



April 2024

# Experiences of Students Who Are Also Parents



INNOVATION HUB

# Introduction

As a part of the University of Toronto, the Family Care Office provides programs and specialized support for students with family and parental responsibilities. In partnership with the Family Care Office, the Innovation Hub aimed to explore the needs and perspective of students who are also parents. The data and stories collected were used to better understand what student parents need as they navigate their multiple roles and responsibilities while studying. We hope that the insights from this research will help the University of Toronto, with the Family Care Office's leadership, to co-create future programs and services that enable student parents to fully engage in campus life.

## Methods



Since 2016, the Innovation Hub has established an in-depth understanding of student experiences and expertise in designing feedback sessions across various settings at the University of Toronto. Our team takes a human-centered approach, using in-depth qualitative research methods and design-thinking strategies to foster rich data collection, and elicit honest stories from students about their experiences. We translate the stories into themes that help us understand their diverse perspectives and reveal insights that will inspire the future design of programs and services.

In the fall of 2023, we conducted **6 group feedback sessions** and **2 interviews speaking to 31 student parents** about their experiences and perspectives pursuing their education while having family duties. In the winter of 2024, we conducted 3 co-creation sessions speaking to 12 student parents about understanding their feedback for strengthening the report.

Our data was transcribed and de-identified and included the feedback and interview transcripts, and short answer form responses.

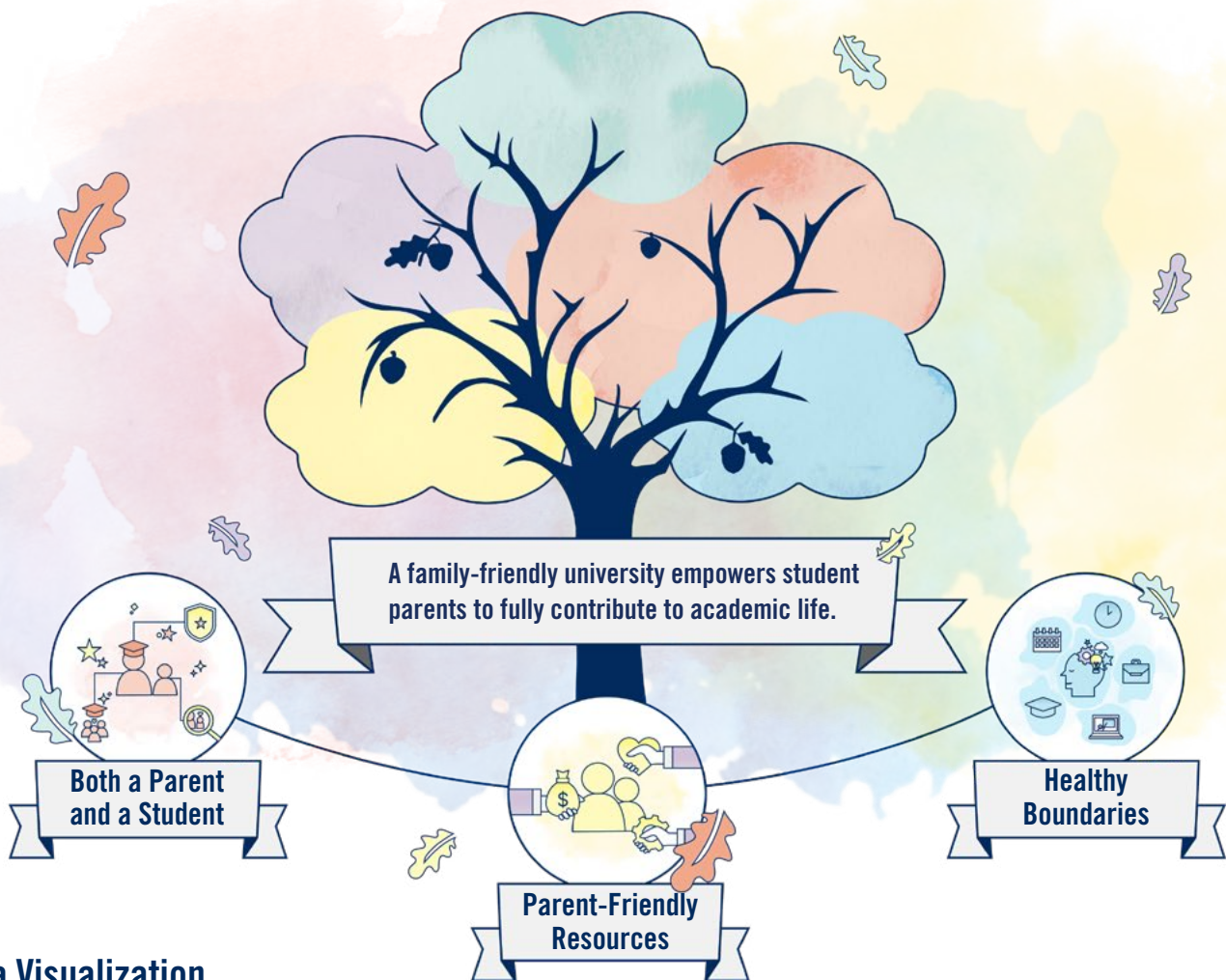
In our examination of the data, we used grounded analytical techniques to gain a deeper understanding of the core needs students communicated and developed a vision based on our insights. We synthesized stories into personas and story moments to bring students' needs to life. We also developed design principles intended to serve as guidance for future programming and services for students who are also parents.

For the second phase of the project, we hosted co-creation sessions to share the original findings from the January 2024 report and hear students' thoughts and reactions. We also engaged students in co-creation activities to hear their ideas about how U of T can better support students who are also parents. We spoke to **12 students across 3 co-creation sessions**. A summary of the co-creation sessions, reactions to the data, and summarized ideas are contained in the Co-Creation Sessions and Design Principles sections of this report.

# Our Findings

## Vision: A family-friendly university empowers student parents to fully contribute to academic life.

We found that students who are parents offer meaningful and distinctive viewpoints to academic conversations and diversify the University of Toronto student population. The student parents we spoke with expressed eagerness to fully engage with campus life, but experienced feelings of isolation and were overwhelmed while balancing their responsibilities as students with those of parenting. Becoming a parent expands one's worldview, and students who are parents bring invaluable knowledge, dedication, and thought leadership to the academic community. Student parents reported constantly facing impossible choices between the needs of their child(ren) and the demands of their academic program, ultimately leaving them to feel that they couldn't give their full attention to either role. We envision a future where university leaders work together to ensure policy, procedure, programming and practices align with the needs of student parents. **A family-friendly university empowers student parents to fully contribute to academic life.**



### Data Visualization

The visual of our vision is inspired by U of T's motto "Velut arbor aevo", which translates to "may it grow as a tree through the ages". The trunk of the large oak tree depicts the parents, who are being nourished by the resources provided by the university. Stretching from the trunk are branches and leaves, each representing the children of the parents whom they hold dear. Hanging off the branches are acorns, the fruits of student parents' labour, each representing a milestone achieved. Through the visual style of watercolour, we aim to use the imagery of the dispersion of colour to show how a family-friendly university allows student parents to "colour" or grow the university landscape in beautiful ways through their unique contributions.

