



A PRACTICAL TOOLKIT:

EIGHT STEPS TO IDENTIFYING, SUPPORTING AND CELEBRATING STUDENT-PARENTS

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Introduction:

Unlike many cohorts attending university under the Widening Participation agenda, student-parents are not considered by the Office for Students to be an underrepresented group. They are not, therefore, required to feature in institutional Access & Participation Plans, meaning that student-parents, and their needs, frequently go undetected by their institutions and departments.

During summer 2021, the author of this toolkit undertook a small-scale research project to identify the needs of, and challenges faced by, student-parents in her department. The study revealed that in order to succeed, student-parents feel they need **flexibility** (in terms of time and space) and a sense of **belonging** (via understanding, support, reassurance and connection) from their institution.

During summer 2022, the author carried out a further study to assess the impact of a year-long pilot approach to supporting student-parents (aimed at giving students what they identified as being necessary for their success) and to garner views on what more can be done to provide flexibility and support to them at university.

The steps overleaf represent a practical (yet research-informed) approach to identifying, supporting, and celebrating this committed and motivated cohort. It includes some practical tips on how institutions and/or departments can complete each of the eight steps.

Many of the tips may also assist other minority cohorts, such as those with other caring responsibilities and students undertaking significant paid work whilst studying.

For those interested in reading more about the research underlying this toolkit, papers have been accepted for publication during 2023 in the Journal of Learning & Development in Higher Education and in the Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning Journal.



STEP 1: IDENTIFY THE COHORT

Student-parents cannot be supported if they cannot be identified. In contrast to Scotland and Northern Ireland, there is no obligation on institutions in England and Wales to compile data on their students' family circumstances.

It is therefore incumbent on institutions in England and Wales to systematically collect this information. Asking students to self-identify will not catch everybody: some may choose not to disclose their parental status, but it does give those who wish to disclose their status the opportunity to do so.

HOW?	<p>At institutional level: include a tick-box question on pre-arrival university enrolment documentation.</p> <p>At departmental level: collect data at department level by way of a pre-arrival survey sent to incoming students.</p>
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As well as collecting data pre-enrolment, opportunities should be provided to students to self-declare if they become a parent during their studies.

HOW?	<p>At institutional level: include a question on a re-enrolment survey undertaken before the start of each academic year.</p> <p>At departmental level: send out a survey prior to the start of each academic year and inform students that if they choose not to disclose at this point, they can do so at any point in the academic year by contacting their personal tutor.</p>
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STEP 2: EQUIP PERSONAL TUTORS

To effectively support student-parents, personal tutors should be equipped with knowledge of the challenges and barriers experienced by student-parents, of their frequently encountered queries and of the avenues of support available to them.

HOW?	Provide personal tutors with an evidence-based personal tutor information pack ¹ compiled by student-parents
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It is recommended that student-parents are grouped into tutor groups containing other student-parents, with the aim of reducing the potential for feelings of isolation reported by student-parents.

HOW?	<p>When identified pre-arrival at Level 4, allocate student-parents to a small number of nominated personal tutors. Ideally personal tutors should be asked to volunteer for the role of supporting a tutor group which includes student-parents, following an explanation of the benefits of student-parents being supported in this way, to ensure staff engagement with the initiative.</p> <p>If not already offered, hold group personal tutor meetings during induction to allow student-parents in the tutor group to meet each other and make connections.</p> <p>The tutor group need not be made up exclusively of student-parents. Indeed, being in a group with non-parents assists with student-parent transition into university more widely, and non-parent students may benefit from being in a group with student-parents given their often-excellent time management skills, life experience and strong work ethic.</p> <p>In the absence of a system to identify student-parents pre-arrival, consider the ages of incoming students in the data sets provided and allocate students aged 24 and over in groups to nominated personal tutors, as it is more likely that these individuals will be student-parents².</p>
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¹ This pack will be produced by the author during 2023 and will be informed by contributions from student-parents taking part in an ethically-approved research study drawing on student-parents' experiences of best practice from personal tutors, views on where practice could be improved (and how), and the practical information personal tutors should have to hand to assist with commonly encountered student-parent queries.

² The author has used this method for two academic cycles and the majority of students in these groups have indeed been parents.



STEP 3: PROVIDE EFFECTIVE INDUCTION

Effective induction for student-parents is crucial, to alleviate the stress reported by student-parents of arriving at university and not knowing how the juggle between university student and parent identities can be balanced.

