

THE PERSONAL TUTOR'S GUIDE TO SUPPORTING STUDENT-PARENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A research-informed, evidence-based¹ guide to help you provide effective support to your student-parent personal tutees.

SIX KEYS TO SUPPORTING STUDENT-PARENTS	
1 Understanding the context p.2	4 Dealing with assessment and exceptional circumstances p.11
2 Ensuring effective induction and transition p.5	5 Understanding childcare p.12
3 Supporting with timetables, attendance, and time management p.8	6 Providing emotional support and facilitating connections p.14
APPENDIX: The Personal Tutor's Induction Checklist p.16	

This Guide is the sister guide to **'The Student-Parent's Guide to Navigating University'**, housed on the UCAS website. If your student-parents have not found this already, we recommend providing them with this link: <https://www.ucas.com/file/757241/download?token=0Cqy8ZSy>.²

¹ This Guide was produced following a nationwide ethically approved survey which asked student-parents a series of questions relating to their experiences at university. The survey was answered by 41 student-parents from 14 UK universities. See the [back page of this Guide](#) for further details.

² Both this Personal Tutor Guide, and the Student-Parent Guide, are designed to complement the institutional-level guidance published in January 2023: 'A Practical Toolkit: Eight Steps to Identifying, Supporting and Celebrating Student-Parents', available via the UK Advising and Tutoring Association (UKAT) website: <https://www.ukat.ac.uk/media/1886/supporting-student-parents-toolkit-andy-todd-jan-2023.pdf>. The institutional toolkit was produced following research studies conducted during 2021 and 2022, the results of which are discussed in this 2023 article: <https://journal.aldinhe.ac.uk/index.php/jldhe/article/view/920>

1

UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEXT

From 2023 entry, UK universities will know, via information from a tick box on UCAS forms, which of their incoming students have parental responsibility. They will be in a better position to put in place appropriate support to help student-parents succeed. The role of personal tutor is crucial to this support.

1.1 WHY DO STUDENT-PARENTS NEED ADDITIONAL SUPPORT?

Here are some reflections from our student-parent survey group which underline why student-parents need additional support:

'Parenting can be challenging, so mixing that with the challenges of being a student can be overwhelming'

'Children are an entire commitment that impacts absolutely everything'

'Students with children have a lot of extra responsibilities and tend to put themselves last'

'As parents we must consider school hours, school commutes, emergency calls, childcare can let us down and our capacity is stretched whilst participating in academic study.'

1.2 WHY IS MY PERSONAL TUTOR ROLE SO IMPORTANT?

The role of personal tutor is critical to supporting student-parent belonging and success at university. Indeed, some student-parents attribute their remaining in, and succeeding at, university to their personal tutor's support...

'I could not have [made it] through my undergraduate without her being by my side.'

'Without [their] support I could not have continued'

...and appreciate the connection between a lack of personal tutor support and dropping out.

'When I went to her I didn't get support. I could understand why some would leave'

1.3 HOW DO STUDENT-PARENTS FEEL?

The first step to effectively supporting student-parents is understanding how they feel when they start university. Our student-parent survey group shared their reflections on this.



The **positive feelings** expressed – reflected in this word cloud - reveal student-parents to be a motivated and determined cohort excited to be embarking upon the university journey.

The explanations for these feelings reveal a sharp focus on future employment and on bettering themselves for the benefit of themselves and their families. Here are some examples:

'I know what I want to achieve and was excited to take this journey!'

'I was motivated as I knew I was getting a degree which was the starting point for a successful career for me and to give my daughter the best life.'

'Determined to better myself and complete the course'

It is perhaps to be expected that new university students will experience many of the **negative feelings** reported by the survey group.