# Both a Student and a Parent



## Building Connections

Students shared their wish to **belong to communities where they can talk openly about their lives**, including both areas of vulnerability and success. Student stories revealed they often felt isolated and like they were the only one experiencing difficulties navigating school while also being a parent. In some cases, when students connected with others who empathized with their experiences, they felt supported and capable of overcoming their challenges.

- Some students shared their appreciation for feedback sessions that allowed them to connect with other student parents. The students elaborated that talking openly and relating to other students parents about the challenges they were facing made them feel less lonely about their experiences.
- An international student living off-campus discussed how they carry a lot of emotional weight from all the responsibilities they balance every day. The student wished to find a student parent space where they can share their concerns with a group that actively listens to them.
- Another student revealed they were dealing with a lot of anxiety and guilt for not being able to take extra steps to engage in their academics, which resulted in them breaking down in class. The student shared their class peers took the time to listen and support them, which made them realize they did not need to approach their education on their own. The support they felt that day encouraged the student to be more self-compassionate, specifically when it came to balancing family responsibilities.

## Recognize My Family

Students expressed the importance of their **identities as both a parent and a student to be acknowledged**, as this would help them feel confident sharing their unique challenges. Student stories revealed they felt let down when opportunities are not inclusive of students with families and cannot accommodate children. Students wished for initiatives to shift away from the “one-size-fits-all” approach and instead consciously include families to make them feel valued and secure in the university community.

- Several students talked about wanting their children to be more involved in the activities they attend so their identities as parents are acknowledged. For example, one student parent mentioned how they would like to involve their children in more activities organized by the university.
- One student shared how they were rejected from bringing their child on a day trip with a student group that is affiliated with the university. The student explained this event had a personal cultural connection to them and expressed feeling let down and frustrated when they could not include their family to share the opportunity.
- Another student explained that if faced with a choice between parental and academic responsibilities, they would prioritize the former, potentially jeopardizing their academic outcomes. The student wished the university would ensure that its Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) policies would better account for the needs of students with children as part of the diverse university population.

# Both a Student and a Parent



## More than a Parent

Students shared they want to **feel taken seriously as academics by their peers and wider university community**. Students explained when their contributions felt valued and acknowledged, they are more likely to pursue paths of their choice. When students perceived judgement from others for their parental responsibilities and time capacities, they felt incompetent and incapable to succeed as parents and students.

- One student expressed frustration when their lab mates accused them of using their parental responsibilities as an excuse to not do their work. The student felt belittled and ultimately decided to switch laboratories, explaining that this experience made them later hide their identity as a parent to avoid feeling judged by other students.
- Another student shared their perception that academia requires them to work overtime to be seen as a stellar researcher. The student revealed that they felt pressure from their co-op placement to prioritize academics over their other responsibilities, which discouraged them from wanting to pursue a research career when they could not commit to competitively working additional hours like many of their peers.

## Freedom to Participate

Students we spoke to wished they had the **freedom to participate in programs and activities that are separable from their family responsibilities**. Our data revealed that despite students' desires to become more involved in academics, professional development activities, and extracurriculars, they felt restricted by busy family schedules. Students explained when they had more freedom to choose how to spend their time, they felt rejuvenated fostering other aspects of their life beyond their dual roles.

- One student shared how they enjoyed attending professional development opportunities on campus despite their parenting responsibilities. Prioritizing the time to attend these events helped this student refresh their energy to focus on their multiple responsibilities.
- Another student indicated that they were aware of resources and workshops provided on campus but that they could not make use of them because of the time constraints of the sessions and the challenges they face seeking childcare.

# Parent-Friendly Resources



## Flexibility for My Family

Many students shared a need for **more flexibility in their days to address unpredictable family circumstances**. Our data revealed students struggled with unexpected disruptions to their daily plans, leaving them feeling stressed about their commitments. Students explained when they feel assured they can adjust their schedules to respond to family situations without major consequences to their education, they felt relaxed and capable of dedicating more fruitful effort to their responsibilities.

- One student explained they are unable to follow a consistent schedule for themselves because their children sometimes wake up sick. The student expressed worry that they cannot adapt to the change of plans to care for their children, which negatively impacts their other responsibilities.
- Another student described the stress they feel getting to in-person classes on time because of the unpredictability of how their children will feel in the morning. As a result, the student often rushes to class, where they end up feeling exhausted and unable to focus during lecture.

## Financial Security

Students expressed the importance of **feeling secure in their ability to provide necessities for their families**. Many students shared their anxieties about whether they could afford food and childcare costs for their children. In some cases, students described feelings of guilt grappling with the quality and quantity of support and resources they can provide to their families. Our data showed that when students feel confident that they can provide for their families, they feel assured that they can dedicate more time towards their academic work.

- A student discussed taking on several additional jobs and teaching assistant hours to afford necessities such as food and rent for their family. The student described constantly feeling stressed about their finances, preventing them from being able to fully focus on their academics.
- One student expressed appreciation for the daycare provided by the U of T Family Housing because they noticed that their children were able to enjoy their time there and develop independence. The student reported finding comfort in knowing that they can send their children to a good environment to grow up, as this eased their worries about providing enough opportunities to support their children's development.

# Parent-Friendly Resources



## Accessibility to Student-Parent Resources

Students shared they want **clarity regarding where to find and access resources for student parents on campus**. Many students described feeling confused when searching for resources online and anxious about whether they fully understood the information presented. Students revealed clearly understanding information about student parent resources helped them make more informed decisions about their academic futures, which allowed them to focus more on their current student and parental responsibilities.

- One student described feeling confused navigating financial support for maternity leave. The student revealed they were unsure of the context in which the money would be issued, such as when it would be given, the duration of the aid, and the conditions for acceptance, which made them feel uncertain about whether they had correctly applied for support.
- Another student expressed regret they did not learn about the Family Care Office sooner, sharing they felt the mental health support provided by the office would have been helpful especially during the pandemic. The student shared hope these resources can be more accessible to commuter students who do not live on campus.

# Healthy Boundaries



## Accepting My Limits

Students shared the importance of **feeling competent in their dual roles as parents and students**. Students revealed they placed heavy pressure on themselves to give sufficient attention to both their families and academics. In some cases, students expressed feelings of guilt when they felt they were always prioritizing one responsibility over the other. Oftentimes, finding empathy towards themselves was important in fostering openness toward asking for help and accepting that their best is good enough.

- A student expressed having to constantly assess what responsibility should be prioritized is a lot of mental work, making them feel exhausted. The student shared this excessive mental work led to their responsibilities being mixed together, impacting their relationship with their family and their professionalism in school settings.
- Another student parent discussed how even though they have a lot on their plate, they feel hesitant to ask for extensions on their coursework due to the parental guilt they feel for being unable to handle their responsibilities as a parent while being in school.
- One student shared a fear they were “letting down” their teenagers because they were short-tempered and unable to cook for their family during stressful periods in their academic term. The student acknowledged while they knew that their teenagers could take care of themselves, they worry that they were not doing enough as a parent to ensure their children were eating nutritious food and feeling supported emotionally.

## Dual Roles Take a Toll

Students expressed the **importance of balance between academic work and family responsibilities**. Many students described feeling stressed and overwhelmed when they struggle to complete their academic work while caring for their family at the same time. In some cases, students shared balancing both roles successfully benefitted both their physical and mental well-being, which helped them feel more capable of meeting their responsibilities.

