

On-campus child care needed for increasing number of student-parents

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Brent McBride, a professor of human development at the University of Illinois, says the college drop-out rates of traditional undergraduates who are also full-time parents is a growing problem in the US. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The lack of affordable, high-quality on-campus day care programs that cater to undergraduate students who double as parents is a stealth issue that has the potential to harm both the student-parent and the child, says a University of Illinois expert in early childhood education.

According to Brent McBride, a professor of human development at Illinois, the college drop-out rates of traditional undergraduate students - college freshmen who have just transitioned from high school - who are also full-time parents is a growing problem in the U.S., one that's further exacerbated by the dearth of acceptable [child care](#) options for students

pursuing a bachelor's degree.

"The typical scenario is a young 18- to 20-year-old woman who's away from home for the first time, separated from her familial support system, and may be in a difficult relationship with their partner," McBride said. "It's mostly a hidden issue, and that makes it that much worse for those student-parents, because it tends to make them feel that much more isolated. It's just a difficult situation all around."

Among the challenges student-parents face are a lack of money, a lack of support and understanding, and the mounting pressure of familial responsibilities.

Finding affordable child care is another big challenge student-parents face, but McBride, who also is the director of the university's Child Development Laboratory, believes campus-based support programs, including affordable, high-quality campus day care, may provide the assistance that student-parents need to complete college while successfully raising a child.

With an on-campus day care center that's welcoming of student-parents, "You take one big headache out of the equation," McBride said.

"What we've found and what the literature supports is that traditional undergraduate students who are suddenly thrust into this role of parent aren't prepared for all the responsibilities being a full-time parent entails," he said. "They've been focused on social relationships and educational endeavors, but they haven't thought about being a parent with a newborn baby. Having an on-campus day care program that welcomes and understands the demands on student-parents provides a support mechanism as well as a way for them to learn parenting skills."

Affordable campus child care is also crucial to the success of student-

parents from a personal developmental standpoint.

"The student-parents themselves are also at a very vulnerable stage of their own personal development," McBride said. "They're in that identity exploration phase where they're transitioning to young adulthood, trying to figure out who they are, and are trying on different careers and roles for themselves."

But with a baby in tow in addition to their full-time studies, student-parents often find themselves "tossed into an adult world with minimal preparation and minimal support for that change," McBride said.

"Not only are they at risk for academic failure, they're also severely at risk for personal problems because of that disruption of their own development," he said. "That only amplifies the concern we have for these students."

It should come as no surprise, then, McBride said, that student-parents are three times as likely as traditional undergraduates to drop out.

"If you're a student-parent, you're at greater risk of not succeeding at any type of institution of higher education simply because you're a parent, and the hardships and hurdles are that much higher," McBride said.

While their friends and peers are attending class, studying and completing homework assignments, student-parents must do all that plus raise a child.

"The vast majority of their peers are traditional undergraduate students, so there's no organization to support them, and no way for them to congregate and seek out others in their situation," he said.

The faculty at a traditional college or university is also usually in the

dark about a student's parental responsibilities outside of class.

"How are student-parents supposed to complete group assignments if they have to take care of a child? Not being able to participate in normal undergraduate activities only serves to further isolate them, which in turn leaves them at greater risk of dropping out and not earning a degree."

Faced with choice between raising a child or pursuing a degree, McBride says student-parents usually have no choice but to dropout and forgo what many educators and economists see as a key component to long-term economic stability and mobility.

"The lifelong trajectory of these students is, once they transition to parenthood, they don't finish school," he said. "And with the economy the way it is, this is a very vulnerable demographic. Their job prospects are really hamstrung."

Having an on-campus day care center for undergraduate student-parents not only benefits the student who eventually graduates with a bachelor's degree, it also benefits the child.

"It helps the student-parent, because it's one less ball that they have to juggle," McBride said.

"Trying to balance school and parenting is a tough thing to balance, especially if you're a young single parent. But day care also benefits the child in multiple ways."

Research overwhelmingly suggests that high-quality child care has a significant positive impact on the development of young children's language and pre-math skills, along with other soft skills such as self-control, sociability and cooperative play.

A campus-based day care center could also leverage university resources

easier than a commercial day care center.

"If there's a language delay, for example, we can tap into campus experts in that area," McBride said. "If there's dysfunctional parenting, we can step in and make referrals to campus resources to help with parenting."

Campus-based day care facilities also offer better quality controls than profit-oriented child care programs. Research consistently indicates that as much as 40 to 60 percent of all child care in the United States has been deemed sub-standard - "so sub-standard that it's harming the child rather than helping," McBride said.

"For better or for worse, the quality of community-based child care programs is not always what we would want it to be," he said. "Having federal dollars being poured into something that's less than optimal from the child care perspective, that could actually be to the detriment of the child, is not a good investment of taxpayer dollars."

A good investment is one that's made in human capital, so marginalizing someone who is unable to complete a college degree simply because of a child care issue is, from a social justice perspective, a tragic mistake to make, McBride said.

"If a person has the human capital to go to college, we've got to help them cultivate that potential," he said. "We need to encourage parents to be good parents, to be productive members of society and to be able to provide for their children. If you take away the opportunity for higher education, they're not going to be able to provide. We don't want to take away those opportunities. The consequences are just too great."

To help low-income undergraduate student-parents complete their studies, the Child Development Laboratory at Illinois is now accepting undergraduate student-parents and their children into the Child Care

Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) program.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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