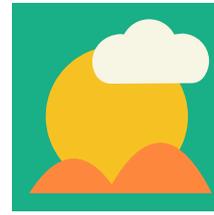


# Parenting Students and Graduate Education: A Call for Child- and Family-Friendly Infrastructure at Rutgers

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# Who We Are

## The SGS DEI Graduate Student Advisory Committee

This report was conceptualized, researched, and drafted by members of the **Holistic Student Supports subcommittee** of the School of Graduate Studies' (SGS) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Graduate Student Advisory Committee between 2022 and 2024. SGS established the committee in 2022 to advise on the implementation of the [SGS DEI Strategic Plan](#) and on DEI priorities beyond the strategic plan. The committee is comprised of students from across disciplinary areas who serve a one-year term and are compensated for their time. The committee meets monthly throughout the academic year, rotates facilitation responsibilities, and is organized through the following five subcommittees:

- Affinity Groups
- Inclusive Curriculum and Mentoring
- Graduate Student Engagement and Outreach
- Holistic Student Supports
- Professional Development and Career Preparation

Through building peer-to-peer connections, fostering relationships with campus partners, and designing projects/deliverables around their specific subcommittee topic, the committee aims to contribute to a more just, equitable, and inclusive graduate education experience.

## About the Authors



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## Acknowledgments

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# Background

Across the country, parents spend a larger portion of their income on childcare than on housing, college tuition, and other basic needs (Child Care Aware, 2022). At the same time, the structures and processes of schools, workplaces, and public life remain largely inaccessible or un-affirming to children. An inadequate early care and learning infrastructure means that many poor, working-class, and middle-class parents and caregivers often have to choose between pursuing educational and employment opportunities or staying home and caring for children given the cost-prohibitive nature of childcare. Parents who cannot afford childcare and are fortunate enough to have trusted family or community members nearby often have to rely on them to provide free or low-cost care. Even parents who are able to pursue education and careers are often confronted with workplaces and educational spaces that are unsupportive, or even hostile, toward parents, caregivers, and birthing people. Access to childcare, and caregiving generally, should not be a luxury or an obstacle that keeps people from the promise and joy of educational pursuit.

In this brief, we will use the term “parenting students” to refer to all graduate students who identify as parents and caregivers of children. While we recognize and honor the fact that graduate students also perform carework for elders and other loved ones, this brief focuses specifically on the care of children. About 18 percent of doctoral students in the U.S. identify as parents (Zhou & Mollo, 2023). Studies of graduate student attrition have shown that parenting graduate students attribute their decisions to withdraw from or delay progress through their program to, in part, their parental status and the associated lack of supports for parenting students (Gardner, 2009; Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). Those who complete their graduate programs have expressed hesitancy about research-based careers in academia, fearing that it’s a hostile environment for life as a parent (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013). In a qualitative study about parenting students’ persistence, respondents primarily attributed their capacity to persist to their personal determination, discipline, and good luck (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). This individualized accounting of persistence reflects a broader trend as it relates to parenting students: That is, the landscape of institutional support is insufficient, and the supports and policies that do exist are often poorly communicated to parenting students (Riley, Hutchinson, & Dix, 2022).

Consistently, parenting students identify the inability to obtain affordable childcare as an immense obstacle in their higher education journey, and for both graduate and undergraduate parenting students, access to affordable childcare significantly impacts retention and graduation (Lynch, 2008; Noll, Reichlin, & Gault, 2017). Notably, data collected by grantees of the US Department of Education’s Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) program found that retention and graduation rates for parenting and non-parenting students were approximately equal for campuses using CCAMPIS funds, highlighting the importance of investing in supports and infrastructure for this population. In the United States overall, non-parenting students are twice as likely to graduate as parenting students (Contreras-Mendez & Cruse, 2021). Thus, not only does lack of childcare access impede retention and graduation, but enhanced access brings graduation rates between parenting and non-parenting students up to par.

While Title IX requires schools to facilitate accommodations for pregnant students and prevent discrimination on the basis of pregnancy, many institutions have a long way to go to cultivate an environment that goes beyond compliance and embodies a truly affirming and accessible culture for all parenting students (Riley, Hutchinson, & Dix, 2022). Broader institutional support and policies for parenting students are often lacking, contributing to “school-family conflict” and burnout as graduate student parents navigate the tensions and competing demands of their dual roles at work and at home (Dolson & Deemer, 2022). Pregnant and parenting students are constrained by a higher education climate punctuated by time and resource limitations, as well as fear of disapproval or withdrawal of essential support from faculty and mentors (Mason, 2009; Zhang, 2021). Parenting students who identify as women (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009), Black mothers (Turner & White, 2023), and International students (Zhang, 2021), for example, grapple with compounding structural issues such as race- and gender-based discrimination, economic constraints, and stringent immigration policies that impact degree attainment and the parenting experience on campus.