- One student expressed how “mom brain” gave them feelings of imposter syndrome because they felt that it took too long to reorient themselves into an academic mindset. The student explained they had to constantly switch between a parent and student headspace and could not be in both at the same time.
- Another student revealed their academic work was negatively impacting their physical and mental well-being. The student expressed a concern that their stress was extending to their family’s well-being as well.
- One student felt they were less productive and motivated to do work because they were so tired and stressed. The student shared they were concerned about their ability to complete their degree because they felt so overwhelmed with how many different tasks and responsibilities required their attention.
- A student discussed how recording lectures and listening to them while they play with their child helped them create a balance between their school responsibilities while being more present in their children’s lives.



# Healthy Boundaries



## Redefining Self-Care

Students **valued discovering their own understanding of self-care to prioritize their well-being**. Student stories showed that when they found unique ways to implement self-care depending on their circumstances and responsibilities, they felt more at peace and relieved in their everyday lives. In some cases, redefining what self-care means helped students overcome stressful times.

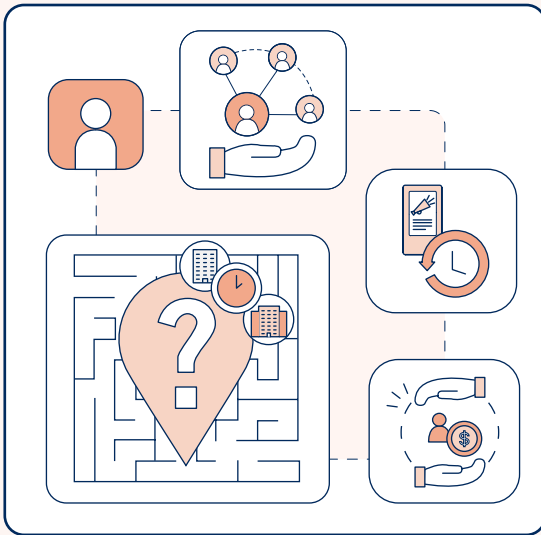
- A student mentioned their definition of self-care evolved since becoming a parent. The student described how they used to exercise frequently as a form of taking care of themselves. However, as their schedule grew busier with being a student and a parent, they found that their definition of self-care has remolded to any moment that relieves their stress and makes them feel calm.
- A student described how reframing their decision to go to school as a form of self-care helped them better appreciate small moments of rest, such as going out for coffee during busy times in the term. While sometimes the student felt they did not have time to do “fun activities”, they viewed the hard work and time they put into school as a different way of investing into themselves and their growth.
- Another student shared the value of spending a short period in the morning for themselves to help foster calmness for their day. The student emphasized that this time is unstructured for them to choose what they need to do to prepare for their day, such as writing a task list, going outside to their garden, or doing breathing exercises.

# Personas

Personas are data-driven aggregates of experiences that students have shared with us brought together in a fictional character. Personas humanize the needs and reflections of people as shared in feedback sessions and interviews.

## Imran (he/him)

- *Incoming master's student studying social sciences*
- *International student who grew up in Pakistan and who has moved to Canada for school*
- *Married with 3 children, 2 of school age, and 1 who is daycare age*
- *His wife is working a new job that will bring in more income but has longer hours*



My family has finally settled into an apartment in Toronto in the university's family housing complex. It has been quite a tiring process, especially with the little ones being excited and restless to explore the new space. Now that we are settled in, I'm excited to have some time to prepare for my new program and get the kids ready to go back to school.

Since moving in we've only been eating fast food, so my wife and I decided to go grocery shopping to stock up our kitchen with something that isn't in a takeout container. Since I'm new to the area, I wanted to see if I could catch any of the families or students on campus to ask for recommendations about stores with Pakistani grocery items and halal food. I ended up feeling hesitant to talk to anyone because they all seemed either

engrossed in their own world or in a rush, and I didn't want to bother them. We were able to find a few items in our nearby grocery store which had biryani rice, daal, cumin seeds, and yoghurt. I found the items to be quite expensive, but it was good enough to get us started.

Back at home, I began to look into registering my older kids for school. I was confused navigating the multiple registration links because based on my address I didn't know which one to register through. The descriptions were also not very helpful...I want to see if I can get my kids into schools that would provide school buses so that my wife and I won't need to worry about them getting home safely.

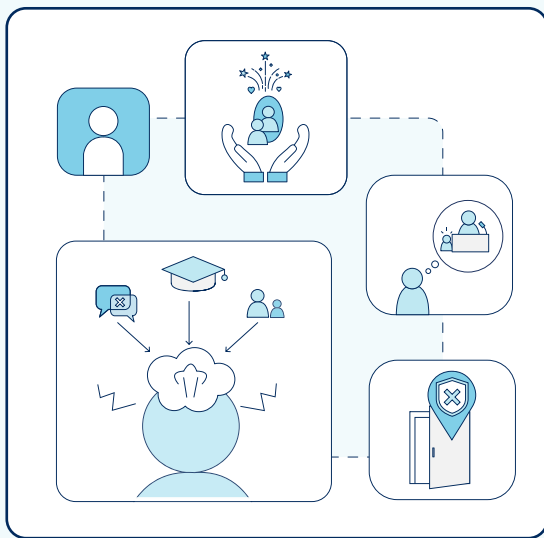
I am already feeling concerned about being able to pick up our littlest one from daycare because the pick-up time is quite close to when my class ends, and the pick-up window is short. I know there is an afterschool program that I can enroll the older kids into, if need be, but I'm worried that we can't afford it in the long term. Also, the kids are still learning English and I just don't want them to feel overwhelmed being at school all day. With my wife's new job, I don't think she'll be able to leave in time to pick them up. I think I'll need to ask my professor about the possibility of an accommodation to leave early, but I'm not sure it will be granted as it's a small group seminar course with bi-weekly presentations.

I didn't realize how complicated the kids' schooling schedules were going to be and how much there is to learn just about day-to-day life in Canada. I feel like I might be taking on more than I can handle. I might need to drop a course or two, but I don't know how that will impact my progress in the program. I just hope that my wife and I will figure things out and that our kids can have a smooth transition when they start school in Canada.

# Personas

## Valeri (she/her)

- *PhD Student studying sciences*
- *Domestic student who grew up in Toronto*
- *Married with a 2-year-old daughter*
- *Her husband works multiple jobs to financially support the family while Valeri attends U of T*



I always knew it was ambitious to start my PhD after just having my daughter, but I am passionate about my research and I knew that if I didn't start now, I might never do it. My husband took on extra work to ensure that we could support our needs for me to go to school.

My daughter's daycare is wonderful, and I can see how quickly she's learning and growing there. However, being exposed to all the kids and germs means she gets sick constantly. The daycare has a policy that I need to pick her up if she has fever, and unfortunately this happens quite often. When I have to run out of lab early, I always feel like my academic colleagues think I'm less committed to the program or the research than they are. I always feel so torn, but I need to take care of my responsibilities as a mom.

