Studying as a Parent: A Handbook for Success

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2014 Helen Owton

Version: Publication Extract

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk
# Contents

_Author Biography_  ix  
_List of Abbreviations_  x  
_Prologue_  xi

## Part 1  ‘Going Back to School’  1

1  Access to Higher Education  3

## Part 2  Entering Higher Education  19

2  Student Pregnancy  21  
3  Becoming a Student Parent  34  
4  Funding Your Studies  49

## Part 3  Juggling Acts: Balancing the Lifestyle  75

5  Balancing Social Life  77  
6  Balancing Childcare  85  
7  Time Management  93  
8  Stress Management  102  
9  Supporting Student Parents  112

## Part 4  Future Directions  119

10  Postgraduate Student Parents  121  
11  After Graduation  138

_Acknowledgements_  147  
_References_  148  
_Index_  152
Balancing Social Life

The ‘student lifestyle’

There are a number of stereotypical pleasures that are typically associated with ‘student life’: lots of time, lots of parties, lots of fun and carefree experiences. However, the modern student experience continues to change: what was a fun, carefree experience is now peopled by a more hard-working population with its focus on achieving a good degree and improving its job prospects. Socialising at university is on the decline, with more than 60 per cent of students socialising for no more than two hours a day and only 12 per cent socialising for more than five hours a day. The same survey shows that 14 per cent do not socialise at all. This could be because there are more mature students (1 in 4 forms a significant proportion of the part- and full-time student population), students have more responsibilities (for example, part-time work), have less time, commute, and have tighter budgets. In addition, very little is spent on socialising, with 75 per cent (up from 62 per cent in 2008) of students spending less than £20 a week on socialising. This seems to suggest that student parents are not missing out on a ‘student lifestyle’ at all.

Social Life

Nonetheless, regardless of the myths that surround the idea of ‘the student lifestyle’, social life is one aspect of being a student parent that is particularly difficult, especially when the child/children are very young and babysitting is hard and expensive to come by. Some student parents
feel that they have different responsibilities and feel that they don’t want to participate in the typical student lifestyle which seems to attract the younger students.

**Inside view**

“Sometimes, I often smile and look back at previous times when I would often go out with mates on the spur of the moment. Now, going out for a drink seems to take lots of planning especially as I have many family and other commitments.”

*Tom, Exeter.*

For some, especially younger student parents, who might want to participate in the ‘typical student life’ the difficulty in socialising with fellow students may be more problematic than other aspects of being a student parent. I was lucky when I was at university because I was able to balance my social life reasonably well. However, whilst socialising might be an important aspect of a student parents’ life, it is also important to keep an eye on balancing *how often* you socialise.

If you start going out too often then other aspects of your life – studying, your health, the quality of time you spend with your child, your finances – can all potentially suffer as a consequence.

The cost of socialising may be a barrier for many student parents as the fees for babysitters can be much higher than you end up spending on drinks!

**Inside view**

“I went out every week and I always ended up coming back at about 12 because otherwise I just wouldn’t get up in time to take my child to nursery. Financially it wasn’t too bad, because I’d try to get friends to babysit so it didn’t cost much, and drinks at the university were really cheap.”

*Claire, Winchester.*
Another worry for student parents about socialising is the worry of being judged.

However, something I told myself when I became a mother was ‘those who judge don’t matter and those who matter don’t judge’. It can be hard to remember this, particularly when things are tough and it doesn’t always help but it did help me care a bit less about what people thought about me.

Additionally, as mentioned previously, LGBT student parents also might find it difficult to know which ‘group’ to socialise with.

64 per cent of lone student parents and 71 per cent of international student parents reported that they would like to be supported in meeting up with other student parents.[11] Meeting in a group specifically for student parents might help student parents to feel less isolated. I think I would feel like opening up more to other student parents because they would know (by their own experiences) what it was like and perhaps be able to empathise more genuinely. There is nothing worse than someone saying, “Oh I know what it’s like” or “I know how you feel” when they really don’t.

---

Inside view

“I’d go out and sometimes spend as little as £8 on drinks, come home and have to pay £25 for my babysitter!”

Claire, Winchester.

Inside view

“I felt really conscious about being judged when I went out drinking, because I’m a mum.”

Claire, Winchester.

Inside view

“I found gay groups a bit cliquey and I wasn’t really that keen on the ‘gay scene’, and being gay with children is just a bit different, probably because most of the gay people in my uni were all quite young. Most were friendly, you know, but they just had no clue what it’s like to have children and study.”

