

Understanding the Childcare Experiences and Challenges of Young Student Parents

Introduction

Student parents make up nearly 20 percent of undergraduates, balancing the responsibilities of parenthood while managing academic obligations. While higher education provides benefits such as increased lifetime earnings, many attempting to complete their education face barriers to accessing and completing higher education, including student parents with childcare needs. Students who became parents as adolescents face additional obstacles such as social stigma and economic challenges. Meeting their unique needs is critical to supporting them and their children. This brief shares insights regarding the childcare experiences of student parents who became parents as adolescents and then were enrolled in a program (the Generation Hope Scholar Program) designed to support their success in higher education.

Student parents with dependent children who are attending higher education institutions make up approximately one-fifth of the undergraduate population in the United States (Anderson et al., 2024). This education is an important lever for promoting positive outcomes (e.g., career advancement, financial stability, parenting) for student parents (Dubow et al., 2009; Witteveen & Attewell, 2021), yet many face barriers to access and completion, including paying for the education and basic needs (David et al., 2013; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 2016). Student parents have additional parental responsibilities, including the challenge of finding and affording adequate childcare (Reichlin-Cruse et al., 2021; Dayne et al., 2023; Fluent Research, 2021; Long, 2017; Miller et al., 2011; Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023; Sandstrom et al., 2019; Schreiber et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022).

Students who became parents as adolescents face additional obstacles such as social stigma and economic challenges, with some research indicating less than 2 percent of teen mothers completing a college degree by age 30 (Shuger, 2012). Despite barriers, many young student parents find their roles as caregivers motivating and seek education to secure a better future for their families (Goodman et al., 2023). Understanding the childcare needs of students who become parents as adolescents can lead to innovative solutions.

In this brief, we summarize recent evaluation findings, current research, and discuss considerations for how to further our understanding of the unique childcare needs of undergraduate students who became parents as adolescents, offering insights and recommendations.

Evaluation Background

In 2020, the Annie E Casey Foundation (Foundation) partnered with James Bell Associates (JBA/we) to conduct an evaluation of Generation Hope, a nonprofit dedicated to supporting student parents in college through direct services, national advocacy, and research (see Generation Hope callout box). The evaluation of Generation Hope was designed to explore the experiences of participants, called Scholars, enrolled in the Washington, D.C., Scholar Program. JBA worked with the Foundation, Generation Hope, and a Scholar Advisory Committee to inform the direction and design of the mixed-methods study. JBA combined quantitative and qualitative data to understand how Scholar outcomes were associated with participation in services.

Generation Hope

Generation Hope is a nonprofit dedicated to supporting student parents in college through direct services, national advocacy, and research. Its Scholar Program sites in the Washington, D.C., region, Greater New Orleans area, and the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex provide mentoring, tuition assistance, peer support, and wraparound services to college students who became parents as teens to help them earn their degrees. [To be eligible](#), student parents must be or have been a teen parent, currently 25 years old or younger, and actively involved in their child's life. Scholars are paired with a Hope Coach who provides holistic case-management, helping them navigate school responsibilities while parenting. They are also matched with a volunteer Mentor who provides Scholars with a caring, committed adult with whom the Scholar can share concerns and celebrate successes.

The main goals of the study were to describe progress toward graduation, supportive relationships, and parenting responsibilities. Scholars were asked about their experiences in Generation Hope and about their experiences as student parents broadly, which included questions about the availability of childcare. Generation Hope offers support related to childcare (e.g., assistance with applications for childcare subsidies), but it is not a main feature of Scholar Program services. Childcare was not a specific focus of the formal evaluation. However, Scholars frequently described their childcare experiences and challenges across several data collection opportunities.

Data Collection

JBA combined quantitative and qualitative data to understand participant experiences in the Scholar Program. Data from the three sources described below captured student parent childcare experiences.

- **Scholar survey (87 responses)** included 102 questions across seven sections: academic history, progress toward graduation, academic beliefs, supportive relationships, parenting responsibilities, experiences with Generation Hope, and demographic information. The survey included several existing validated measures and new questions developed specifically for the study. The survey also included questions about childcare sources, adequacy, and reliability.
- **Individual Scholar interviews (35 Scholars)** were semi-structured interviews with questions exploring key domains, including academic progress, social networks, parenting responsibilities, and the influence of systemic factors on experiences.¹
- **Student Parent Voice Project** was a multimedia research project where student parent advisory committee members created submissions centered around two themes: challenges (8 submissions) and motivation (6 submissions).