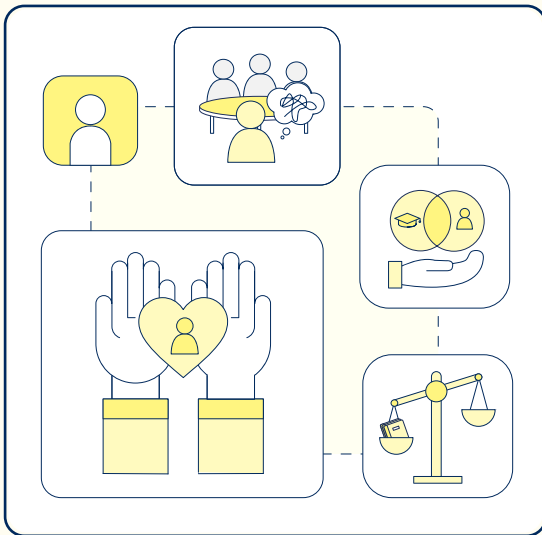
Last month, my supervisor presented an opportunity to present our research at an academic conference. I was so happy to be considered as a presenter and it's something I would love to do. When I spoke to my husband about the opportunity, he was happy for me too. But when we started to look at the logistics of my leaving town for those few days, it was impossible, so I had to decline the opportunity. It's hard when I feel like I'm missing out on so much of what academia has to offer so I can fulfill my responsibilities at home, but I love my family and I want to be there for my daughter. I could feel how disappointed my supervisor was when I made this decision, and I worry she won't take me as seriously now or consider me for future opportunities.

I feel like I'm not reaching my potential as an academic and a researcher. My knowledge of my subject area is exceptional, and my research is so important to the field, but my peers and supervisor often become frustrated with me. I fear they only see me as an overwhelmed mother, rather than someone who is making valuable contributions to the field. Sometimes I wonder if pursuing my PhD at this time was the right choice. It feels too late to turn back now, so I hope I can make the contributions that I know I'm capable of.

# Personas

## Min (she/they)

- Undergraduate student studying humanities
- Domestic student who lives in the GTA
- A single parent with a 3-year-old daughter
- Lives with her parents who support the care for her daughter



As a young single mom, I always questioned whether I would be a good parent. My life changed drastically when my daughter was born. From being a young person who was just starting university, living in the city for the first time, and considering studying abroad, I shifted to moving back in with my parents and realigning my priorities to being the best mother I could. Going back to school after 3 years was a big decision for me, but I was excited to finish my degree so I could pursue a career that would lead to a successful future for my daughter and I.

My parents are amazing, and I am lucky to have them in my life to support me in raising my daughter. However, my daughter gets sick a lot and I am the only one who has been able to comfort her during rough periods. While

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else but by her side when she's not feeling well, I can feel the late nights supporting her taking a toll on my health. I'm always tired and I've been feeling scatterbrained. I also can't tell if I'm truly helping my daughter. When she's really having a difficult night, I feel helpless when I can't get her to calm down or feel better.

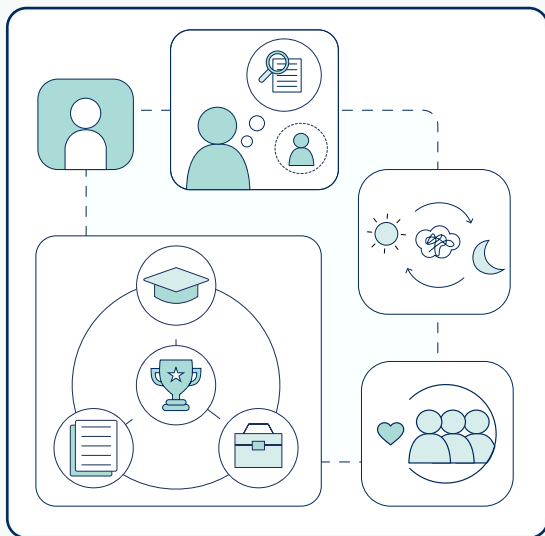
Recently, I went to class after a long night awake with my daughter. I was running late, and when I arrived, I was surprised to learn that I had missed the deadline to hand in a report proposal that I thought was due next week. I felt so embarrassed because our class discussion was going to be based on each of our research topics. I was disappointed in myself for making such a careless mistake and felt silly sitting in class not understanding or engaging in anything because I didn't have my proposal ready. I felt anxious thinking about when I would have time to write the proposal, as I knew I had some other assignments I desperately needed to finish and a sick daughter to care for. However, I was hesitant to reach out for an extension because I have already missed the deadline, and the proposal is only 2 pages long. I worried that it would be an unreasonable request to ask for an extension, and I didn't want to draw more attention to my error.

Feeling like I'm always messing up and not doing anything "right" is demoralizing. I feel like I have been making all the wrong choices lately and that I'm pushing myself beyond my limits. I can't deny how much support I get from my parents, so I feel guilty for feeling so alone in my struggles. I wish I could just get it right and feel confident that I am taking care of my daughter properly while also achieving my dream of getting a university degree.

# Personas

## Marina (she/her)

- *Master's student studying business*
- *International student from eastern Europe*
- *Married with 2 teenage sons*
- *Works part-time at the university, while her husband works full-time at an external firm*



I told myself that when I came to Canada to pursue my Master's degree, I would make the most out of my time at U of T to really grow my professional network. As both a student entering a career later in their life and as a newcomer to Canada, I am determined to show everyone that I have what it takes to be successful. I have really enjoyed my experience in my program so far. The student cohort is lively and passionate about their future aspirations. I have also joined a case competition group and taken on a relevant work-study job for my academic program, which helps bring in some additional income for the family.

Lately though, I feel that life has gotten very hectic. This is a busy time of the year for assignments, my case competition group is competing soon, and my

sons have upcoming dance recitals that I need to help them prepare for. It's been tricky keeping track of everything, and I have been working pretty late most nights to make sure I stay on top of my schoolwork.

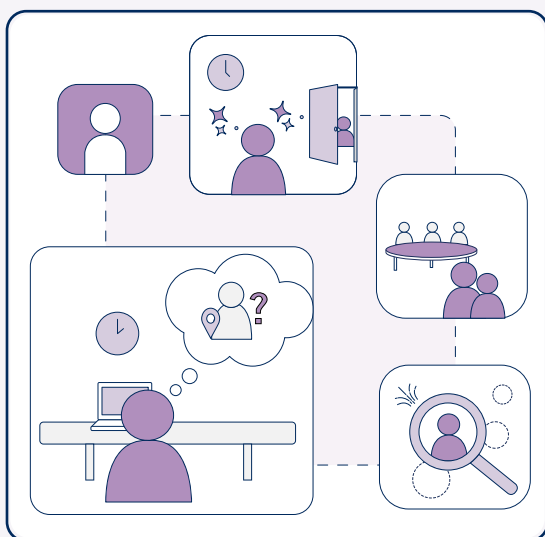
Since I haven't been sleeping much, I feel like I've been taking too many lazy shortcuts with my family responsibilities to focus on other tasks. I've been depending on takeout instead of making family dinner or scrolling through my phone instead of keeping the house in order. I'm also noticing that I've been short-tempered. The other day, when I was sitting by the kitchen island after dinner working on an upcoming presentation, one of my sons kept asking me questions about his costume, which needed some adjustments. I felt that my answers were too curt and eventually I snapped at him and told him to leave me alone as I was busy. Afterwards, I felt so guilty. A mother should never show their stress in front of their child. He was just asking for my support, and I could tell he was nervous about his upcoming performance. I talked to my husband afterward and he assured me that he'll see what he can do to help with the costume and that I shouldn't feel too bad, since our son likely didn't take it to heart. I still felt bad. As a parent, I want to always be available to them when I am at home.