However, for student-parents, these feelings link directly to their family circumstances:

'I was anxious, afraid that I would fail, due to the amount of sacrifices I had made'

'I was worried being a mother would affect the university experience'

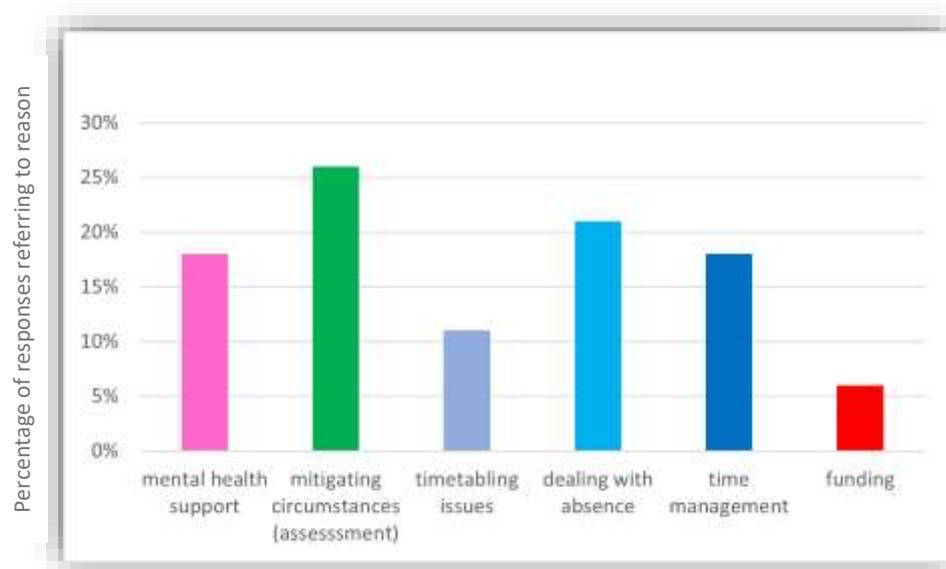
'I was nervous in case I had made the wrong decision for my family.'

'I was really concerned with how I would make it work with childcare, finances and school runs.'

1.4 WHAT DO STUDENT-PARENTS NEED PRACTICAL SUPPORT WITH?

Here are the most common reasons for student-parents needing the support of their personal tutor, according to the survey group.

Each of these topics will be considered in the remainder of this Guide.



1.5 HOW OFTEN SHOULD I CONTACT MY STUDENT-PARENT TUTEES?

'it is easy to just fall under as [we] get bogged down with so much'

Many universities operate termly check ins with personal tutees.

There is a strong argument that this is not sufficient for student-parents (indeed, only 5% of the survey group felt that once per term was satisfactory). 71% of the survey group felt it was necessary for personal tutors to check in with student-parent tutees **monthly or more frequently** than once per month.

This does not necessarily mean that personal tutors and their student-parent tutees need to meet up monthly. Rather, we would recommend considering diarising **tailored individual correspondence**, via email or other messaging platform, with your student-parent tutees each month, to check in and offer support if it is needed. You may also consider making your own plan of when to contact your student-parent tutees, noting the 'crunch' points during your institution's academic year (e.g. assessments) and during your tutee's childcare year (e.g. school holidays). See Key 3 of this Guide for some insight into how you may be able to support your personal tutees during these periods.

2

ENSURING EFFECTIVE INDUCTION & TRANSITION

Now that UCAS invites students to disclose their parental status, your department should receive a report on which students in the new cohort are student-parents. From this, ideally the student-parents from the list would be allocated to personal tutors in groups, to ensure an early sense of connection with fellow student-parents, as recommended by Step 2 of the institutional-level Practical Toolkit³.

2.1 SHOULD I CONTACT MY NEW STUDENT-PARENTS BEFORE THE START OF TERM?

'My personal tutor is super supportive. I wish I had known about her before I started though as I think I would have been more relaxed knowing that support was coming'

If you are informed of the members of your personal tutor group prior to term starting, we would recommend reaching out to student-parent tutees before they arrive at the university. It may be that your department does this for all personal tutees, and it may also be the case that student-parents, and/or mature students, are invited to specific institutional pre-induction sessions before term starts. Even so, it would be worth taking the additional step of reassuring your student-parent tutees that you are aware of their personal circumstances and will be there to support them through their university journey.