Scholars mentioned childcare experiences in interviews when discussing barriers to persisting in their education and describing support networks (e.g., family). They were also asked about childcare in the survey, including about the types used and their reliability.

Recognizing this group of student parents (those who became parents as adolescents) as an understudied population led the JBA team to explore these childcare experiences to help understand Scholar needs. The JBA team explored several questions.

- How are Scholar childcare experiences different from those of student parents generally?

¹ In this study we also conducted group interviews with Hope Coaches and Mentors. While these interviews are not the focus of the current brief, these individuals heard similar childcare challenges from Scholars with whom they were paired.

- What types of childcare are Scholars using?
- How do childcare challenges faced by Scholars compare with those of student parents generally?

To address these questions, the team triangulated quantitative and qualitative analyses from the evaluation and combined it with existing research regarding the general student parent experience.

How Are Scholar Childcare Experiences Different From Those of Student Parents Generally?

Attending higher education institutions while raising dependent children is a common experience in the United States, with recent estimates indicating that nearly one-fifth of undergraduates are student parents (Anderson et al., 2024). These student parents are diverse in terms of gender (approximately three-fourths are female), race/ethnicity (45 percent White, 21 percent Black, 20 percent Latine), age (most are over 25), and family composition (Anderson et al., 2024). They have children of all ages, with nearly half having a child under 2 years old (16 percent) or between 2 to 5 years old (33 percent) (Anderson et al., 2024).

Less is known about the subgroup of student parents who became parents as adolescents. The current study's sample was small (87 survey participants who will be identified with the term Scholar); and while primarily female (95 percent), they were diverse in terms of race/ethnicity (46 percent Black or African American; 43 percent Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin; 25 percent White). Scholars had just under two children in their households on average ($M = 1.87$, $SD = 1.40$). Nearly the entire sample (96 percent) had at least one child under the age of 6 and over half (51 percent) had at least one child under the age of 3. These percentages are much higher than national estimates (49 percent) of student parents with children under the age of 6 (Anderson et al., 2024). Given the Generation Hope eligibility criteria (pregnant/expecting by age 19 and 25 or younger at the time of application), this should be expected and would indicate a greater childcare need in this sample.

Student parents balance many roles and responsibilities. They have unique and varying experiences with higher education, work, family, and the intersections between these different areas of life (Anderson et al., 2024; Dundar et al., 2024; Sandstrom et al., 2019). Research has found over 75 percent of student parents work while attending school and tend to work more hours per week than nonparenting students who work (Schreiber et al., 2024). In the current study, nearly two of three Scholars were employed, with 31 percent working full time and 30 percent part time.

For Scholars, 96 percent had a child under age 6 and over 60 percent were employed, indicating most had a child of childcare age while simultaneously enrolled in school and employed. Childcare allows families to work or attend school. As recent research and the current study show, the majority are balancing education and employment. These overlapping roles and responsibilities can be stressful. Research consistently finds student parents face stressors related to school, work, and family, with financial stressors often rising to the top (Althaus, 2021; Fluent Research, 2021; Long, 2017; Sandstrom et al., 2019; Schreiber et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022). Childcare can be one such stressor but can also be an incredible source of support for student parents (Althaus, 2021).

What Types of Childcare Are Scholars Using?

