Early Childhood Education and Care
Student-Parent Families at the Center

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To reduce barriers to enrollment and completion for student parents, making high-quality child care readily available and affordable is necessary. Access to on-campus child care is associated with higher retention and nearly three times higher on-time graduation rates for student parents (https://urbn.is/3VcPyG3).

Child care includes many arrangements, such as centers, home-based providers, after-school care, and unlicensed friend or family care. Below are considerations for parenting students' needs:

Flexible hours. Parenting students may need care while in class, studying, working, or running errands, which could mean full-time care during weekdays, evenings, weekends, or overnight. A parenting student may not know their schedule in advance and could miss enrollment deadlines for center-based programs. Schedules may also not align with local care options.

Quality and safety. Quality child care offers children supportive, nurturing relationships with trusted teachers, and positive, diverse learning experiences (https://urbn.is/3QY4tAP). Center-based care is seen as higher quality, but other care settings can be better for families and may be best during early morning, evening, or overnight hours, especially if care occurs in the child's, relative's, or friend's home (https://urbn.is/3qQUIty).

Affordability. Federal and state programs can help with the cost of care, but the options offered are limited and are generally oriented toward weekday, center-based care. Federal financial aid offers an allowance option for independent students with dependent children, and students can increase their aid allocations to account for child care but that could mean incurring more student debt (https://urbn.is/3Lte69k).

Location. Many student parents want care near their home or campus, as transportation costs can be high. Child care options for school-age children are often located near elementary schools, but it is unclear if many affordable child care options are located near college campuses.

Understanding options. Navigating quality considerations, logistics, costs, and provider hours make up a heavy burden for student parents who are already time and energy constrained. Providers' waitlists can also last months or years. Resource and referral centers can help parenting students navigate their options, but the quality and availability of those services and their sensitivity to student issues may vary.

About half of institutions enrolling undergraduate students and nearly **60 percent of two-year colleges** had child care on campus in 2016 (https://urbn.is/3f9wyIk).

For undergraduate students with dependent children under age 6, **nearly half had a child in paid child care** (https://urbn.is/3S1sDvt).

On average, undergraduate students who had dependents in paid child care **paid $489 per month out of pocket**. Those with a child younger than two paid an average of $532 per month out of pocket (https://urbn.is/3f9wyIk).

Forty-two percent of parenting students found it **difficult or very difficult to secure child care**, primarily because of cost (https://urbn.is/3Er2QZC).

Sixty-three percent of student parents **missed at least one day of school or work** in the prior semester because of lack of child care (https://urbn.is/3Er2QZC).

TYPES OF FEDERAL CHILD CARE AID AVAILABLE TO STUDENT PARENTS

Although parenting represents a large part of a student parent's expenses, child care costs are not routinely taken into account for financial aid calculations (https://urbn.is/3Smyxab). But some federal programs do support student parents with low incomes:

- **Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies** are funds drawn from a block grant distributed by the federal government to states, territories, and tribes. These funds defray costs of child care for children up to age 13 in families who meet certain income and need criteria. Only about 110,000 of the million families receiving CCDF benefits received child care assistance for education and training. CCDF expansions for parenting students could increase college enrollment by more than a quarter-million, increase completion by 20 percent, increase family earnings, and ultimately decrease child poverty (https://urbn.is/3duBYwU).

- **Head Start and Early Head Start** are federally funded programs for young children from families with low incomes free of charge. Head Start services are provided primarily in group settings for three- and four-year-old children during traditional work hours. The much smaller Early Head Start program supports care for younger children. Past work has shown that collaborations between Head Start programs and colleges can be mutually beneficial (https://urbn.is/3duBYwU).

- **Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS)** is a US Department of Education grant program for colleges to support accredited child care for student parents with low incomes (https://urbn.is/3Ltwpv7).

- **After-school care** is supported by the CCDF for children up to age 13. Many after-school programs for children from families with low incomes not covered by CCDF are provided through the federally funded 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which focus on high-poverty and low-performing schools (https://urbn.is/3qW5Hlz).

Other programs include public preK and 3K education and private child care providers on or near college campuses. And parenting students can use the refundable child and dependent care tax credit to cover up to 50 percent of care costs for a child under age 13 or a dependent incapable of self-care, with a limit of $8,000 per dependent and $16,000 per family.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE CHILD CARE OPTIONS FOR STUDENT PARENTS

Student parents who can access safe, trustworthy, and affordable child care are more likely to succeed in their degree programs (https://urbn.is/3LrCRmw). To ensure that these parents have the child care supports they need, colleges could do the following:

- Automatically provide and help coordinate child care options for student parents if they indicate they have dependents on financial aid forms and proactively offer and publicize child care allowances

- Use data from campus child care provider waitlists or student surveys to understand depth of child care needs and build partnerships with Head Start and other providers to create a range of affordable care options

- Change the cultural mindset from a campus child care program must be a self-supporting "business" to one where child care is a necessary student success service

- Create drop-in child care programs that allow student parents to have their children supervised for a few hours as they attend class or workshops or set up child-friendly study spaces on campus

- Track educational outcomes for student parents participating in child care programs to demonstrate benefits

Policymakers can also further support these parents by doing the following:

- Creating incentives to locate public child care options, like Head Start, close to colleges

- Funding CCDF at levels that allow all eligible parents who want assistance to get it, relaxing state policies that put additional limits on eligibility and getting rid of work requirements for student parents, and allowing subsidies to be used for multiple child care settings, not just traditional-hour, center-based care