The cost burden of childcare is exacerbated and compounded by additional features like poor lactation spaces, lack of child-friendly infrastructure, inflexible policies, limited data, and dispersed and inaccessible resources. At Rutgers, we lack crucial, centralized data about parenting students necessary for informing evidence-based child- and family-friendly policy and practice. Resources available to parenting students are dispersed across units, with no office or point person solely dedicated to supporting graduate students who are parents or caregivers. Coupled with a childcare landscape on campus that largely mirrors national trends of unaffordability and inaccessibility, this creates a fundamental, structural inequity between parenting and non-parenting students. Rutgers has only four child development centers (CDCs), all of which have long wait lists. The Rutgers Psychology Child Development Center even acknowledges they do not have the resources to fully meet the childcare needs of students, faculty, and staff. They request donations to support DEI initiatives and childcare infrastructure. From a greater investment in family-friendly policy and infrastructure to better communication, we agree with Riley, Hutchinson, & Dix (2022) that “schools must provide multifaceted support that is effectively communicated to the entire campus community, including students who are parenting, who are pregnant, and who may become pregnant” (p. i).

There is a concerted need to better understand the circumstances and needs of parenting graduate students and to devise solutions at institutional levels to address them. Yet, parenting students are largely left out of University-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse. The third strategic goal of the Rutgers [School of Graduate Studies Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Strategic Plan](#), however, articulates an objective for the graduate school to “vigorously advocate for the creation and funding of much-needed affordable and safe childcare and infant-care options for graduate students, including providing evidence addressing the importance of such measures for student wellbeing and student success.” We – a collective of graduate students, postdocs, workers, and parents – view this objective as an invitation to action.

*To this end, the following actions are meaningful steps we believe Rutgers should take to cultivate an equitable educational experience for parenting graduate students:*

1. Establish a permanent liaison for parenting students.
2. Grant priority access to teaching schedules, class registration, and flex-work policies for parenting students.
3. Collect data on parenting students and caregivers to support effective interventions and resources.
4. Create equitable access to lactation spaces and family-affirming infrastructure.
5. Expand access to quality childcare on campus and provide graduate childcare stipends.

## **Establish a permanent liaison for parenting students.**

One of the most basic access barriers that parenting students encounter at Rutgers is information inequity. The limited resources that currently exist are dispersed across units; communication about university policies, basic needs access, and available services and resources is decentralized and not always accessible.

Other large, geographically dispersed public state universities have addressed their own issues with information dispersal by creating a permanent liaison to parenting, pregnant, and caregiving students. This liaison, whether a single person or a dedicated office, serves both as an information clearinghouse and a direct support line for parenting students. For example, the [University of California-Berkeley](#) has a Student Parent Center with staff and resources personalized to the experiences of graduate student parents and caregivers. At the [University of Texas at Austin](#), the parenting student liaison is a staff member in the Title IX office, and at [Texas A&M](#), the liaison is a staff member in the Division of Student Affairs. The [University of Michigan](#) has a Student Caregiver Coordinator, and the [University of Wisconsin-Madison's](#) Office of Child Care and Family Resources houses a Parent Resource Specialist to support parenting students.

The landscape of student support at Rutgers would become even more inclusive with the addition of at least one full-time staff person to serve as a liaison for all parenting students. This person or office could help build capacity across the institution by coordinating and supporting a network of point people, one for each school, that has the skills and knowledge to aid and advocate for pregnant and parenting students. They might also develop a guidebook for pregnant and parenting students to consolidate resources and information specifically relevant to this population. Rutgers faculty and staff would benefit, too, from education and capacity-building opportunities focused on how to best support pregnant and parenting students, and the liaison could help coordinate this. A permanent liaison would be a starting place to enhance the accessibility of policies and resources related to pregnancy and parenting while deepening education and advocating for more expansive supports tailored to this community.