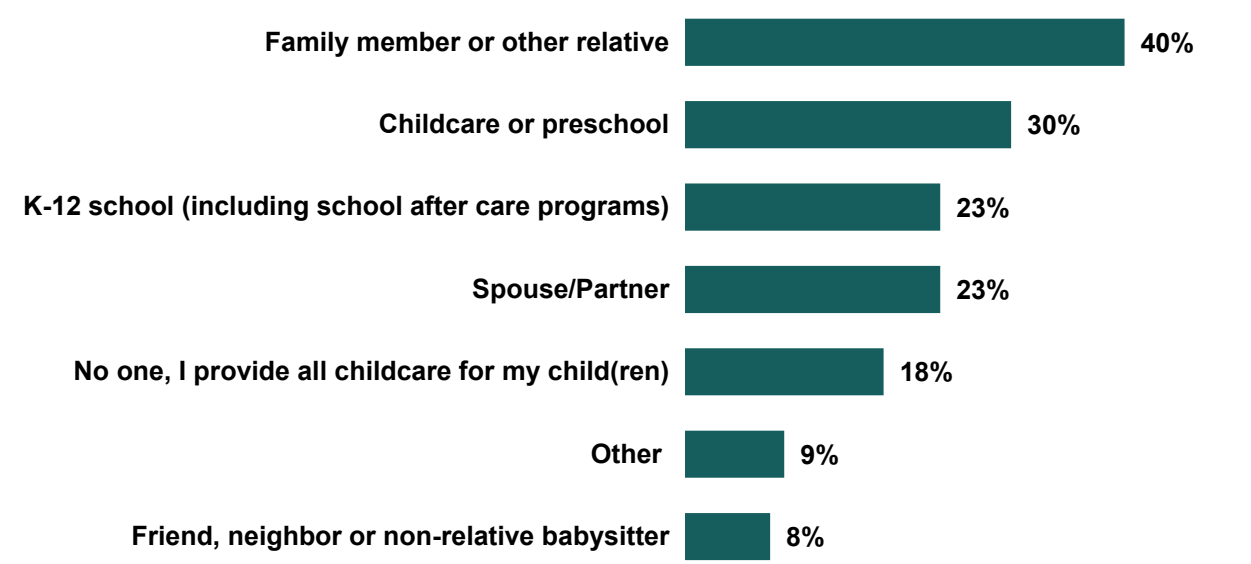
Nationally, 36 percent of children aged 5 years old and younger are estimated to attend center-based care with 19 percent in relative care and 9 percent in nonrelative care. Another 45 percent of parents are the sole source of childcare (i.e., rely only on themselves for childcare; Hanson et al., 2024). Estimates for the children of student parents are slightly different, using relative care much more frequently than the general population. Specifically, research reports 20 to 33 percent of student parents use center-based care, 67 percent relative care, 29 percent nonrelative care, and 26 percent only use parental childcare (Dayne et al., 2023; Fluent Research, 2021). In the survey, Scholars reported relative care being the most common type of childcare used while attending classes (exhibit 1).

Defining Childcare

While there are many types of childcare for children of all ages (e.g., out-of-school time care), for the purposes of this brief we use the term “childcare” to describe the early care and education opportunities available specifically for children aged 5 years old and younger. This includes formal settings such as childcare centers, Early Head Start/Head Start, and family childcare homes and informal family, friend, and neighbor care.

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Scholars used family members (spouse/partner or another relative) for childcare while they were in classes, similar to the rate reported in the Dayne and colleagues’ (2023) study at a California State University (67 percent). The prevalence of using family members may be in part due to Scholars’ living arrangements. Over half (53 percent) of Scholars reported living with at least one other adult, and of those, many lived with family members including their spouse/partner (56 percent), parents (46 percent), and/or other relatives (37 percent).

Exhibit 1. Types of Childcare Scholars Used While Attending Classes



Note: N = 77. Percentages do not add up to 100 because multiple selections were allowed.

Rates of using other types of childcare among Scholars were largely similar to rates found in previous research on student parents (see exhibit 2). For example, 30 percent of Scholars reported using center-based care, which falls within the range of estimates for student parents in prior research (Dayne et al., 2023; Fluent Research, 2021). Center-based care is typically more expensive and difficult to access compared to other childcare types, particularly for infants and toddlers (Paschall et al., 2021), which is a relevant concern for the 51 percent of the sample who had at least one child aged 3 years or younger.

“If you have parents around, they could help watch the kids . . . when you go to work, when you’re going to school . . . that alone is a major help. When my mom was around . . . she used to help . . . when we go to work, or when I had to go to class. So that was a major support system on my end.”

We also found 18 percent of Scholars relied only on themselves for childcare, slightly lower than a rate (26 percent) from prior research (Fluent Research, 2021). This difference may be due in part to the subset of Scholars being single (69 percent), living alone (46 percent), and/or unemployed (32 percent).