I feel like I've been letting my family down. While I know a lot of my current stresses are temporary, I worry that I've been so focused on my own things that I'm dismissing when my family needs me. Sometimes, I wish I could be in multiple places at once. Despite how I feel, I know I'll get through this busy period, and I hope I can do so while still being able to do well in my studies and be there for my family.

# Personas

## Cam (they/them)

- 5th year undergraduate student studying humanities
- Grew up in Canada in the GTA
- Separated from their ex-partner and co-parents their 9-year-old son
- Their ex-partner lives outside of the GTA



I have been in school for so long and I was excited to go back to full-time learning on campus after spending so much of my university experience online due to the pandemic. I started my degree during the pandemic but switched to part-time learning because I really wanted to experience my education in person. I feel like I thrive on being able to engage with other people and build off their energy. While the online model allowed me to spend more time with my son, which I'll always cherish, I was also feeling lonely because the pandemic started around the time my ex-partner and I decided to officially split. Truthfully, I needed to connect with others more during that time to help me get through my break-up. I found that I struggled to get to know my classmates because we could only communicate through screens and most people didn't turn on their camera.

Going back to campus has been fun, and I enjoy seeing other people and starting spontaneous conversations. However, I didn't anticipate how difficult it would be for me to get to know people more deeply. Most of my interactions with others have been during class and maybe a little after. Outside of class, I haven't been able to participate in additional activities or go to events on campus since they often occur during the evenings. I can't stay late on campus most days because I have my son during the week, and I can't always find a babysitter. My ex-partner doesn't live close enough for me to drop him off some evenings, and they're only comfortable with leaving our child with a small number of people, which I want to respect.

Recently, I considered signing up for a workshop series, on campus, focused on making an art piece over multiple weeks to tell a story. A few of my peers from class were going and encouraged me to join them. This would have been a great opportunity to get to know them better. I was really interested in attending the workshop, especially because it seemed like it might be family-friendly. I reached out to the organizers to see if I could bring my son along to some of the sessions, but I was told that I wouldn't be allowed because he might be distracting to other participants. I was disappointed because I was looking forward to building a story and seeing everyone else build theirs.

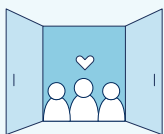
Sometimes I wonder why U of T doesn't have more events that allow families to attend. I feel like there are a lot of events that are generally family-friendly but are still restrictive about who can participate. I think that a lot more people would attend the events on campus if more of them offer the option for their families could come. There are still many opportunities to engage, so I am hopeful that I will be able to attend one eventually.

# Co-Creating with Family Care Office: Experiences of Students who are also Parents

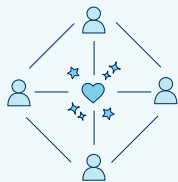
The second phase of the project consisted of co-creation sessions. Co-creation entails sharing back the findings of our initial report, hearing students' feedback on key initial findings, and working with them to vision ideas and suggesting for co-creating the future.

We hosted 3 co-creation sessions and spoke to 12 students over the course of the sessions. We asked students about their thoughts and reactions to the initial findings, specifically the vision and design principles. We facilitated two ideation activities where students brainstormed ideas about how U of T can better support students who are also parents.

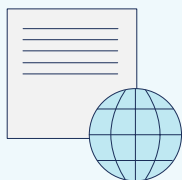
## Overall Findings



Students told us **integrating their families** into their academic lives is important to build familial connections and accommodate their busy schedules. Students felt welcoming families at events and considering families when establishing student funding would reduce the pressure to choose between furthering their careers and honoring their commitment to care for their families.



Students described challenges locating accurate and consistent information about policies regarding student parents because of the inconsistencies across sources, including some departments with no policies listed at all. Students requested more **consistent policies regarding student parents across departments** and centralized access to university-wide guidelines.



Student parents voiced an understanding of the importance of self-care in its many forms. Students expressed interest in the university's involvement **connecting student parents to their peers with lived experience** balancing academic and parental demands. To complement these individual self-care practices, students highlighted a need for structural changes facilitating access to childcare and healthcare.

# Co-Creating with Family Care Office: Experiences of Students who are also Parents

## What Students Told Us...

### What's Working Well for Students

- Students expressed appreciation for the sense of **belonging and connectedness at the University Family Housing (UFH)**, as the space offers opportunities for them to meet and share experiences with other student parents and their families. Students reported enjoyment attending events by UFH and building community through friendly interactions with other families.
- Students shared they value **spaces and facilities designed to support parental responsibilities and flexibility to move between their dual roles and responsibilities**. Students appreciated having spaces available around the university to comfortably take care of their children within university settings and shared they would like to see more places across departments on campus.
- Students told us that they are grateful for **their professors who are caring towards their parental responsibilities and make accommodations to meet their needs**. Students appreciated and felt valued by the individualized support from instructors and shared hope that awareness of student parent needs would go beyond the individualized level across the university.

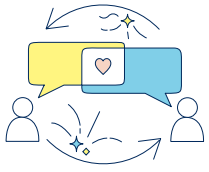
### What's Challenging

- Students indicated the benefits of **cross-cultural exchange to help students especially international students and new immigrants adjust to higher education**. Students shared that events such as cultural festivals with music, food sharing, and education of different cultures around the world would provide them and their families opportunities to learn about new cultures and broaden their worldviews.
- Students expressed the need for **support resources such as financial bursaries and services that considers the unique needs of student parents**. Students believe that where possible, resources should encompass their children from the start and be accessible to their family members who help support their children to reduce their stress toward meeting basic needs and allow them to focus on reaching their academic potential.
- Students shared feeling treated as an "exception" despite having many other student parents who attend university. Student parents **want their needs to be recognized and normalized** without judgement by the university community to allow them to grow and integrate into their academic communities and access opportunities and accommodations to succeed in their future goals.



# Design Principles

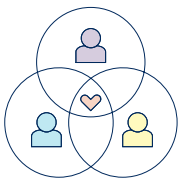
Design principles are data-driven guidelines to support designers in meeting people's needs with empathy. The principles suggest issues to keep in mind while prototyping solutions and offer criteria for refining and prioritizing design ideas. We ideated with students way to bring each design principle to life, including a summary here.



## CURATE CONNECTIONS

Create opportunities for student parents to meet others with shared experiences across various areas of the university. When creating connection-building programs events for the general student population, consider making the space more family-friendly.

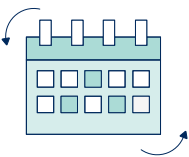
- Create a communal resource pooling program to connect parents through mutual support with parental responsibilities (e.g., carpools, meal shares).
- Host family-friendly group field trips to places that might otherwise be a hassle for parents to go along (e.g., science center, the aquarium).
- Encourage parent-led student organizations that would allow children to participate alongside their parents (e.g., playdates, food potlucks).
- Organize multicultural festivals that recognize and celebrate the diversity of student parents.



