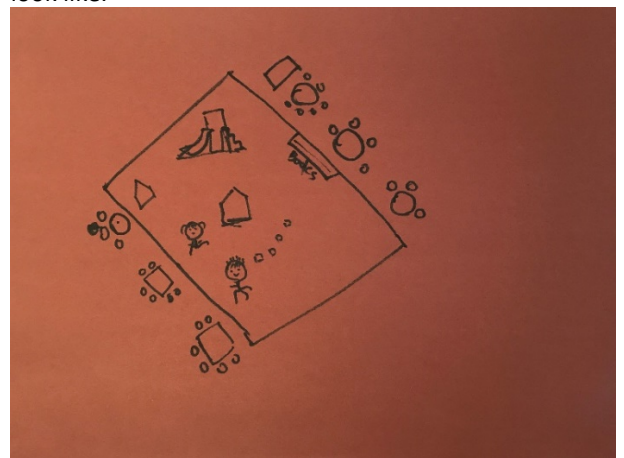

Sketches of kids friendly spaces, open play ground for kids, and an all-inclusive day care.
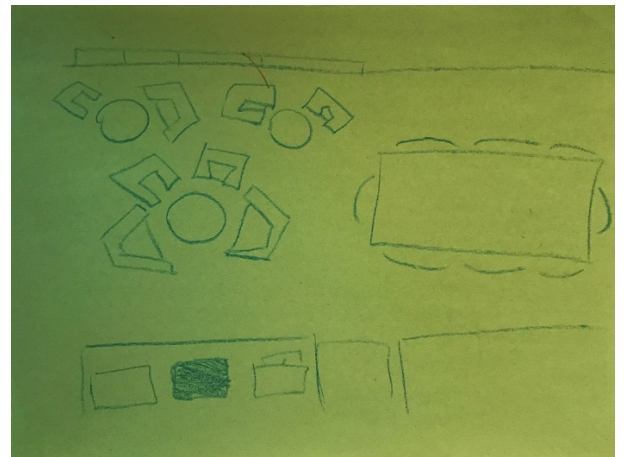
Sketch of what a family-friendly play and work space could look like.

Sketch of a family-friendly sports centre area near a park and having breast feeding areas and children-friendly washrooms.

Sketch of what a family-friendly play and work space could look like.

Shirin Gerami, Design Research Team Lead, 5th Year PhD in Socio-Cultural Anthropology

Allie Dainow, Design Research Assistant, 1st Year Master of Counselling Psychology

Charis Lam, Writer, 5th Year PhD in Chemistry

Kaitlyn Corlett, Project Assistant, 2nd Year Master of Education

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

FAMILY CARE OFFICE

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO LIBRARIES

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

innovationhub
deepening collaboration