Lastly, 40 percent of Scholars reported regularly using multiple types of childcare. This was higher than what Navarro-Cruz et al. (2023) found for the general population of student parents who had to rely on a combination of childcare types (31 percent). This is somewhat unsurprising given the childcare landscape, with high costs, waitlists, and limited slots for infants and toddlers at center-based childcare. This difficult landscape is laid on top of school, work, and family roles and responsibilities and the required time commitments for each. Generally speaking, student parents who became parents as adolescents and have young children are likely to face incredible difficulties finding a childcare arrangement for their child(ren) that fits multiple needs.

Exhibit 2. Childcare Types Used by Scholars and Student Parents

Childcare type	Rate in Scholar study	Student Parent Comparison rate	Comparison sample
Family care	64%	67%	786 student parents at one 4-year California State University (Dayne et al., 2023)
Center-based care	30%	20%–33%	586 student parents across the United States. (Fluent Research, 2021); 786 student parents at one 4-year California State University (Dayne et al., 2023)
Parent care only	18%	26%	586 student parents across the United States (Fluent Research, 2021)
Multiple types of care	40%	31%	36 student parents who had children aged 5 or under at one public 4-year university in the southwest United States (Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023)

How Do Childcare Challenges Faced by Scholars Compare with Those of Student Parents Generally?

The type of childcare parents select is driven by many factors (Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023). Student parents must consider how the selected childcare will meet both student and family needs while also balancing factors such as cost and availability. There is not enough childcare available, particularly care of high-quality that is affordable and/or designated specifically for infants and toddlers (Paschall et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the existing barriers all parents face in finding quality, affordable, and accessible childcare (Gould & Cooke, 2015; Jessen-Howard et al., 2020; Weiland et al., 2021)—making it difficult for families to access their desired options.

Many Scholars identified childcare as a potential barrier to attending and continuing classes. Sometimes these challenges can lead to taking time away from or postponing education. In the survey, 43 percent of Scholars had taken a semester off. Of those, 32 percent indicated this was due to childcare issues. Research has shown continuing higher education in a timely manner is important for future earning potential, because delayed time to degree completion is associated with lower salaries (by as much as 15 percent) in jobs after college (Witteveen & Attewell, 2021). Because of this, understanding the specific types of challenges student parents face around childcare and what supports might be needed to address them is crucial.

Lack of Affordable Childcare

Research consistently finds the cost of childcare to be prohibitive and/or stressful for student parents (Dayne et al., 2023; Long, 2017; Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023; Schreiber et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022). Student parents use center-based childcare at lower rates than more informal types of care (e.g., family, babysitters), likely in part due to the cost of childcare centers (Dayne et al., 2023; Fluent Research, 2021; Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023). In interviews, Scholars raised issues about the affordability of childcare when asked to discuss the biggest challenges faced when it comes to continuing education.

“I would say the biggest prohibitor for most parents, including myself, is childcare and the cost of attaining it.”

In interviews, Scholars reported they rely heavily on family members for childcare because it is the most affordable option. This echoes findings from Navarro-Cruz and colleagues (2023), where student parents at one public university in southwest United States described how eliminating childcare costs by having a partner or family member provide it was sometimes the only way to afford to continue their education.

“My daughter's grandma, she actually is retired already. So, that helps out with childcare costs. And that's where we get our childcare, from grandma.”

A Scholar who participated in the Student Parent Voice Project submitted a multimedia entry for the challenges prompt, specifically on childcare (see below). Attention was drawn to cost and limitations of childcare subsidies.

Why is childcare important for student parents?

The Student Parent Voice Project captured the lived experiences of student parents, highlighting their unique perspectives. The following reflection from a student parent illustrates the difficult trade-offs made to balance their own education with their child's early learning and development needs. This story underscores the need for accessible, high-quality childcare options and policies that recognize the dual role of student parents.

Student parents have a lot of responsibilities. My biggest challenge to balancing family, work, and school is...

Knowing that I cannot put the same time and effort into my daughter's early learning and development as I would if my only job was to be her mother.