## WELCOME DIVERSE STUDENTS

Ensure student parents feel welcomed as a part of the academic community. Normalize that there is no one way to be an academic and design opportunities for students to participate in research activities that are flexible to different needs.

- Ensure that hiring and selection processes for lab, work study, and on-campus job positions consider the diversity of student backgrounds and are welcoming of all students.
  - e.g., Include the words “Student Parents Welcome to Apply” on job postings.
- Clearly communicate work expectations and time commitments including asynchronous work for research and academic opportunities.
- Offer employee training programs centered on case studies that address implicit bias, microaggressions, and other forms of marginalization.

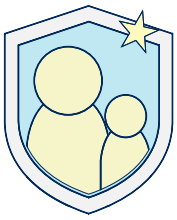


## FOSTER FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION

Offer students varied opportunities to participate in non-academic activities and events, providing options that can align with many different schedules. Ensure offerings have flexible and convenient timings so parents can participate.

- Hold activities and programming during the day especially around lunch times to allow students to freely come and go.
- Facilitate student activities and programming that can be joined remotely or with hybrid especially during the evening time.
- Offer activities and events that are flexible and do not have a firm time commitment Include visual cues that welcome diversity such as child friendly spaces or spaces with artwork by diverse artists.

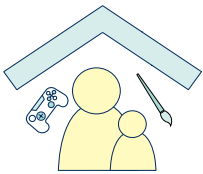
# Design Principles



## PRIORITIZE PARENTS

Ensure academic policies and practices consider the common challenges parents face and offer options that accommodate their unique needs. When unexpected challenges come up, ensure students know what avenues to reach out through to catch up on missed work and request additional support.

- Provide options for asynchronous participation like recorded lectures or access to lecture content outside class hours.
- Clearly state academic policy around late submissions, make-up exams, and other forms of accommodation in class syllabi.
- Facilitate training programs for staff and faculty so they could learn about the support available to the student-parent population.
- Establish a student-parent council within academic departments and programs to facilitate communication and cooperation between university services and student-parents.
- Extend access of student-parent resources and services to the families of students.



## FOSTER FAMILY-FRIENDLY SPACES

Actively include students' families wherever possible and ensure that information that children and families are welcome is well-communicated. In circumstances where children and families cannot be included, offer childcare of simultaneous family-friendly activities in a nearby space or list known childcare options nearby.

- Create an activity table for children at the back of the room during workshops and events so that children may attend as necessary.
- Include language about nearby childcare options and/or activities in event descriptions to enable student parents to participate during times when their children are in their care.
- In large events, hire additional students to offer child-friendly activities and provide next-room childcare for the event duration.
- Create child-friendly spaces across campus which are noise-friendly that allow children to play freely.
- Where possible, encourage classrooms environments to be family friendly so parents can bring their children to class in cases of emergencies.

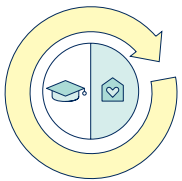
# Design Principles



## COMMUNICATE CLEARLY

Maximize the ways clear and detailed information for resources and programs are delivered to student parents. Provide multiple avenues to access family-focused information to ensure students are informed and aware about the support offered to them.

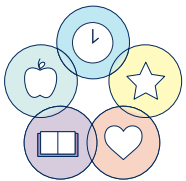
- Provide resources in digital and print form and ensure they are placed in areas commonly frequented by students.
  - Encourage departments and programs across the university to display information about student-parent support through their communication channels.
- Translate student parent resources into common languages spoken by students on campus.
- Implement and promote a chatbot that is knowledgeable on student-parent resources and programs for students to easily access information.



## PROMOTE SCHOOL-LIFE INTEGRATION

Actively promote school-life integration and empower student parents to pursue their education while fulfilling their parental responsibilities. Encourage students to embrace ways that integrate their duties as both a student and parent.

- Encourage students to find synergy between their home life and academic instead of compartmentalizing them.
- Offer flexible ways for students to engage in their learning from home.
- Connect students to existing workshops and resources for developing school-life integration skills.

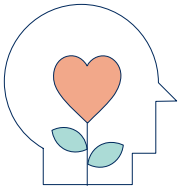


## PRIORITIZE BASIC NEEDS

Establish resources and financial support that make basic needs like food, housing and childcare services more accessible to students. Ensure that resources are easy to find and are intuitive to understand.

- Strengthen the accessibility of university websites to make navigating different pages easy and intuitive.
- Clearly communicate costs and criteria for financial aid.
- Organize educational workshops on financial literacy with follow-up and accountability, including a structured plan to ensure participants retain and apply the knowledge gained.
- Consider the growing population of student-parents when implementing programs and services for students with families.
  - Offer more financial aid and support, such as bursaries and scholarships, specifically for student-parents to allow these students to take care of their family during their studies.
  - Appoint a family doctor to support student parents access healthcare seamlessly.

# Design Principles



## RE-DEFINE SELF-CARE

Provide inspiration with consultation from student parents to show students that there are multiple ways to take care of their well-being. Create opportunities for students to learn about ways to implement sustainable self-care and integrate self-compassion in their day-to-day lives.

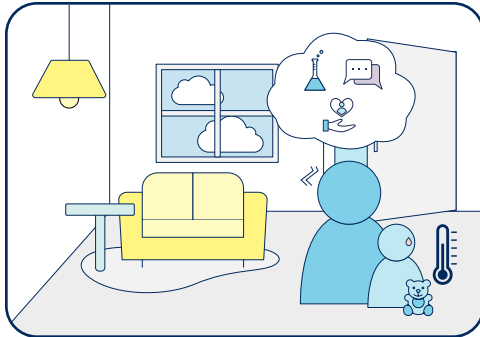
- Build drop-in daycare facilities in university gyms for student parents, who like to exercise.
- Design small-group, informal discussions where student parents can meet and share tips on how they implement self-care in their lives.
- Design workshops that focus on a diversity of strategies to care for their mental health.
- Provide students with a variety of small self-care activities to participate in throughout their day on campus.
- Incorporate topics of work-life integration, self-love, and overall well-being into academic programming.
- Offer time-management and self-compassion workshops for students to learn tips on how to organize their priorities.

# VALERI'S DAY-IN-THE-LIFE

(SHE/HER)

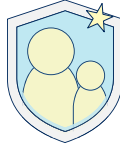
Here we show the stories of Valeri and Cam, as they navigate their day as a student parent before and after design principles have been applied to their experiences.

## Current



Valeri has an important lab meeting, but is worried about her daughter who feels sick. She drops her daughter off at daycare and hopes that she is just tired.

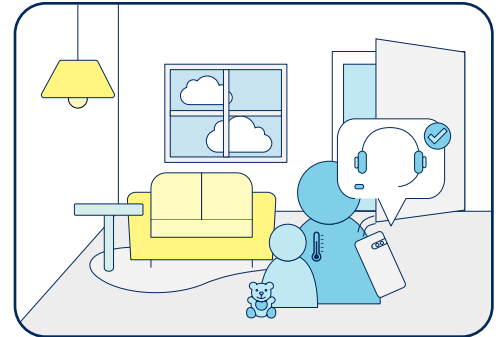
## Design Principle Applied



### Prioritize Parents

Valeri's supervisor understands unexpected parental emergencies and offers to accommodate her attendance virtually.