Penny, Plymouth.
Circles of social support

Making friends

During the course of my three years of study, even though I was 25 years old when I started university, I made many friends with people on my course and in my sports team. Friends can offer guidance, support, reassurance, a sense of belonging, empathetic listening, encouragement, feedback and make your personal experience of achievement feel validated. For me, the experience of friendship acted as a buffer against stresses and potential stresses in my life during this time – and continues to do so. Some student parents (52 per cent) socialise with those outside university most of the time, because many student parents with children do not move to attend university. Therefore, many student parents already have support networks in place. Either way friends can be an effective mechanism for counteracting various difficulties or stresses associated with starting university with dependents because they are a major source of social support.

I initially moved to Winchester to complete my degree and whilst I had some family close by who supported me, I found it hard to make friends outside university because I was so busy studying and looking after my daughter. During term-time I was able to make friends in class and also on a sports team. Then, outside university term-time it was particularly difficult as most students who I got to know went home for the holidays. Instead, working part-time during the holidays helped me get to know people outside university. Other student parents don’t necessarily think about building new social lives or engage in extra activities to meet new people.

Whereas for resident student parents, it might be quite important for them to make friends, given that this transition might disrupt previous social networks.

"I've got friends outside university I like to hang out with and obviously, my husband so I don't really feel like I need to get involved.”
Eleanor, Plymouth.
Clubs and societies

The Students’ Union might be one place to approach. It offers many groups/societies (for example, sports: basketball, athletics; societies: dance, art, martial arts, religious groups, socialist students, archaeology, UNICEF; representatives: subject reps, LGBT reps, international student reps, woman’s officer, mature student reps and, of course, student parent reps). Whilst some student parents don’t want to get involved, 77 per cent of student parents reported that they did not think that it was easy to get involved with university life. The lack of sleep, energy and spare time that affects student parents might make it harder to be able to get involved in extra-curricular activities. For example, student parents with older children might have many activities their children already engage in which also means that there is limited time for other things.

Student parent groups

Creating and maintaining a suitable and empathetic social support network seems vital for many student parents. There are various different ways support networks can be created, which can be extremely useful, both emotionally and practically.

However, not all universities have student parent groups; for example, my university did not have a group specifically for student parents and I tried going to mature students’ meetings instead, but I did not feel like I really fitted in there. For me, I wanted to socialise with friends ‘out and about’ and many of the mature students who attended these groups were much older and did not have children or want to socialise in the same way as me. The group focused on arranging much more structured events (such as shopping trips and walks) which were OK, but were

Inside view

“When I lived on campus, making friends was so important to me.”

Daniella, Winchester.

Inside view

“When I was at university, there was a student parent rep and she often ran a coffee morning. There were quite a few of us who then organised to do things together.”

Penny, Plymouth.
not always appropriate for me to bring my daughter along. So after a while I gravitated towards like-minded folk regardless of whether they had children or not and we arranged nights out together or days out (for example, picnics).

**Lecturers and personal tutors**

Many student parents do find lecturers and personal tutors hugely supportive. It is worth working *with* your lecturers and personal tutors to get the best out of them so that they support you and have a better understanding of your situation.

Often a certain kind of confident assertiveness is required; being assertive is a useful and possibly vital actively which can be learned and practiced. If I was having personal difficulties I found it easier to email my tutors, as opposed to meeting face-to-face, but I was lucky enough to have tutors who knew many of their students by name and valued their teaching responsibilities.

**Internet spaces**

There are also various Internet websites that offer support to student parents. When I was a student parent, I was unaware of any such websites, but some might be useful. These websites appear to have helpful information with regards to aspects of the student parents’ life, such as funding. University websites might also have pages for student parents giving advice about funding, and student parents’ forums might be a source of more emotional support.

**Family**

As I mentioned earlier, when I was studying at Winchester I had family around me which really helped when I needed to go out. My sister was a huge support to me and looked after my daughter for the night while I went out. Sometimes, I took my daughter to my mother’s house, just 20 minutes away, which also meant that I could go out and socialise.
with my friends. I found it really important to go out, enjoy myself and socialise with friends whilst I was working so hard; it was a way of rewarding myself. As a single parent, I needed to go out and meet people so that I didn’t feel isolated.

Whilst it’s been reported that most student parents do not move to attend university, it might be that many commute.\(^{(11)}\) This was my experience when I did my MSc at Chichester, meaning that socialising was much more difficult during this period. Many student parents also study part-time which can make socialising harder as it is much more challenging to get to know other students under such circumstances. Nonetheless, having family close by can offer invaluable support.