# Grant priority access to teaching schedules, class registration, and flex-work policies for parenting students.

Another considerable access barrier that parenting students contend with is schedule inflexibility. Caregiving is very resource-demanding. The costs can be exorbitant, but it also takes a considerable toll on one's time. As such, scheduling is a paramount concern. For parenting students, ensuring they can progress toward their degree and balance their caregiving obligations is essential for their success as students. Part of the training for many graduate students includes teaching obligations in the form of Graduate Student Teaching Assistantships, where they contribute to undergraduate instruction. Flexibility in their teaching duties and work schedules is crucial to ensuring they can balance family and caregiving priorities with professional obligations and progress. Implementing such flexibility ensures a more accommodating environment for parenting students and enhances the overall graduate experience. Other schools, such as the [University of Texas at Austin](#), currently provide accommodations through their Title IX office for [parenting graduate students](#) to access priority registrations and protected leave of absence for parenting responsibilities. Title IX, however, treats pregnancy and parenting as medical conditions and does not currently extend protections for parents beyond six months into parenting, making it even more crucial that Rutgers develop its own comprehensive policy to extend accommodations to parenting graduate students that would include priority registration and flexible work schedules.

Although all graduate students are able to enroll in courses at the earliest date, TA appointments are currently lottery based and don't take into account life circumstances such as parenting. Specifically, graduate students with TA appointments face barriers to schedule flexibility that put them at risk of spending thousands in extra childcare costs in off hours. Even though Title IX protections do not extend to parents or caregivers (other than for pregnancy-related conditions), Rutgers could enact policies to offer parenting students priority access to sections that fit their schedules. These extended policies would demonstrate Rutgers' commitment to equality and inclusivity by helping parenting students manage their academic and family responsibilities more effectively. Further, it would contribute to the overall well-being and success of parenting students.

Also, flexible work policies can be extended to parenting students to facilitate degree progress and completion. Accommodations such as working from home when needed, bringing children to classrooms, and extending the graduation timeline by +1 year per child born contribute to promoting

an inclusive and flexible work and academic environment. These initiatives align seamlessly with the goals of the [FlexWork@RU](#) pilot program, emphasizing the importance of adapting to the diverse needs of graduate students, promoting work-life balance, and fostering a supportive academic environment.

# **Collect data on parenting students and caregivers to support effective interventions and resources.**

In addition to logistical access barriers, Rutgers also contends with a lack of accurate, current information on parenting students that impedes its institutional capacity to enact evidence-based support for this population. Currently, Rutgers does not have University-wide data on how many parenting students are enrolled, which supports they require or already utilize, or if their degree completion timelines are comparable to their non-parenting peers. This information is essential for determining how resources should be allocated to allow parenting students to succeed academically and to ensure adequate supports for pregnant and parenting students.

Collecting data on the parenting student population is an important initial step Rutgers University can take to determine the extent of parenting student needs for housing, academic accommodations, childcare, and other supports. Targeted data collection would allow the University to directly contact parenting students to connect them to existing services. Data collection might also address students who are caregivers to adults or other family members, as this population of students faces similar challenges to parenting students and would benefit from targeted support. Having access to accurate and up-to-date data on the parenting student population would also improve the University's ability to apply for external funding opportunities to support parenting students.

Mandatory and voluntary data collection to identify parenting students is increasingly common throughout the US. Several states have enacted policies that require public universities and colleges to collect data on parenting students, including Illinois, Oregon, Michigan, and California (Sick et al., 2023). Many other higher education institutions voluntarily collect this data and use it to connect parenting students with support (Sick et al., 2023).

Although New Jersey does not have a statewide policy for mandatory data collection on parenting students, Rutgers could demonstrate leadership by providing a parenting status self-identification question for all students through a semesterly enrollment self reporting system. Collecting yes/no

parenting status data in this manner allows the university to treat parenting status as personally identifiable information, which could then be disclosed to the relevant supports such as the Title IX representative and the proposed Parenting Student liaison. Regularly surveying the parenting status of individual students will ensure accurate data collection and timely resource notifications to in-need students.

If students self-identify as parents, they could then be offered a voluntary survey with questions about how many children they parent, children's ages, and supports received or still needed. The Urban Institute provides freely available resources on designing and wording such surveys (Sick & Anderson, 2024). Collecting additional data from thoughtfully designed, voluntary surveys can help the university determine if its investments are providing measurable, evidence-based results for parenting student academic success and quality of life.

## **Create equitable access to lactation spaces and family-affirming infrastructure.**

According to the [Rutgers Student Affairs Compliance and Title IX for Lactation Support](#), there are thirteen lactation spaces across all New Brunswick/Piscataway campuses available for parenting students. While there is at least one designated lactation room on each campus, there are barriers that prevent the use of these resources, including accessibility, privacy, provided equipment, and sanitation.

