



# **Student Parents Movement**



*Envisioning a Family Friendly Future for Educational Institutions.*

## **What is the Student Parents Movement?**

The demographic of the student population has shifted over the years and includes a rising number of students with dependents. We are the people working towards changing the academic system and government policy in order to reflect that. In the last couple of years there has been growing awareness of this group and their needs, and positive changes have been instigated to improve the lives of many students with caring responsibilities, but there is still much to be done. The Student Parents Movement is a term we use to describe the individuals and groups involved in the effort to understand and tackle the barriers to education experienced by Student Parents.

## **Contact details:**

For more information please **email:** *studentparents@googlemail.com*.

Join our online **discussion board** at:

*http://groups.google.com/group/student-parents-movement*

To post a topic directly onto the board via email, send it to:

*student-parents-movement@googlegroups.com*

Anyone can join our **online community** at:

*http://groups.google.com/group/studentparents*

To post a topic directly onto the online community via email, send it to:

*studentparents@googlegroups.com*

You can also find out more about us on our **blog:**

*http://studentparentsmovement.blogspot.com*

Or show your support and help to spread the word by joining our

**facebook group** and inviting others to join:

*http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=26061611512*



## **Why should YOU care?**

Practically anyone become a Student Parent. Parental status does not depend on what area of the country you live in, which political party you support, what nationality, or religion, which cultural/socio/economic background, dis/ability, the levels of melanin shading your skin, your sex or gender.... These issues apply to people from all walks of life. If you aren't already a parent, can you imagine adding parenting responsibilities to your life?

We believe that Student Parents are worthy of a national campaign.

Here is why:

- Student Parents do an amazing job under incredibly difficult circumstances, trying to balance their family lives with an academic system built around the needs of childless 18-25 year olds.
- Money and childcare are not the only barriers to education for Student Parents. Other problems are frequently reported, such as isolation, a lack of support and understanding, and policy and practice that indirectly discriminates against students with caring responsibilities.
- The reality of student life for those of us with dependants is dramatically different to that of the “average student”. We know everyone faces challenges at university, but there is little recognition or support for the unique problems we experience.
- The needs of student parents and other vulnerable groups overlap. For instance, universal pushchair and wheelchair access helps ensure that all students can participate in education.
- Difficulty accessing FE and HE creates barriers to employment opportunities for people with children and caring responsibilities.
- Supporting and engaging parents in the education system has many positive effects going far beyond the individual, with long-term social, intergenerational and economic impact.
- Widening participation initiatives encourage groups such as parents to apply for university, but the support for these students once they are here is not always adequate. Students are for the duration of the course, not just to supplement widening participation statistics!
- The more people willing to get involved in the Student Parents movement, encouraging respect and equal rights for all parents, the more we will achieve.

**We envision a future with a vibrant student parent community, whose members feel supported, included and able to achieve their potential. With your help this can become a reality.**



## What are our aims?

**REACHING OUT:** Encouraging the development of channels of communication to foster a sense of community and inclusion. Creating environments that are welcoming for students with dependents. Isolation is one of the most common problems we experience as a group and tackling this is a high priority.

**RAISING AWARENESS:** Not all students fit the stereotype. Even in attempts to embrace and encourage diversity, we are an often overlooked minority group. Raising the next generation whilst getting an education is hard work but worthwhile, and students facing this challenge should receive acknowledgement for their achievements, as well as support and understanding for the difficult task of juggling many responsibilities. Raising the profile of students with dependents in the consciousness of the government, media, universities and society at large, and encouraging debate and discussion, is essential to achieving this aim.

**RESEARCH:** Student Parents are not even a statistic. There is virtually no existing research on students with dependants, although this situation is very gradually improving. We are engaged in our own research, encouraging others to collect their own data and review existing research. This could include evaluating the needs of student parents and the current levels of support available, and investigating retention rates amongst student parents. We would welcome any information that would help!

**COLLABORATION:** Creating links and lines of communication with groups who have similar aims. Working together to exchange knowledge and ideas, raising awareness, and encouraging involvement and publicity.

