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Studying as a Parent: A Handbook for Success

Book

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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.⁽¹⁹⁾ The same survey shows that 14 per cent do not socialise at all.⁽¹⁹⁾ 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.⁽¹⁹⁾ 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.

 **Inside view**

"Sometimes I did feel like I was missing out, but I didn't mind because I've got different responsibilities, different priorities so I just accepted it really."

Richard, Winchester.

 **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.

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'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.

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 found gay groups a bit cliquy 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.⁽¹¹⁾ 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.



Inside view

"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.

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



Inside view

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

Daniella, Winchester.

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.⁽⁴⁴⁾ 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 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

Inside view

"My personal tutor's been fantastic, been very helpful with deadlines. Luckily I've not had to ask for any extensions yet but... she said if I need to it's there but not to worry about it."

Stephanie, Northampton.

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.

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