Although most facilities have feasible hours of operation, there are often barriers to accessing them. On the Rutgers lactation support webpage, most spaces include statements such as, "Access may be limited," "Obtain key from front desk," or "Requires ID swipe." As a result, parenting students who are denied access to a building are further prevented from using the lactation space. Additionally, some designated lactation spaces are located in areas that are unlikely to be frequented by the general university public, such as in a clinical space. There are also inconsistent and vague policies for usage, which is an additional concern when the space is multipurpose. For example, the [Center for Advanced Biotechnology and Medicine](#) has a multipurpose room that is used for lactation, prayer, and meditation, but it is uncertain how parenting students can reserve the room for a safer and more private experience. Relatedly, general spaces are not always adequately equipped with the essential equipment necessary for lactating parents to hygienically pump and store milk. Even designated spaces sometimes lack essential equipment. A proper lactation space should include a chair, sink, power outlet, someplace to store milk, nursing pads, and wipes. Most designated lactation spaces across Rutgers include just a chair, sink, and outlet but fall short of providing wipes, nursing pads, and a small refrigerator for parenting students to store their milk. Also, it is unclear if these rooms are being cleaned regularly like bathrooms, classrooms, and other office spaces across campus.

Rutgers can take action to overcome these barriers by repurposing existing under-utilized spaces on campus into lactation spaces. At minimum, each building should include at least one designated space (such as an existing conference room) that parenting students may use as a lactation space on an as-needed basis if the room is not occupied. These spaces should be sanitized and cleaned on a regular basis and might be reserved using Digital Classroom Services or with a universal access code provided to parenting students. Lastly, parenting students would benefit from a designated lactation space equipped with a sink, refrigerator, outlet, chair, nursing pads and a changing table equipped with wipes.

Lactation spaces are just one part of a family-affirming infrastructure at Rutgers. Parenting students and children would benefit from more family-friendly spaces, a policy allowing parenting students to bring children to their classes, and housing support. Although Rutgers does permit parenting students to [bring their children to the libraries and learning centers](#), there are currently no designated areas for children nor a policy related to bringing children to classes or other campus events. [Central Michigan University](#), [Oregon State University](#), and [University of Maryland](#) offer examples of successful family-affirming infrastructures that Rutgers could follow. These universities provide designated child-friendly study rooms that include furniture, workstations, sanitary wipes, and supplies for children, including books, toys, puzzles, and coloring books. There are also online reservation systems to facilitate access to parenting students. What's more, peer institutions also prioritize housing assistance customized for parenting students, complementing their initiatives to establish family-affirming infrastructure. Although Rutgers provides reduced-cost [family housing](#), parenting students often encounter housing insecurities due to financial strain, which makes them vulnerable to houselessness (The Hope Center, 2021). Rutgers can expand the range of family-affirming housing options through partnerships with local housing authorities and nonprofit organizations. Family-friendly infrastructure would affirm parenting students' sense of belonging on and off campus and create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment that enables them to succeed academically while balancing family responsibilities.

## **Expand access to quality childcare on campus and provide graduate childcare stipends.**

Childcare is a necessity for parents, especially those who are also full-time students. In a 2019 survey of 86,000 students, the Hope Institute found that 62 percent of respondents (of which 70 percent were single parents) cannot afford childcare (Goldrick-Rab, Welton, and Coca, 2020). Currently, Rutgers offers both on and off-campus options for childcare at facility centers; however, the relative cost of this care surpasses the means of graduate students to support their living expenses.

On average, Rutgers graduate students are awarded a stipend of \$35,335 for the 2023-2024 academic year appointment and \$36,395 for 2024-2025 (Rutgers Office of Human Resources, 2022). However, the cost of childcare per child at the Rutgers Psychology Child Development Center [Rutgers Psychology Child Development Center](#) can reach up to \$17,100 annually. Graduate students seeking on-campus childcare for 2 children can expect to pay up to \$34,200 per year. Thus, it's possible for graduate students to allocate about half of their total stipend solely to childcare for a single child and nearly all of their stipend for two children. In addition, graduate students and professors are both offered the same discounted rate for childcare at on-campus centers despite the large salary disparity. Additionally, graduate students who are supported by fellowships instead of Graduate/Teaching Assistantships are not considered employees and receive significantly lower pay and reduced benefits, despite often having similar responsibilities as Graduate Assistants. For example, graduate fellows currently receive \$25,000/year and are not eligible for benefits such as enrollment in state health insurance, the University's Care.com pilot program, and LifeMart employee discounts. As a result, extensive efforts have been put into understanding the needs of parents at Rutgers University in hopes of alleviating this financial burden. Specifically, the Supporting Parents and Caregivers at Rutgers (SPCR) Graduate Student Organization conducted a small survey from 2021 to 2022 asking graduate students who were parents about their basic needs. The survey found that 93% of the respondents (n=15) expressed that a lack of access to affordable, quality external care negatively impacting their success as a student. In a 2023 survey of basic needs insecurities at Rutgers, 47.8% of parenting students at Rutgers-New Brunswick expressed experiencing difficulty affording childcare (Cuite, et al., 2023). While this percentage is large, it doesn't necessarily reflect the severity of the issue given that some respondents may not identify as experiencing childcare difficulty for reasons such as having children who are school-age. Every graduate student should be able to achieve academic success at Rutgers University regardless of their responsibilities as a parent.

