



Valeria Fernandez, a student at George Mason University, with her son on campus.
(Credit: Generation Hope)

1 in 5 college students is a parent.

CONTENT CREATOR RESOURCE GUIDE

Student Parents





Who We Are Talking About

Despite representing nearly 20% of the higher education student population nationwide, **student parents** are overlooked and underserved. These individuals are living a narrative of extraordinary resilience and dedication, but lack of institutional and policy support, rising costs of college and childcare, and systemic roadblocks can undermine their pursuit of a degree or training that leads to a better life for themselves and their children.

Telling These Stories Matters ...

If you are surprised to learn that there are so many parenting college students in the US, you're not alone. Most colleges, in fact, would be surprised too: very few postsecondary education institutions ask the parenting status of their students. Meanwhile, many programs established to support working parents often exclude those pursuing education. Exacerbating all of this is the child care crisis in the US which affects both working and student parents. **These are the cracks between our systems of learning, care, and work that millions of US families slip through – rendering them invisible to those who make decisions that shape their lives and their families' futures.**

Shining a light on these often invisible struggles is a way to...

- **Support Families.** The struggles faced by student parents are also felt by their children, as time commitments, financial constraints, and the challenge of securing high-quality child care can have a large impact on parents' success and their family's well-being. By inspiring policymakers to create better societal support systems, we can unlock the doors of higher education and economic mobility to more parents, while also providing the resources necessary for healthy childhood development that will set their children up for educational success, too.
- **Break Cycles of Poverty.** Parents with bachelor's degrees are half as likely to live in poverty and *double* their earnings compared to those with high school diplomas. This translates to better outcomes and opportunities for themselves and their children. Even a relatively small increase of \$3,000 per year in a parent's income has been shown to increase their children's future earnings by 17%.
- **Higher Education for All.** Most student parents are single women, disproportionately women of color, who already face compounding systemic barriers on their path to education. Recent rollbacks to affirmative action and reproductive rights policies threaten to make higher education even more inaccessible for these parents. By supporting their educational journey, we can help them overcome these barriers and create a ripple effect of progress for future generations.
- **Invest in the Common Good.** By helping student parents succeed, we unlock their potential as valuable contributors to our workforce and economy, benefitting us all. An increase in earning potential and the opportunity to achieve economic mobility can improve quality of living for families, communities, and future generations. And, encouraging business leaders to normalize support for child care solutions will have benefits for all parents, not just students.



Quick Facts

3M

student parents are enrolled in college, representing nearly 1 in 5 US undergraduates

12M

US parents have some college but no degree

Despite juggling child rearing, childcare, and schooling in the face of structural barriers, **student parents earn higher GPAs** than non-parent students

2 in 3

student parents live near the poverty line

Single mothers who complete a bachelor's degree earn over

\$625K

more during their lifetimes than those with a high school diploma

2 in 3

student parents under 30 say they felt unwelcome on their campus

42%

of all Black women in college are moms

Student parents are

10x

less likely to earn a BA than those without children

Student Parent Stories Are...

Inspiring. Student parents are real-life heroes, pursuing their dreams while making sacrifices to support their families. Their stories provide a platform to showcase inspirational narratives of strength, resilience, and love – and to advocate for a society that values family, the pursuit of education, and social progress.

Relatable. Skyrocketing rents, inflated prices at the grocery store, and general economic turbulence leave most Americans squeezed by the rising cost of living. That pain is especially acute for student parents and the millions more Americans whose college dreams have not panned out. Their stories are an opportunity to acknowledge the reality facing many of us and to depict characters grappling with these resonant and relatable struggles.

Diverse. Foregrounding student parents means foregrounding individuals from communities and populations typically underrepresented in popular culture – stories that an increasingly diverse American audience is eager to see better reflected in the content they consume.

How To Tell Their Stories

Acknowledge Their Sacrifices. Highlight the incredible determination of student parents. Their resilience and grit as they navigate the challenges of balancing family and education deserves to be celebrated and makes for compelling stories.

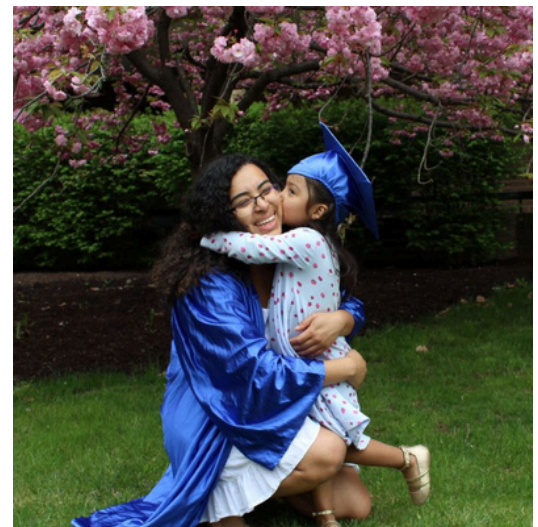
Make Their Children Part of the Story. Integrate the narratives of student parents' children into their stories, recognizing that their identity as a scholar and dreamer is intertwined with their role as a parent and caregiver. Their children are not accessories or barriers to success, but profound motivating force essential to their story.

Include Them in Campus Life. The reality that student parents often experience social isolation on campus is also an opportunity to depict a journey from isolation to integration, and ultimately portray them as an essential part of the campus community, using campus resources, career services, and participating in social life.

Avoid Perpetuating Stereotypes. The struggles of student parents should not be seen as punishments or consequences of their individual actions. Instead, acknowledge that the hardships they face often stem from systemic failures, not personal shortcomings.

Case Studies

- Fathers who are students battle their own unique set of barriers and stereotypes that they contend with (i.e., gender roles).
- Mothers who are students have to contend with the new restrictions around reproductive care which can impact their decision to pursue higher education or career-advancing accreditation (i.e., reversal of Roe v Wade).
- Despite typically depicted as young, student parents span a wide age-range, and face additional barriers due to societal preconceptions (i.e., older parents with young children who decide to go back to school).
- Part of the student parent journey is not only interacting with the education system, but the child care system as well – creating opportunities to explore how child care providers, like teachers, are essential and skilled workers who should be compensated to reflect the value they're providing to our communities.
- There are different forms of child care such as a center-based daycare, home-based community care, or care through family and friends, which are accessed by parents for different reasons (i.e., child care takes on different forms and should be represented in different ways).



"I am so ready to give my all in order to get my degree and to create a better future for my kids. To prove to everyone that I am more than capable, that I am more than just '16 and Pregnant.'"
Karen Escobar graduated in 2023 and now works as a Case Manager for Generation Hope in DC.

Audiences Want These Stories

84% of viewers say they are interested in seeing more depictions of work, family and care that are realistic, according to March 2024 data from New America's Better Life Lab and MarketCast. TV series featuring work-family content, including Netflix's *Maid*, drive audience engagement on social media more than other types of TV-related content.

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