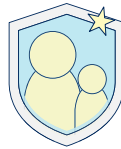
## Future



Valeri has an important lab meeting, but is worried about her daughter who feels sick. She tells her supervisor, who offers a virtual option for joining the meeting.



Valeri's daughter develops a fever and needs to be picked up. Valeri feels guilty for leaving early and notices that her labmates are annoyed at her.

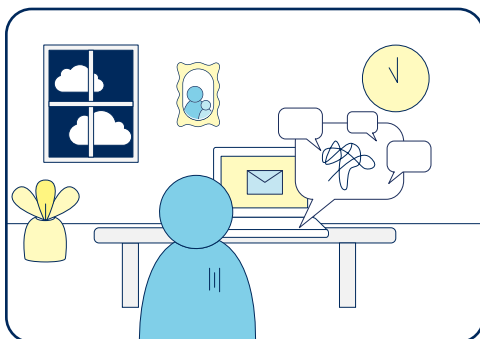


### Prioritize Parents

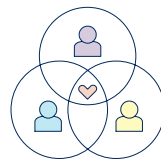
Valeri's supervisor understands and offers to find a way for her to catch up on work later.



Valeri's daughter develops a fever and needs to be picked up. Before leaving, she discusses with her supervisor how she can catch up and support the team later.

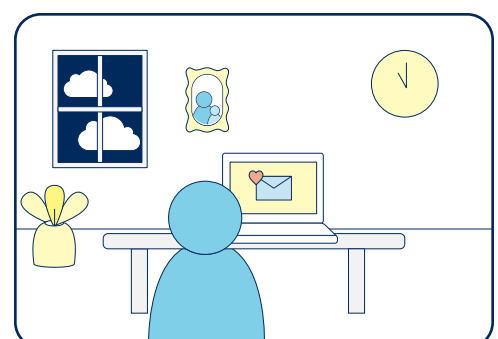


Valeri receives an angry email from her supervisor about her leaving lab early. She feels disheartened and disappointed in herself.



### Welcome Diverse Students

Valeri's supervisor finds a way for her to contribute meaningfully despite not being physically in lab.

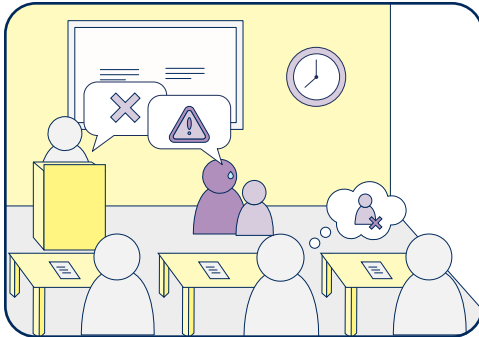


Valeri receives a caring email from her supervisor urging her to prioritize her daughter's health. She feels supported by a plan for her to temporarily work from home.

# CAM'S DAY-IN-THE-LIFE

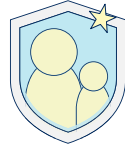
(THEY/THEM)

## Current



Cam has an exam today, but their son's school is closed because of an emergency. Without childcare or accommodation from their professor, they opt to miss the exam.

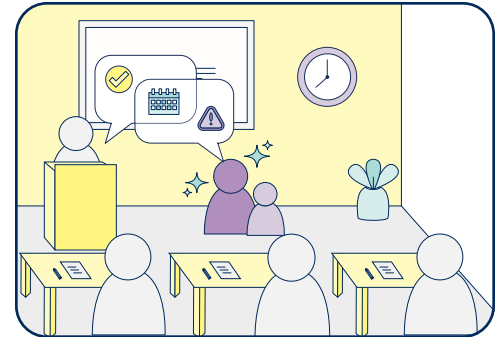
## Design Principle Applied



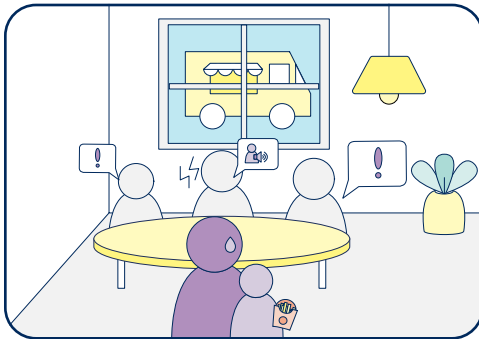
### Prioritize Parents

A clear academic policy allows accommodation when emergencies with a student's child arise.

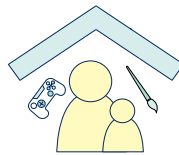
## Future



Cam has an exam today, but their son's school is closed because of an emergency. They feel reassured taking their son to campus because they can defer the exam.

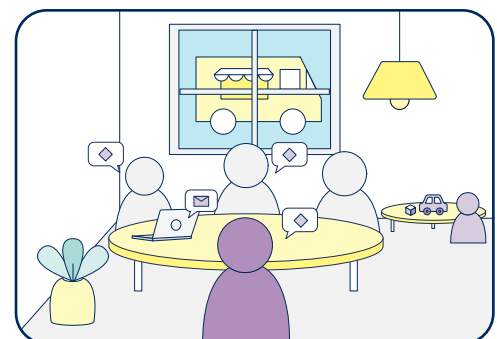


Cam takes their son to a capstone meeting. They feel embarrassed and guilty when their supervisor confronts them for bringing their child to an important meeting.



### Foster Family-Friendly Spaces

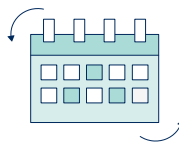
The co-working space provides a space for children and Cam's group understands the situation.



Cam requests to move their capstone meeting to a family-friendly co-working space on campus. They appreciate that their group mates were willing to move.

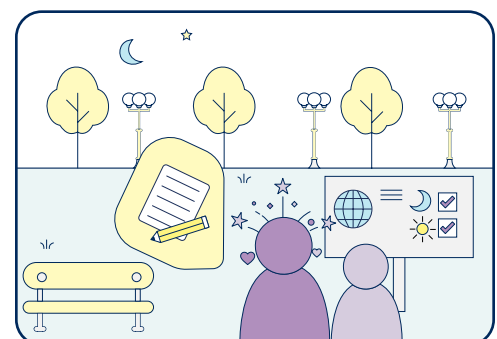


Cam sees an advertisement for an evening event and is disappointed they cannot attend without childcare. They wish they could engage with more campus opportunities.



### Foster Flexible Participation

The event hosts have multiple time slots and provide more flexibility for participation.



Cam sees an advertisement for a lunchtime campus event and feels excited to attend. They are grateful that they do not need to worry about childminding support.

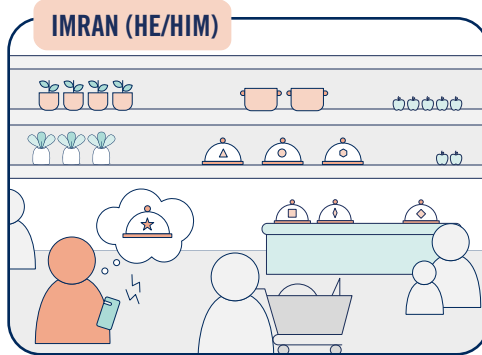
# Co-Creation: Stories

Here we show student persona before and after design principles have been applied to their experiences.