2.2 WHAT SHOULD I THINK ABOUT DURING INDUCTION?

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to student-parent induction into university. However, there are some themes to consider, and some recommended approaches, that you may wish to incorporate into your induction activities. We have included an Induction Checklist as an appendix to this Guide which may also assist you during induction.

BELONGING: During induction week, we recommend carving out time for **open and positive discussions** between you and your student-parent tutees about their children (names, ages, interests), their sources of childcare (if their children are young enough to need it) and their plans for balancing study, family, and in some cases, work.

'In the first few weeks I felt very isolated'

It is worth keeping a note of this so that you can refer to this information, and importantly remember children's names, in later discussions. Ideally this initial induction discussion would be

³ Available here: <https://www.ukat.ac.uk/media/1886/supporting-student-parents-toolkit-andy-todd-jan-2023.pdf>.

held in a group setting (see below), but if this is not possible, we recommend making sure this is done on a one-to-one basis during induction week.

If your institution has a **student-parent support group**, and students are not already aware of it through pre-induction messaging, we recommend providing details of how to join during induction. We also recommend establishing a **departmental support group** (this has been shown to work well via Teams) made up of student-parents from all year groups. See Key 6 for further detail.

'I felt so left out when I started university. All of my friends were going out for Freshers and living in halls, and I was going home to my child'

CONNECTING: If not already offered, and where this is possible, **hold personal tutor meetings in groups** during induction to allow student-parents in the tutor group to meet each other and make connections, to help alleviate feelings of isolation. It is not necessary for every student in a tutor group to be a student-parent. Indeed, student-parents should not be isolated from other students in their cohort. You will be best placed to gauge the extent to which it is appropriate to discuss parenting responsibilities in a group setting given the number of student-parents in the group.

Consider also whether it is possible to **connect student-parents** from your tutor group with those in colleagues' tutor groups, to encourage student-parents to socialise and to feel connected. Finally, consider whether, during induction, either in group personal tutor meetings or separately, you can **share success stories** of student-parent alumni and/or those from higher years. Would these student-parents be able to come in and share their experiences, or provide video recordings of their stories and share tips to provide reassurance to new student-parents?

BALANCING: it may be that you plan to take time to go through the **timetable and expectations** with all your personal tutees. The timetabling element is vital for student-parents given childcare commitments. It will be important to take time to discuss whether the planned timetable works for your student-parents, and where it does not, within the constraints of your departmental/university policy on this, to help them to work out which timetabling swaps, if any, would assist to help them maximise their attendance.

'It's important to consider timetables for those that have children as childcare is limited, expensive and/or only open certain hours. Their access to education would improve massively if considerations [were] in place.'

Sharing the year's **full assessment calendar** as far in advance as possible, and at the latest during induction, will also assist with childcare planning. We also recommend providing information during induction on the **policies most relevant to student-parents**. This will include policies on timetable swaps (if applicable) and extenuating circumstances and assessment. See Keys 3 and 4 for further detail.

2.3 HOW CAN I EASE STUDENT-PARENTS' TRANSITION BETWEEN ACADEMIC YEARS?

We recommend considering the Induction Checklist at the start of each academic year for items to ensure you discuss with your student-parent tutees, as these will be relevant year on year. We also recommend doing what you can to help student-parents understand their likely timetable

commitments in advance of the official release of the timetable, which often comes too late for arranging childcare effectively. See further Key 3 below.