I aim high for my family, and although I am pursuing an education, in part, to ensure economic mobility, it is hard knowing that I need to split my time and energy between my studies and family during the beginning years of my child's life. As my daughter approaches preschool, I worry that she won't have high-quality early learning opportunities. She soaks up knowledge like a sponge, and is so excited about learning new things. As a prospective early childhood educator, I understand the value of high-quality early learning. The current reality is that access to high-quality preschool and pre-K programs is highly limited. Qualifications for early learning stipends are strict. If a family has a relatively livable income, they may then be unable to afford the quality of early childhood education that will more comprehensively prepare their children for later stages of development. To put it into perspective, a high-quality preschool with college-educated teachers likely costs more than my college tuition. I have turned down job offers in the teaching field due to the cost of my child's preschool tuition despite receiving a partial employee discount.

Aid for higher education and early childhood education doesn't typically consider the possibility of a parent also being a student and vice versa. Keeping my daughter occupied and engaged while I'm studying is a challenge, especially when I want to limit the use of electronics as a method of distraction. Making time to provide opportunities for extracurricular/recreational enrichment is worth it, although it requires effort. I'm determined to give my child the best education I can with the knowledge



and resources I have, but I also recognize that it sometimes hurts knowing that I have to make some sacrifices to prepare for the years ahead. What's harder is living with the "mom guilt" when I feel like I can and should do so much more in each area of my life.



Some efforts are being made to increase the affordability of high-quality childcare for student parents, such as through the delegation of the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) to states (Lynch, 2022). These funds allow states flexibility in developing childcare systems to meet the needs of families, promote high-quality care, and help families with low incomes access care through subsidies (Lynch, 2022). School enrollment is one way to demonstrate eligibility for a CCDF subsidy (Lynch, 2022). However, as the Student Parent Voice Project participant described and found in prior research, student parents still face limitations with CCDF, including a lack of awareness that the program exists (Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023). Another program, the federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS), started in 2011, was designed to provide funds to higher education institutions to assist student parents with low incomes to access on-campus childcare centers (Edgerton, 2024). The Kids on Campus program, where community colleges partner with local Head Start programs, is an emerging program designed to bring childcare and two-generation supports onto community college campuses (Association of Community College Trustees & National Head Start Association, 2025). Even with initiatives like these, very few (i.e., less than half) of the higher education institutions have on-campus childcare centers (Reichlin-Cruse et al., 2021; Long, 2017; Miller et al., 2011). At institutions with on-campus childcare centers, student parents still face challenges, such as getting a slot that meets their family needs or even receiving information about the center (Dayne et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2011; Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023).

Unreliable and Inaccessible Childcare

Perspectives were mixed on the reliability of childcare. In the survey, Scholars were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “My childcare arrangements are reliable” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). They indicated a moderate to high level of reliability in childcare arrangements ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.23$). However, when the topic of childcare reliability arose in interviews during discussions about challenges when continuing in school, some identified unreliable childcare as a challenge. It is likely the reliability of childcare is complex depending on the type of care, when it is needed, the number of different sources on which parents must rely, and any potential mismatches between needs and actual usage.

“So, because my support system is like a wild card, I don't know when I will or when I won't have childcare. I could have childcare one day, and I could not the next day. It's very difficult to know with my family. So, it's kind of like it's the one thing that kind of keeps me from, like, attending a class on time or doing something on time.”

Finally, many Scholars reported dealing with childcare being inaccessible, most commonly not having access to childcare at the needed hours. In interviews and in the Student Parent Voice Project, participants shared they wished there were more options available at the needed hours (e.g., weekends). This finding aligns with prior research on similar populations (e.g., young, single parents), indicating they are more likely to work and need childcare at nontraditional hours (CCEEPRA Research Translation, 2023; Enchautegui et al., 2015; Sandstrom et al., 2019). However, to our knowledge, the hourly childcare needs (e.g., number of hours per week, times of day) of student parents has not been researched.

“Usually during the day, I will have to work and in the evening time when I would have my classes. There’s not really childcare that opens really late. Usually, it’s open until 6 P.M., so this has caused conflict because I would have to figure out elsewhere where to find somewhere to watch my children.”

Most Scholars (61 percent) and student parents in the national samples (75 percent; Schreiber et al., 2024) were employed. Finding sufficient childcare for school and work schedules can be challenging. Another factor for the Scholars is the age(s) of their child(ren), with over half having at least one child aged 3 years or younger. This likely means these student parents needed infant-toddler childcare, which has historically been more difficult to access than for preschool-aged children (Paschall et al., 2021). Scholars balance a unique combination of roles, responsibilities, and family factors that can make finding, affording, and accessing their desired childcare especially challenging.