HOW?	<p>Prior to induction week, in the months leading up to arrival at university, provide student-parents, who will in many cases be returning to learning after some time, with tailored pre-arrival information which assists with their transition into higher education. Many institutions and individual departments will provide all students with pre-arrival information and resources which may assist with transition into university generally, but also consider providing a pre-arrival pack specific to student-parents.³</p> <p>During induction week, carve out time (ideally in groups, as noted above) for open and positive discussions between the personal tutor and student-parents about the students' children (names, ages, interests etc), sources of childcare and plans for balancing study, family, and in some cases, work.</p> <p>Personal tutors should also provide early information on the policies most relevant to student-parents (see Step 4 below).</p> <p>During personal tutee meetings, personal tutors should share success stories of student-parent alumni, and mentors from higher years (see Step 7 below) can be brought in to facilitate discussions and share their experiences, or provide recordings of their stories to provide reassurance to new students.⁴</p>
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³ This pack will be produced by the author during 2023 and will be informed by contributions from student-parents taking part in an ethically-approved research study drawing on their experiences of their transition into university.

⁴ The author and a group of student-parents are in the process of setting up The Student-Parent Podcast, which will provide video stories to tap into for all institutions. Contact the author for further information.



STEP 4: CLARIFY AND, WHERE POSSIBLE, AMEND POLICIES & PROCEDURES

To assist with the retention and progression of student-parents, it is recommended that wherever possible, student-parents are supported when encountering exceptional circumstances which impact their performance and/or their ability to submit work.

The evidence requirements stipulated by institutional exceptional circumstances policies often leave student-parents in an impossible position. Having a child who is sent home from school with a minor illness will have a significant impact on a student-parent's ability to undertake assessment work, but the illness will often not be deemed sufficiently serious to merit the use of NHS time in seeing the child, nor in writing a medical note.

During COVID, exceptional circumstances policies in many institutions were relaxed and in many cases emergency changes to policies obviated the need for the usual medical or other third-party evidence to be provided to support the application. The author's research study revealed that even when these rules were relaxed, student-parents only applied for an extension or deferral of an assessment as a last resort.

HOW?

At institutional level: consider whether a derogation to university policy could provide for extensions and deferrals to be available to student-parents without the need for independent medical evidence when extenuating circumstances connected to children arise (and requiring instead other independent evidence, e.g. email from the child's school or childcare setting).

At departmental level: in the absence of a university-wide policy, consider whether, and if so the extent to which, the department has scope within existing regulations to exercise discretion locally to assist student-parents encountering exceptional circumstances related to their children (e.g., accepting a late submission with an email from school or childcare setting in place of medical evidence).

Personal tutors should take student-parents through the detail of the exceptional circumstances policies at a very early stage (induction or shortly thereafter is ideal) so that they understand these rules in detail from the outset and can make plans for any contingency arrangements they may need to put in place to account for unexpected interruption to childcare and/or child illness around assessment deadline periods.



STEP 5: FACILITATE EFFECTIVE PLANNING

Student parents report needing certainty to effectively balance their parent and student identities. They also report being incredibly time-poor and benefitting from being in control of the time at which, and the space in which, they access learning resources.

Institutions and departments can provide support by facilitating student-parents in effectively planning and balancing their time.

HOW?

Where possible, provide pre-recorded lectures online. This enables student-parents to make the best use of their scarce time and avoids the need to put in place childcare provision to attend didactic lectures. It also enables student-parents to access lectures at a time that suits them, which, as reported by many student-parents, is often when their children are in bed.

Release teaching timetables at the earliest opportunity to student-parents, as schools and nurseries often require confirmation of wrap-around requirements months in advance. Where the student-facing timetable will not be available until early September, consider the extent to which details of any drafts of the timetable could be shared with student-parents. Any information that can be provided earlier than the start of term (even regarding days on which particular modules will not run due to staff working patterns) will help in giving student-parents some idea of their likely commitments (with the caveat that this may be subject to change).

Where the student-facing timetable made available at the start of term interferes with childcare commitments (e.g. 9am starts and later finishes), encourage student-parents to speak openly to their personal tutor about this. The tutor should assist the student in considering the timetable and working out whether requesting a move to alternative seminar sets (where available and subject to space and timetable clashes) may assist. If not already in place, consider instigating a departmental seminar swap policy to facilitate this.

Release assessment timetables as early as possible, so that student-parents have notice of when they may need to secure additional childcare around assessment deadline periods.