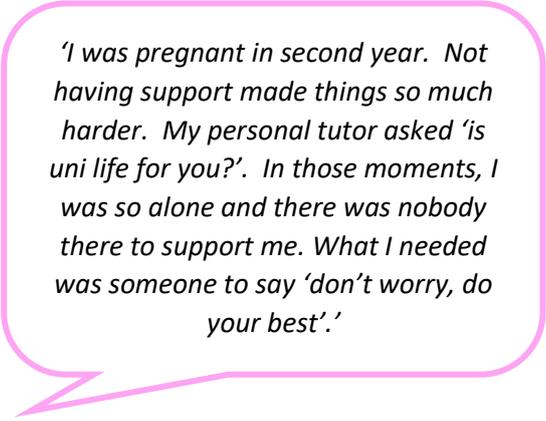
2.4 HOW CAN I HELP TUTEES WHO BECOME PARENTS DURING UNIVERSITY?

Some students will become parents whilst studying. The crucial importance of personal tutor support at this time cannot be underestimated.

To assist students who are in this position, we recommend you ensure you are aware of the university's rules on the following:

1. Health and safety (and any necessary health and safety assessments) for pregnant students;
2. Interruption of studies policy;
3. Breastfeeding policy and available spaces.

It will also be important to ensure you run through the issues in the Induction Checklist, when appropriate, with new parents.



'I was pregnant in second year. Not having support made things so much harder. My personal tutor asked 'is uni life for you?'. In those moments, I was so alone and there was nobody there to support me. What I needed was someone to say 'don't worry, do your best'.'

3

SUPPORTING WITH TIMETABLES, ATTENDANCE & TIME MANAGEMENT

'Being a parent is so integral to my life and therefore anything I do has to fit in around child caring responsibilities.'

'Being a parent is a responsibility that goes above and beyond and cannot be paused'

'As parent-students we rely heavily on extended family, external childcare settings, after school clubs which are not always available, close without notice, change operating hours and point blank let us down.'

Student-parents are time poor. They will need support in

balancing their university and home commitments. Below are some examples of how this support can be provided by personal tutors.

3.1 TIMETABLES

University timetables are generally released very close to the start of the academic year. However, schools and nurseries often require confirmation of wrap-around requirements months in advance. This causes a significant practical challenge for student-parents.

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 your 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.

'timetables are often late and that makes organising childcare hard'

When the timetable does become available, offer to meet with your student-parent tutee to consider how the timetable fits with their childcare responsibilities. Sessions starting at 9am and/or finishing late in the afternoon are likely to cause issues for those needing to drop off at - or pick up from - school or other childcare setting. We recommend ensuring you are familiar with your institution/department's position on swapping modules, and/or swapping seminar groups, sharing this with your tutee, and if they need it (and your institutional policy allows swaps), sitting with them to work out which classes they might be able to slot into to make the balance between childcare and university attendance easier. You may also assist with filling in any necessary forms to action these changes.

3.2 TIME MANAGEMENT

In many cases, student-parents will have worked prior to attending university and will likely already have good time management skills which will help them juggle the balance between home and university. However, our survey respondents noted that they were still taken aback by the **time commitment** expected per academic year.

It is worth discussing the concept of **notional hours** and explaining the expectation of a 1,200-hour commitment for one (120-credit) academic year. You may consider asking your student-parent tutee to sketch out how they envisage fitting this in across the course of the year and then meeting them to discuss their plans for how this can be achieved.

It will be important for your student-parent tutee to understand that the weeks leading up to **assessment deadlines** will be heavy in terms of university workload and to consider how their childcare commitments can be organised to fit around this, especially when deadlines fall very shortly after school holidays. See further Key 4 below.

3.3 MISSED SESSIONS AND CATCHING UP

'Parental responsibility sometimes has to be prioritised over attendance'

Student-parents will encounter circumstances beyond their control – often at short notice - which make it impossible for them to attend university.

'There can be so many things that pop up such as your child being ill, lack of childcare or even just that you have had a [dreadful] night with a child who won't sleep'

Your department's policy on **support for catching up** with missed work will be important here. For example: are there any

recordings or catch-up sessions available for those who are absent, or would it be possible to attend another session if one is missed? It is worth sharing this information with student-parents during induction, given the likelihood of unexpected childcare issues arising during the year.