## Current

## Design Principle Applied

## Future



**IMRAN (HE/HIM)**

Imran finds it difficult to settle in after moving into University Family Housing as he doesn't know where to get affordable groceries or seek healthcare.

**Communicate Clearly**

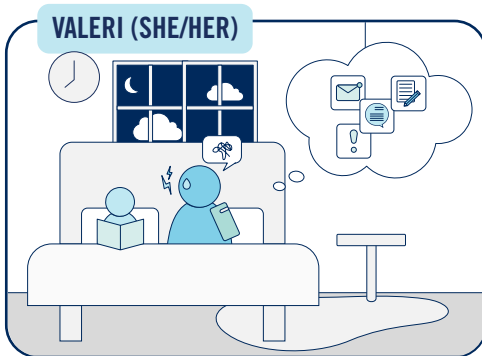
Imran is happy to receive a detailed email with resources for settling in.

**Currate Connections**

Imran is happy to receive a detailed email with resources for settling in.



Imran settles in easily as he receives a detailed email listing local resources for settling in and a multicultural student parent meetup happening in University Family Housing, to connect with other student-parents and learn about local resources.



**VALERI (SHE/HER)**

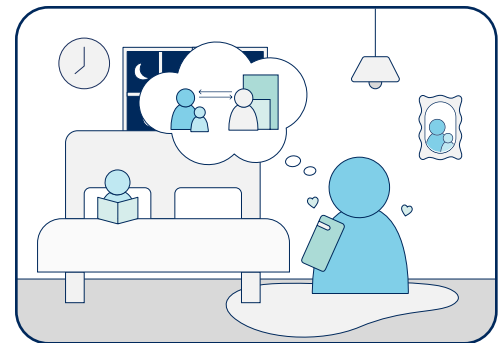
Valeri has an urgent meeting tomorrow with her supervisor and team but is not able to find any drop-in childcare services for her daughter.

**Prioritize Parents**

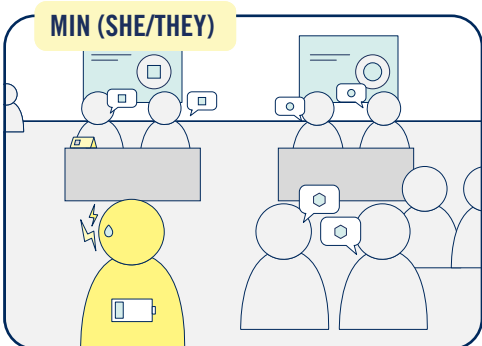
Valeri feels relieved she can rely on the available student parent association's hotline.

**Foster Family-Friendly Spaces**

Valeri is grateful for drop-in daycare centers in campus.



Valeri has an urgent meeting tomorrow with her supervisor and team and is able to book a drop-in daycare service through the student parent association's hotline.



**MIN (SHE/THEY)**

Min wants to connect with potential employers at career networking events but feels embarrassed to explain the 3-year gap in her resume as a single mother.

**Welcome Diverse Students**

Min feels better knowing her department offers supports which are considerate of student parents.



Min connects with career advisors in her department, who help her strategize to feel confident explaining her experiences while connecting with employers.

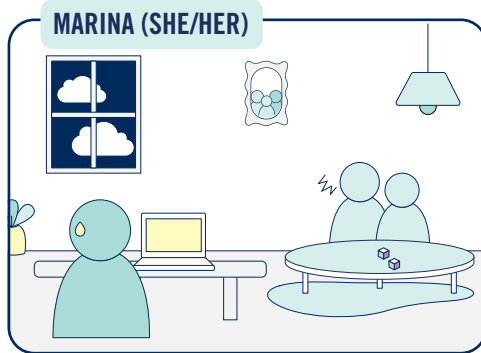
# Co-Creation: Stories

Here we show more student personas before and after design principles have been applied to their experiences.

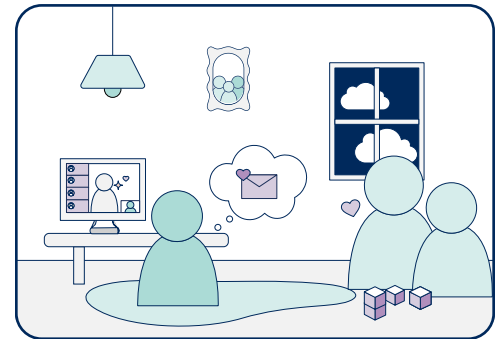
## Current

## Design Principle Applied

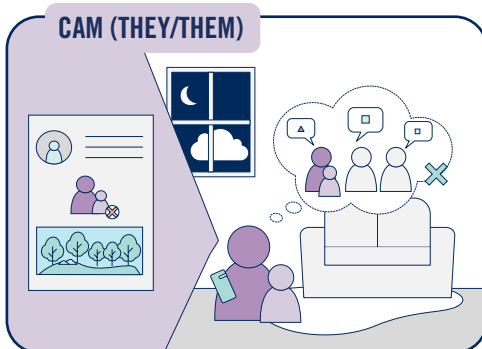
## Future



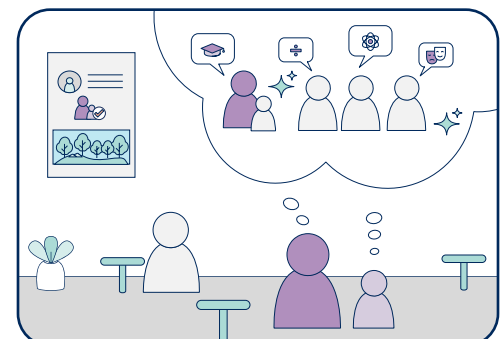
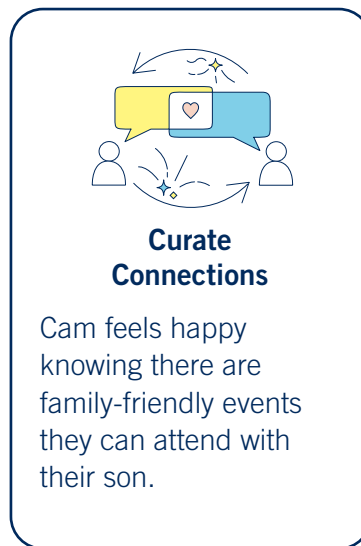
Marina feels isolated and overwhelmed balancing her coursework and family responsibilities.



Marina receives help from the Family Care Office in connecting with other student parents who share similar challenges. She and a peer support each other by listening and sharing self-care strategies.



Cam is interested in attending a trip to the Toronto Islands to connect with their peers, but is prevented from bringing their son because the trip is a "student-focused event".



Cam is interested in attending a trip to the Toronto Islands to connect with their peers and is excited to see the poster indicate families are welcomed.



# Conclusion & Next Steps

Student parents bring impactful experience, skills, and values to the University of Toronto community. While student parents want to involve themselves in the opportunities provided at the university, they struggle to feel fully present on campus because of the commitments to academics and family they need to balance. When university programming and services acknowledge student parents' needs and make structural changes to address them, they can engage in academic life. A family-friendly university empowers student parents to fully contribute to academic life.

We hope that the data and insights discussed in this report help in designing programming and services that will help student parents at all levels of study in the university.



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