**ACTION:** Encouraging improvements at a local, institutional, national and individual level. Creating a chain reaction which will lead to tangible improvements. Change requires action, not just speech.

*Do one thing...*

*Take one step...*

*Make one change...*

*Together we can make a difference!*



## Campaigns

**Student Parents – not even a statistic:** Tackling the lack of current research. We have been working hard to gather information, and encourage others to do the same. We'd love this to be a collaborative effort, so let us know if you would like more information, and share your findings via our online discussion board.

**Take one step...** : Promoting action to improve life for students with caring responsibilities. We hope Unions will pledge to do at least one thing to achieve this aim (a list of suggestions is provided later in this document). Imagine the overall impact if every union committed to this!

**2009 - The year of the Student Parent:** We want 2009 to be the year when student parents finally feel like they belong in higher education! The aim is to raise awareness throughout all academic institutions, to get students with dependents more involved in university life, and to begin to solve some of the problems that currently exist. We are working on a poster campaign and creating targeted information to help spread the message to various groups. We hope as many unions as possible will join us in setting this in motion.

**If you are interested in (or are already) actively working on behalf of student parents and carers, or aim to make some improvements at your union please get in touch!**

## Engaging Student Parents

Student Parents can be difficult to reach through the usual channels as we are, by definition, very busy people who come from a wide range of backgrounds, and often don't have time to read or process information that isn't essential to our courses, jobs or families.

We are an under-represented group who are unlikely to feel very involved in union life, and tend not to take part in extra-curricular activities at university. Student parents are reluctant to put themselves forward for roles in the union or participate in campaigns and union democracy.

Imagine yourself walking into a room full of people chatting in groups. Everyone seems to know the rules but you, you feel as if you stand out, and the conversation is full of in jokes and jargon you don't understand. We're sure that you can understand how intimidating the idea of attending meetings can be for students who are unfamiliar with their union, or how approaching an unfamiliar exec officer with a problem (especially if it's personal) may be a daunting prospect.

Add to that equation the feeling of parental guilt for being there rather than



spending time with your child, the vague memory of your last night out being several months ago and the realisation that you're spending time in a meeting rather than all of the other things you should really be doing. You're suffering from sleep deprivation and in need of some TLC, and have been running around like a chipmunk on speed trying to complete two essays, revise for exams and prepare for a presentation in-between the inevitable demands of family life on your energy and time. You are irritable with offspring, partners and friends who, probably rightly so, feel neglected, and are ultimately left wondering if it's all worthwhile.

Anyone involved with union politics and campaigning will know it often feels like an uphill struggle or as constructive as banging your head against a brick wall, so you can see why student parents might be reluctant to add this to their already hectic schedule!

Convincing Student Parents that this isn't a waste of their time and that your union is their union too can be challenging. We have found that a good way to engage Student Parents is to use a flexible, person-centred approach; ask them what they want/need, talk to them about the best ways to contact them and the most suitable times for events and activities, and encourage them to be involved in decision making.

Remember that Student Parents come as a package with their families. Welcoming partners and children at groups and events will help student parents to feel comfortable attending and less intimidated. This is a key step in creating an environment of inclusion.

**Which groups are likely to contain Student Parents?**

- *International students*
- *Mature students*
- *Part time students*
- *Post graduates*

*...but remember that anyone could be a student parent.*

**Where could you publicise information relevant to student parents?**

- *University/college crèche*
- *In on-campus cafés*
- *In and around toilets (men's and women's)*
- *Near baby changing facilities*
- *Evening classes*
- *Common rooms*
- *Notice boards*
- *Through personal tutors*
- *In and around computer clusters*
- *Through campus magazines, newspapers and newsletters*



## What can unions do to help?

This may seem to be a very long list of suggestions and it is by no means comprehensive, but if your union can manage to do even one thing from the list it will make a difference. Please help us to achieve these aims by pledging to take at least one step or passing this information onto others within your union who would consider taking up this cause.