You may also choose to help your student-parent tutee to come up with an advance plan (perhaps during induction or in the first few weeks of term), as to what action they will take when a session is missed. This might be, for example, that they email the relevant module tutor asking to attend another class, and/or to access the materials used during the session, perhaps copying you in so you are aware and can offer support where necessary. It will be easier for your tutee to come up with this plan, with your assistance, with a clear head and before the need to catch up arises, so that if and when they do need to miss sessions, they can proactively deal with catching up as soon as possible and avoid falling further behind.

3.4 SUPPORT FOR NON-ATTENDANCE

Student-parents forced to miss timetabled sessions for reasons relating to their children (e.g. illness, childcare problems) will most likely be feeling frustrated and stressed by their absence.

Our student-parent focus group which met to finalise this Guide reported the exacerbation of this stress, and a decline in their mental health, caused by repeated automated messages being sent via email to chase their non-attendance.

'[my personal tutor] turned that notification off [...] so I did have that support there'

Some university platforms allow for these messages to be switched off. If so, we recommend considering whether it would be appropriate to discuss switching off these notifications with your personal tutee (and if necessary with the relevant contact within your department), and making a note on the student's record as to why this has been done.

'I was feeling really overwhelmed'

'you're barraging me with emails [to] tick a box [but] people are dealing with stuff that they have no control over.'

3.5 EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND EVENTS

'The talks and the meetings [...] were all after 7:00pm [but] I've got kids who've got to go to bed'

'I missed out on a lot of opportunities, especially careers events and related things, because I had no childcare'

Student-parents report missing out on extra-curricular events and activities due to unavailability of childcare, either because the events are held in the evening or are organised or communicated at late notice which does not allow for childcare cover to be arranged.

'extra-curricular things [that] you can't access because they [...] send an email at 3pm and [say] 'this person is here at 5'

The organisation of these activities and events may be beyond your control, but it will be important - especially when encouraging your tutees to engage in extra-curricular activities - to be sensitive to the fact that the timing of these events can disadvantage student-parents. Consider how you might support your student-parent tutee with

the challenges this poses, for example supporting them in enquiring whether the events will be live streamed or recorded, by contacting the organisers to enquire as to whether daytime events or activities can be provided, or by helping your tutee decide on a small number of high-impact evening events to attend, for which they may be able to arrange childcare.

4

DEALING WITH ASSESSMENT AND EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Assessment deadlines, particularly when bunched together, pose a significant issue for parents whose family commitments still need to be met during times when students without such commitments may be able to clear their diaries to concentrate on assessment.

4.1 ASSESSMENT PLANNING

'concentrating on an intense workload is difficult with children in the house'

We recommend sitting down with your student-parent tutee in the first few weeks of term to consider the assessment timetable and how this fits with their childcare commitments. It may be that your tutee can see at this early stage that **expected events**, such as school holidays, will interfere with assessment preparation.

It may be that where coursework is released early in the year, students can work on this well in advance of the deadline, in order to manage this workload. However, this will not be possible for time constrained assessments e.g. those released only weeks in advance of the deadline, or which need to be completed on a particular day or within a short window. As such, childcare for these assessment windows will need to be considered and factored into your student-parent tutee's plans at an early stage.

'[The Winter break] is stressful, when assignments are due, as I want to do well but be there for my children'

4.2 MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES

Student-parents are likely to need to apply for a deferral or extension for a piece of work for **unforeseen circumstances** related to their child.

'things are more likely to take an unexpected turn [...] especially if children get ill'

It will be important to explain the rules around **mitigating circumstances** at a very early stage (during induction is ideal), so student-parents are aware in advance of what needs to be done to gain an extension or deferral for a piece of work.