STEP 6. ESTABLISH A PEER SUPPORT GROUP

Student parents report feeling supported, connected and understood, and a genuine part of the university community, when a member of a student-parent peer support group.⁵

<p>HOW?</p>	<p>Set up a Student-Parent support group which operates via Teams chat group (or a similar online platform). It is important to host this primarily on an online platform given that student-parents are time poor and appreciate the ability to either post quick queries on the group to be answered by fellow students, or to just observe the chats passing between peers without needing to become actively involved. This has been piloted within the author's department (under the guise of 'SPACES: Student Parents and Carers Enhanced Support', a name chosen by the students themselves) and was positively received.</p> <p>Invite student-parents during induction (and via email/Teams reminders through the year) to join the group.</p> <p>The group will likely require a moderator who is a member of staff (to set up the group and add members) but that staff member does not necessarily need to post in the group⁶.</p> <p>The support group may encompass the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A practical forum for asking questions of peers which may obviate the need to navigate often complex university policy documentation; • Online 'keeping in touch' posts at the beginning and end of each term, and on occasions such as World Book Day, Mother's and Father's Day and Halloween, sharing photographs and stories of the students' children and how student life is progressing; and • Face-to-face events as decided collectively by the members of the group which may or may not include the students' children.
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⁵ Findings of the author's 2022 study into the impact of a pilot student-parent support group

⁶ The author's experience was of joining in with group chat discussions (and sharing photos/stories). This did not appear to interfere with the activities of the group and indeed acted as a catalyst for discussion/support at relevant times e.g. around assessment submission.



STEP 7. PROVIDE MENTORING

Many student-parents report having considered giving up when student life and family life have felt impossible to manage. Setting up a mentoring scheme between student-parents can increase the possibility of student-parents feeling supported and provides a safe space to discuss any concerns about what the academic year holds.

HOW?	<p>This is often best done at departmental level as mentors will know exactly what the mentee will encounter during the academic year.</p> <p>In an undergraduate setting, where there are sufficient numbers to facilitate this, set up a mentoring scheme whereby:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level 4 students are mentored by Level 5 peers; • Level 5 students are mentored by Level 6 peers; and • Level 6 students are mentored by a student-parent graduate. <p>Mentoring should involve contact in the first week of the academic year for Level 4 and Level 5 students to facilitate transition and provide a friendly face, sharing tips on how best to navigate the year and reassuring their mentee that they can succeed, followed by informal contact via Teams or other chat function and/or face to face contact, to support the mentee as and when required.</p> <p>For Level 6 students, contact with their alumni mentor should be more structured, with a meeting in Autumn, one in early Spring and one towards Summer. The aim of this scheme ought to be to motivate the Level 6 student, to raise their aspirations and to have positive contact with a student-parent who has ‘made it’ into a successful career post-graduation whilst balancing family life. Given that the mentors will be balancing work and childcare, the remit of the mentoring relationship will need to be carefully drawn to avoid the mentor’s time being overburdened by their role in the relationship⁷. Mentors should be encouraged to report time spent on mentoring to the member of staff responsible for administering the mentoring scheme so this can be monitored. Participants should be encouraged to retain these connections between mentor and mentee into working life.</p> <p>In a postgraduate setting, where numbers allow and where practicable, consider setting up a similar scheme whereby students on courses lasting more than one year provide informal mentoring across levels to their peers, and those undertaking shorter postgraduate courses are mentored by a graduate of their chosen course.</p>
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⁷ During 2023, as part of an ethically-approved research project, the author will be administering a pilot mentoring scheme within her department and will work with student-parents to co-design a mentoring pack which will be shared in Autumn 2023 once the pilot is complete.



STEP 8. PROVIDE EQUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES

It is important to facilitate student-parents' involvement in extra-curricular activities so that they are not disadvantaged in building their CVs by their childcare responsibilities.

HOW?

Provide transparency around time commitments. For example, if it is possible to undertake extra-curricular activities between the hours of 10am-2pm, these activities should clearly be advertised with these timings attached to make clear that they can be undertaken during the school/nursery day and around school runs.

Wherever possible, ringfence some activities as online-only, so that student-parents do not need to be on-site to participate effectively. For example, Law Schools offering a free legal advice clinic staffed by student volunteers can offer one or more clinic as online-only to enable student-parents to participate.

Careers events involving guest speakers are often organised during the early evening so that these guest speakers can attend once their working day is complete. Consider what can be done to facilitate student-parent attendance at these. For example, for evening sessions held on-campus, allow online attendance so that student-parents can actively participate in a live session, rather than simply accessing a later recording (if made).

With sincere thanks to the student-parents involved in the 2021 and 2022 research studies, whose experiences and feedback have shaped the advice in this toolkit, and to colleagues from the Connecting Legal Education community who volunteered their time to review an early draft of this document.