Key Findings

This brief describes the childcare experiences of student parents who became parents as adolescents (Scholars) and were receiving support from a program (Generation Hope) designed to help them succeed in higher education. Although similar in some ways to student parents nationally, their experiences with childcare differed in other ways.

- Scholars and their children represent diverse backgrounds and experiences, as is seen nationwide (Anderson et al., 2024).

- Student parents rely on a multitude of types of childcare and often use more than one type.
 - Family members serve as a key source of childcare while student parents are attending classes. While the Scholar study was conducted in a limited regional area of the United States (the greater Washington, D.C. area), this finding echoes results from a study conducted in California (Dayne et al., 2023).
- Student parent childcare challenges can lead to taking time off from their own education.
- Student parents face many challenges related to childcare, including—
 - Difficulty finding reliable, high-quality childcare from trusted providers that meets their needs, including that which is available at needed times, which are often nontraditional hours. Nontraditional-hour care has been identified in previous research as widely needed, but very difficult to access, particularly in center-based programs (CCEEPRA Research Translation, 2023; Enchautegui et al., 2015).
 - The prohibitive cost of high-quality childcare aligns with previous research which identifies cost as a substantial problem for student parents (Dayne et al., 2023; Long, 2017; Navarro-Cruz et al., 2023; Schreiber et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2022).

Although interest and support for student parents has increased over the last several years (Ascend at the Aspen Institute, 2018), information on student parents who became parents as adolescents is extremely limited. This study showed that although similarities exist, this group may need different support structures, considerations, and further research to understand and meet childcare needs.

Considerations

Study findings identify ways to improve childcare for student parents. Higher education institutions; researchers; and local, state, and federal policymakers interested in continuing to support student parents in this area can translate these findings into practice and policy changes.

Higher Education Institutions

- Fourteen percent of the Scholars took at least one semester off because of childcare issues. Higher education institutions may consider adopting strategies to provide on campus childcare as suggested by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2025) and Kids on Campus (Association of Community College Trustees & National Head Start Association, 2025), the Family Friendly Campus Toolkit (Family Friendly Campus, n.d.), or those proposed by Kruvelis (2017) to make campuses more family friendly and lessen the need for student parents to take substantial time off due to childcare issues.

- Findings showed student parents often struggle to find available childcare during the needed times. Flexible course scheduling (e.g., making courses available at different times of day) and formats (e.g., hybrid, online) can help ensure attendance with the least amount of disruption.

Researchers

- Student parents reported struggling with the cost of childcare. However, it was beyond the scope of this study to gather quantitative data on the cost of childcare and method of payment, including use of subsidies. Future research could examine the uptake of childcare supports (e.g., CCDF subsidies) to understand how to increase student parent access and if additional supports are needed to increase affordability.
- While the theme of childcare arose during interviews when asking about supports and challenges, it was not a main focus of the Generation Hope study. Future qualitative research directly focused on childcare could help to define the nuances for what student parents are needing, what arrangements have or have not worked, and what specific barriers to access are faced.
- The findings represent a limited sample of student parents in one geographic region. Future research studies should include broader samples of student parents to include a variety of backgrounds and various higher education settings (e.g., community and four-year colleges) from different locations. For example, student parents in less urban regions are likely to face different childcare access challenges than those from the current study.

Local, State, and Federal Policymakers

- Student parents who became parents as adolescents have challenges with the cost of childcare, echoing previous research findings about childcare being a source of financial stress (Dayne et al., 2023; Long, 2017; Williams et al., 2022). Boosting advertising about and easing the administrative burden of completing the applications for CCDF subsidies could help lessen the financial stress childcare can place on student parents.
- Findings also illustrate that student parents find it difficult to access childcare available at the needed times. The existing CCAMPIS program incentivizes universities to develop on-campus programs that are accessible and available at needed hours, with the specific intention of benefiting student parents (Edgerton, 2024). Beyond just on-campus childcare, Enchautegui and colleagues (2015) offer suggestions for incentivizing childcare programs to offer more nonstandard hours, such as an increased reimbursement rate for the times that would most likely benefit student parents.

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