**Partners**

Whilst some student parents do not have partners who they can rely on, it seems that having a *supportive* partner can really enable student parents to be more flexible and organised.

Alternatively one student parent I met at university when I was studying was constantly on the phone to her husband, giving him advice on how to look after the children. I could barely have a conversation with her without him calling her and telling her about some drama with the children – in the end she couldn’t finish her studies because she just couldn’t focus, which was quite sad for her. So it seems that having a *supportive* partner can mean all the difference.

---

**Inside view**

*“With my wife working full time this flexibility has allowed me to organise my week so that I can spend time looking after my daughter every Monday and Friday.”*  
Tom, Exeter.

**Inside view**

*“My partner was incredibly supportive when I was studying. I mean, we only had one income coming in and that meant things were tight for quite a long time. It really helps just knowing they’re behind you though.”*  
Eleanor, Plymouth.
Children’s activities

For student parents, whilst much of the balancing revolves around trying to complete your studies, balancing time with children can be riddled with guilt, rushing from one place to the next with little time to stop and think. Nonetheless, not working full-time and being a student parent gives you quite a degree of flexibility which enables you to attend various school events. Often classes finish before the last week of the school term so you can attend things like Christmas plays. Additionally, when you take your child/children to extra-curricular activities, you can try and use the time quite constructively. When I used to take my daughter to indoor play areas, I would read as much as I could whilst she played by herself (she was quite good at this and some children might not be) or with other children.
Index

Access
English 3, 6
higher education, to 1, 3–18
funding 8–9
Maths 6
study skills 6
workload 7

balancing
childcare 11, 84–92
funding 78–80
time 93–101
studies 34–35

benefits
claiming 18, 66, 134
re-claiming 17
child benefit 52, 70–72

breastfeeding 29, 33
budgeting 67, 98
templates 99–100
see also expenses

burnout 97, 103, 110, 125
career advice
interviews, preparing 143
see also CV

childcare
nurseries 16, 51–53, 92, 116
funding 27, 52–53, 59
half-term 7, 48, 89, 93, 95, 117
school clubs 52

CV
developing 39, 101, 141–143
jobs, applying for 13–14, 124,
134, 144
see also careers 5, 45, 40
deadlines
applications 12
assignments 45–46, 54, 95, 133
extensions 113,
managing 45–46, 103, 113
determination 88, 138
diet 129, 132
disability
advisors 40
Disability Living Allowance 60
Disabled Students’ Allowance 61–62
disabled student parents 39
equipment 40
knowing your rights 39, 40
NHS Disabled Students’ Allowance 62
Personal Independence Payment (PIP) 60
support 40

employability 11–12, 142–143
see also careers
expenses
baby 28–29
university
money, saving
living 55, 58

funding 49–74, 124
grants 50, 57, 59, 113
student finance 31, 50, 57–63, 66, 77, 113–114

further study
PhD 119, 124–137
MSc 121–124

goal setting 93, 129–130

health 25, 28, 33, 60, 62, 73, 78, 97, 102–103
body 131
nutrition 132
posture 110, 129, 131

identity 21, 32, 34–35, 39, 42, 48, 75

maternity leave 31

mitigating circumstances 23, 26, 113
motivation 14, 38, 93, 108, 122, 127, 134
role models xvii, 35, 96, 115
group setting 93, 104, 140, 138–139
visualising 108
moving house 15, 119, 125
schools 16
change of address 17
MSc 121–124
see also further study

paternity-related absence 31
PhD 119, 124–137
see further study

pregnancy 21–24
breastfeeding 33
changing status 31–32
knowing your rights 30
making plans 25–26
returning to study 33–34
risk assessments 27–28
support 24–25

relaxation xv, 97, 104–105, 111
relocating
see also moving house
representatives 81, 112, 114, 140
student parent 114–116

studies
revision 96
see also time management
support
financial 57–58, 62–64
seeking 24, 89
social support, circles, of 112
tutor 24, 114–115
mentoring 115, 143
stress relief
relaxation xv, 97, 104–106, 111
time management 93–101
me-time 48
leisure time 106

targets 129–130
see also goal setting
time management 93–101, 134
timetabling 47, 53, 86, 92–95
templates 99–100

university
applying 12–15
choosing 11
preparing, for 6–7
personal statement, tips 12–15, 143