- **Advertise our online community:**  
<http://groups.google.com/group/studentparents> – anyone can join!  
Many Student Parents are grateful for a chance to talk to others in a similar position. Sometimes it helps just to be able to chat with someone who understands.
- Have **toys available in the union** in case students visit with children. You could purchase these from your local charity shop or ask staff and students to donate some.
- Provide a clean, comfortable, **breast feeding area**, where mothers can feed their children.
- Have spare nappies, wipes and other **baby and toddler essentials** available in case of an emergency. This is especially useful at academic institutions further away from local shops and amenities.
- Provide **baby changing facilities** accessible to both mothers and fathers.
- **Throw a family friendly event;** this could be anything from a coffee morning to an after school children's party. You probably already hold events suitable for children (including some organised by clubs and societies) which could be advertised as family friendly. It is relatively easy to get volunteers to help at such events as students are often keen to gain experience of working with children. Bear in mind that the children may be from a wide age range and diverse backgrounds, so care should be taken in making events as inclusive as possible.
- Services which would benefit **pregnant students and those seeking an abortion** often lack continuity and are not always clearly advertised. Students in these situations may need ongoing emotional and practical support. Reviewing existing policies on these matters and creating signposts to relevant sources of assistance is essential to protecting the rights and well-being of these students.
- **Set up a Student Parent group.** The formation of support networks and a sense of belonging can help students with dependants cope. Finding times, activities and means of communication which suit a



range of student parents can be a challenge, but being flexible and ensuring that student parents are consulted at all stages will encourage involvement.

- **Create a family friendly space** in your union or educational institution where Student Parents can take their coursework and children, and meet friends. Student parents often feel disengaged and excluded from their union, so providing a welcoming environment helps to develop a sense of inclusion.
- See if your university or college has a **Student Parents policy**. If not, suggest they develop one, in consultation with Student Parents, and put it into practice. The aim is to ensure that all university procedures and practice take account of the fact that some students have dependents, and that these students face an unique set of challenges which can impact their ability to get the most from their degree. For examples of motions in favour of a student parents policy please see Bristol or Leeds University Union Council minutes (further information is available on our blog & online discussion board).
- **Assess the support available** for students with dependents. Even just asking questions about what is already out there helps to raise awareness, and encourages improvements in provision. Information about this support should be well publicised.
- Make and advertise a list of external services relevant to parents and carers, such as local charitable organisations or government agencies. Creating these links is a cost effective way to help provide **extra sources of support** for families and carers and developing mutually beneficial relationships with other groups.
- Encourage your university to **collect data on students with dependents** to help create a mailing list and to assess the efficiency of available support.
- Write to your local MP regarding the government researching and publishing **statistics** on students with dependents, and developing policies on the basis of this. Perhaps lobbying the government demanding more research and less rhetoric would be a good idea for the future!
- Encourage your university to help find suitable **childcare** or schooling for every student parent. Local authorities can often be a good source of further information. See the NUS childcare campaign for more details.
- Encourage the creation of **timetables** that reduce conflict with **school**



**times and holidays.** Many staff union campaigns outline arguments in favour of this. Universities should be made aware of the fact that student parents cannot always take advantage of periods of time set aside for extra study, such as Easter and Christmas holidays, as they are taken up with unavoidable family commitments.

- Lobby your local **transport** company to use pushchair/disabled friendly vehicles. Links could be made with disabled students campaigns.
- Encourage your university to provide or advertise **family accommodation** for every student that may need it. Most student landlords do not accept children and prefer to rent houses by room, and where family accommodation is available the waiting lists are often years long, so students with families struggle to find suitable housing within a reasonable travelling distance of university.
- If you have an **international students** office you could contact them to see what they are doing on behalf of international student parents. Being in a strange environment can be an extra barrier to maintaining university-family balance.
- **International students** and other students who have moved to an unfamiliar area may be struggling to raise children without family support, trying to get their bearings and find out where to get information and support. Creating or encouraging your university/college to create information packs aimed at student parents could make a huge difference.

If you need more convincing, think we can help in any way or would like to know how to get more involved with the Student Parents Movement please contact us!

**Siobhan Gallagher and Saskia Middleton**

*(getting things done for student parents!)*