While on-campus options have been disappearing from other university campuses, Rutgers in recent years has actually increased the capacity for on-campus childcare with the construction of new infrastructure. Currently each of the Rutgers campuses has a Child Development Center. That, however, should not be taken as an indicator of educational opportunity equity for parenting students. Given the size of the student and faculty population at Rutgers who can enroll children in the facilities, one facility per campus is still inadequate to meet the demand. Each facility is encumbered with long waiting lists for child placement and prohibitive enrollment requirements mandating full week care that make these facilities broadly inaccessible for parenting students. Current wait times for each facility stretch as far as two to three years.

When surveying other Big Ten universities, we found that 8 out of 13 universities surveyed offered child care subsidies or stipends ([Big Ten Excel](#)). This support typically was provided in the form of a multi-thousand dollar stipend, with additional funds for more than one child. For example, [Pennsylvania State University](#) subsidizes up to 75% of childcare costs, and [University of Minnesota](#), [University of Michigan](#), [Northwestern University](#) and [University of California](#) all provide about \$5,000 as a childcare stipend per year. Rutgers is falling behind its peers in supporting student parents. Many local universities also offer child care assistance. [CUNY](#) offers on-campus childcare for parenting students, which range in cost from \$5 to \$40 per day, depending on financial need.

Both [Princeton](#) and [Columbia University](#) offer graduate student parents a \$5,000/year childcare subsidy per child (0-5 years old). Princeton also has a [Graduate Child Assistance Program](#), which provides eligible graduate students additional need-based awards of up to \$6,500 per child per year (0-12 years old) (with a maximum annual award of \$19,500). Additionally, both Princeton and Columbia University provide 12-14 weeks parental leave after birth or adoption and a semester extension of funding eligibility for each birth or adoption.

Several universities and community colleges have also established partnerships with childcare programs to provide free childcare on campus for infants or preschool aged children (e.g., [Head Start](#)). The Association of Community College Trustees has provided guidelines to establish these partnerships ([Kids on Campus User Guide](#)) and several colleges have successful programs.

Parenting students also have childcare needs for school-age children, and after-school programs and partnerships can help meet these needs. [Long Beach City College](#) has demonstrated a successful partnership with the Boys and Girls Club to provide on-campus after school programming. Princeton University partners with [The Children's Home Society of New Jersey](#) to provide childcare to parenting students. This is part of the Princeton RISE (Recognizing Inequities and Standing for Equality) program, which values and supports the specific needs of parenting students as an issue of equity and inclusion.

## **A Child-Friendly Future: Modeling Family Support Infrastructure in Graduate Education**

Rutgers prides itself on its commitments to creating a “beloved community” and advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion. If graduate students are full members of the beloved community, then it is important to recognize that it is a commonplace experience for graduate students to have children while achieving a terminal degree. It is also increasingly commonplace for professionals in the workforce to return to school to seek Masters and Doctoral degrees, and those professionals are likely to have families as well. We are missing out on a significant piece of equitable access to education and inclusion of all talented candidates if we do not offer a level of family aid commensurate with the needs of this student population. Our classrooms, laboratories, and humanities graduate cohorts will be less diverse and inclusive without improved support for pregnant, parenting, and caregiving students.

Rutgers has an opportunity to set an example for other higher education institutions by opening doors for parents who would like to pursue postsecondary education. We have recommended both

low-resource and resource-intensive policies that Rutgers can implement to make graduate credentials more achievable for caregiving students. With a comprehensive package of family aid in place for new graduate students, Rutgers will be able to avail itself of a wider talent pool, and in turn create improved performance in classroom teaching and research output. Furthermore, parenting students at Rutgers will experience lower attrition rates, improved on-time graduation, and more attention and energy for their studies if given family support infrastructure and an accessible, child-friendly learning environment.

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