'unexpected events can occur more often to a student-parent than a non-student-parent'

Evidence can often prove a challenge for student-parents in applying for mitigating circumstances. For example, some institutions require independent third-party evidence. This will not be possible for issues such as a sickness bug requiring the child to be excluded from the childcare setting but for which a GP appointment is not possible to obtain. We recommend familiarising yourself with your institution and/or department's rules around evidence. For example, would an email from the childcare setting explaining the child has been excluded suffice? It may well be that your student-parent tutee requires support with evidence requirements during the assessment period.

5

UNDERSTANDING CHILDCARE

5.1 EMOTIONS AROUND CHILDCARE

'it broke my heart seeing her cry when I dropped her off [at nursery] before going to university for the day. I would count the hours down until I could pick her up.'

'I was scared of missing out on time with my son'

It is important to understand the emotions experienced by student-parents when they place their children into childcare settings to study.

In discussions with your tutees, it will be important to ask, and make a note of, where any help comes from outside of formal childcare settings (partner, family, friends etc).

These sources of help will be especially important during assessment periods.

5.2 SETTINGS

We recommend ensuring you have a list of nurseries available locally (Student Support services within your institution should be able to provide this to you). If your institution has a nursery it is a good idea to familiarise yourself with its location, opening times and contact details so you can assist your tutees with this.

5.3 FUNDING

Funding arrangements can be a significant source of stress for student-parents and so it would be beneficial to ensure you are aware of the rules around eligibility for, and the operation of, funding streams designed to assist student-parents with the costs of childcare (this will differ depending on where your institution is based).

Many students report issues around payment of their **governmental childcare funding** being delayed, which may result in the student being unable to attend at the start of term and can even cause the childcare setting to threaten the withdrawal of the child's place.

Whilst personal tutors do not have any control over the administration of the funding schemes, it is good practice for personal tutors to have an awareness of the schemes, and the questions frequently raised in respect of them.

It is also recommended to familiarise yourself with the **grants and bursaries** available within your institution, including the application process, deadlines and maximum sums available, so you can share this with your tutee. You should be able to obtain this information in advance from your institution's Student Support/Finance team.

England & Wales:

To help support your student-parent tutees, it is recommended that you familiarise yourself with the rules relating to the Childcare Grant, an income-assessed funding scheme available to help full-time students (who meet the eligibility criteria) to pay for childcare.

- Details on the eligibility criteria for the childcare grant, what it covers, and how students apply, are found here: <https://www.gov.uk/childcare-grant>.
- Student Finance England has a useful website explaining how the grant works and answering some FAQs ('Does it need to be paid back?'; 'Can I change childcare providers?'; 'Do I need to know my provider before I apply?'; 'Are benefits affected by the Childcare Grant?'; 'Can I use it outside term-time?'; 'Can I use it for days I am not in university?')
<https://www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/products/full-time-undergraduate-education/full-time-childcare-grant/>
- Student Finance Wales has a similar offering on their website:
<https://www.studentfinancewales.co.uk/undergraduate-finance/full-time/welsh-student/what-s-available/childcare-grant/>

Scotland:

Via Students Awards Agency Scotland, the Scottish Ministers provide childcare funds to Scottish publicly-funded universities to help full-time students with the cost of childcare. Individual institutions are responsible for administering the scheme (processing applications, deciding whether students should receive payments, and if so, how much).

It is recommended that you familiarise yourself with your institution's application process, deadlines, and eligibility requirements so that you can better understand the process your student-parent tutee is navigating.

Northern Ireland:

The NI Direct website contains some useful pages on the types of, and maximum limits of, financial assistance available to student-parents: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-help-students-children>

6

PROVIDING EMOTIONAL SUPPORT & FACILITATING CONNECTIONS

6.1 MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

Significant mention was made in the national survey responses of the need for emotional support for student-parents. Providing mental health services is beyond the scope of a personal tutor's remit, but it will be important to ensure your student-parent tutees are aware of the **university's mental health support offering** so passing these details on both during induction and during any subsequent discussions will be important.

6.2 PEER SUPPORT

If your setting has an **institutional student-parent support group**, ensure your student-parent tutees are aware of how to join this and check in with them as to whether they have done so. It is worth familiarising yourself with the activities of the student-parent support group and advertising any such events via your departmental Student-Parent Teams site (or other platform) as they come up.

Whether or not your setting has an institutional support group, consider setting up, if not already in existence, a **Student-Parent support group for your department** which operates via Teams chat group or similar online platform, and which student-parents from all years can join and share the highs and lows of studying the same degree course. This would require one member of staff to create the group and add new members as they get in touch to join. 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 practical queries on the group to be answered by fellow students, to share news, to share stories and photos of their children, or to just observe the chats passing between peers without needing to become actively involved⁴. A departmental offering can be important as students may prefer to engage with a smaller group of peers and/or a group of students experiencing the same academic experience as them.

⁴ Findings of a 2022 research project conducted by the author. For further details, see: <https://journal.alinhe.ac.uk/index.php/jldhe/article/view/920>

6.3 PRACTICAL SUPPORT

It will also be important to provide your tutees with information on the practical support provided by, and details of how to access, the **university's central teams**, such as the finance team, academic skills team and library team.

6.4 PERSONAL TUTOR: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Those survey respondents who classed their personal tutor experience as 'excellent' all underlined the importance of **feeling understood** and the **sense of connection** they felt to their personal tutor.

Here are some examples of what makes a personal tutor 'excellent' in the eyes of their student-parent tutees:

*'caring,
compassionate,
understanding of
my circumstances'*

*'reaches back
as soon as
possible...not
always rushing'*

*'approachable
and
empathetic'*

*'super supportive -
checks in with me
and gives me help
and advice'*

*'massively
understanding'*

*'nothing was
ever too
much trouble'*

*'would always ask
about my family
and how I am
doing'*

*'I knew she would
understand & do
all she could to
help'*

*'friendly, non-
judgemental,
understanding
and very helpful'*

Induction Checklist

Student Name:

Name(s) and age(s) of child(ren):

Childcare setting (where appropriate) [e.g. nursery, school, after school clubs, family help?]

Timetable provided?	
Timetable discussed?	
Seminar swap policy (where relevant) provided and discussed?	
Swaps possible/made?	
Extenuating circumstances policy provided and discussed?	
Funding (where appropriate):	
- In receipt of childcare funding?	
- Has it arrived?	
- Discussed (and provided information on) institutional bursaries/grants?	
Discussed assessment deadlines where available?	
Discussed importance of planning to ensure sufficient time can be allocated around assessment deadlines?	
Considered potential clash of university holidays and children's holidays (where appropriate)?	
Frequency of personal tutor meetings set up?	
Provided student with my email and other contact details?	
Explained how to access wellbeing and mental health services?	
Explained how to access departmental student support Teams site?	
Explained how to access institutional student support group?	
Permission provided to tell fellow lecturers of parental status?	

Research study details

This Guide was produced using the data gathered from a nationwide Microsoft Forms survey. Ethical approval for the survey was provided by the University of Chester Law School Research Ethics Committee.

The survey asked student-parents a series of questions relating to their experiences at university. Student-parents, for the purposes of this Guide, means those who are parents of, or guardians for, a child under 18.

The survey was answered by 41 student-parents who are currently studying at, or have recently graduated from, 14 UK universities. At the time of completing the survey, 20% of respondents had just completed their foundation year, 12% had completed first year, 22% second year, 24% third year, 12% fourth year, and 10% were recent graduates.

Of the respondents to the national survey, two were guardians and 39 were parents.

The respondents are aged 20 to 51 and have either one (46%), two (37%), three (12%) or four (5%) children.

Thirty-six women and five men answered the survey.

Following analysis of the survey data, the first draft of the guide was produced and sent to a team of five student-parent peer reviewers from four UK universities. The guide was finalised following a focus group meeting with these student peer-reviewers.

With thanks to the student-parents who took the time to respond to the survey and share their experiences for the benefit of others

Personal tutors, please share your feedback on this guide with us by clicking [here](#).