Student Parent Handbook
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“Oxford is a wonderful place for student parents and their kids, though it hides it very well. Don’t be shy to explore the wide range of activities that only Oxford can offer! The Museum of Natural History and Port Meadow are just two of our favourite spots.”

Lukas (DPhil Physiology, Anatomy & Genetics)
Introduction

We estimate there are over 150 student parents at the university, nearly all of whom study for graduate degrees. Around 50 students give birth each year.

This handbook is designed to give student parents a quick overview of the issues you may face, and point to relevant support available. Look out for:

- Key documents (google and you will find!)
- Key website address
- Key email address

Throughout the handbook you will find student voices describing their experience and giving advice.

To keep up to date, email your Student Parent Officer to join the student parent mailing list. You will receive updates on policy and funding opportunities, as well as information about student parent events.

parentsandcarers@ousu.ox.ac.uk

There is also a facebook group. Please use this to raise concerns, publicise events, or exchange children’s equipment among your peers.

www.facebook.com/groups/oxfordstudentparents
“Lab work, leisure time with my family, almost no social activity with The Queens College, mixed feelings about the job market in Oxford; overall, not too bad…”

Saiful (DPhil Organic Chemistry)
Maternity & Paternity Leave

You are entitled to parental leave. The university’s policy document provides details of the arrangements for students who are about to have or adopt a child: how much leave students are entitled to, access to University facilities, graduate accommodation and childcare services and the provision for a flexible return to full-time study.

Student Maternity, Paternity and Adoption Leave Policy (pdf)

University scholarships should provide paid maternity and paternity leave. If you are dependent upon an external scholarship which does not provide maternity support, funding a longer period of maternity leave may be difficult.

If you find yourself in great financial need because of such a situation, you may be able to find some help through your college, department, or a university hardship fund (see ‘Money Matters’ below).

International students may experience visa difficulties if they suspend student status for maternity leave. However, the university visa and immigration team have a work-around in place to enable you to stay. They can also advise you about applying for child and family visas.

Student Immigration & Visas – http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/visa
student.immigration@admin.ox.ac.uk
“Before I arrived in Oxford, I hadn’t anticipated how few of the academic and social events seem to fit into family life. Be prepared to attend events right on your child’s/children’s bedtime, and try to get to daytime seminars or workshops to help counter any feelings of isolation.”

Sarah (DPhil Music)
Childcare & Schools

If you need pre-school age childcare, one of your first priorities – as soon as you receive an offer from Oxford or have a positive pregnancy test – may be to get yourself on the waiting list for university nurseries. Some colleges (St Anne's, Wolfson, Balliol, and Somerville) have their own nurseries. They also have long waiting lists.

The university’s Childcare Services website contains detailed and up-to-date information about university nurseries and independent nurseries with which the university co-operates. University nurseries are cheaper than others in Oxford, and stand therefore in high demand.

University Childcare Services [www.admin.ox.ac.uk/childcare/](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/childcare/)

Of course there are other arrangements such as nannies, and childminders. Oxfordshire County Council can advise:

OxonFIS [https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/familyinformation](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/familyinformation)

To find a free school place for your child (from age 4 or 5) when you arrive, apply to Oxfordshire County Council with a "Transfer application form for in year transfers". Note that you will have to include photocopies of your children's passports and visas, if applicable. They recommend putting down at least three schools of preference – i.e. those nearest to where you live and work. UK state schools are inspected and rated by OFSTED.¹

School transfer [https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/schooltransfer](https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/schooltransfer)  
OFSTED [http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/)

¹ International students should note that many state primary schools have a Church of England foundation. However, these schools are open to and attended by children of all faiths or none. The schools respect the faith background of the children who attend. The jargon for these types of schools is "voluntary aided" or "foundation schools". They are however free to attend, and run by the state.
“As a Canadian family studying for a DPhil in Oxford, we wouldn't trade the experience for the world. But every worthwhile path has its challenges. Visa restrictions on the lead up MSt course meant I had to commute back home between terms first year. And when we were all able to come for my second year, the Fall term was especially difficult as the kids settled in and Julie sought work. But we learned a lot about one another, and as parents we realised that each of our kids respond to transition differently. An extra dose of patience and compassion was needed to see behind some "misbehaviour" in order to empathise with the genuine challenges of transition for our little ones. But the privilege of being in Oxford and of receiving support from many others - both from our church and my college - has humbled us and made us so very grateful that we followed a call here . . . together.”

Andrew (DPhil Theology)
Student Life

Your experience of student life will vary enormously according to the age of your children, whether you have a partner, or how much your partner can or will support you. But it is also about the priorities you set and the choices you make.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- Do I want to rely on myself or do I want to ask for help?
- Do I want to make finding and paying for a babysitter a priority?
- How can my partner and I help the other flourish? How much me-time and us-time do we need each week, alongside work and parenting time?
- If your partner is not a student: Where can we develop common relationships?
- Do I want to set aside definite time for the family in evenings and at weekends or just see how long my work takes?
- Do I want to have regular working hours or just see how long my work takes?
- Do I prefer to keep home life private or do I prefer to have guests?
- What is the minimum level of engagement with college life I want to achieve?
- How many weeks a year do I want to devote to time off with the family (or holiday if I can afford it)? When will I do this?
- Do I want to make time for sport (there will be teams and free facilities at college) or another hobby?
- Which people’s company does me good? When shall I meet with them next?
“Student experience is rather different for parents. You will be spending more time doing the school and nursery run, cooking, washing up, cleaning, playing, taking children to piano lessons, eating with children, putting them to bed, taking them to the park at the weekend. While you are reading a bedtime story, your colleagues are racking up the hours in the Bodleian.

Your colleagues from the lab may be going to hear a visiting lecturer on Friday but you are needed at home for feeding time at the zoo. Perhaps, spurred on by those young freshers, you feel like going clubbing one day, against your better judgement. It will feel so good to be out for a change. But you will still have to get up with the kids the next day. So. Much. Tiredness.

Your budget has to cover the cost of a larger flat, nappies, more food, and some of the highest childcare costs in Europe. Students who become pregnant need creative solutions for parental leave which will often involve temporary suspension of status and thus increase the overall study bill. Internationals have to find a visa workaround with the University Immigration team, and the extortionate costs of a family visa.

Students without children often see the attempt to combine children and study as some superhuman feat. Everyone finds study a challenge anyway, even without little people running around at home. But perhaps having children while a student is the best possible timing – people at the start of their careers may well be less flexible than students. And students who spend all their time working without any real family or social time probably don’t work more effectively for all their mammoth hours.

I think too many people in our generation are put off having children for pragmatic reasons, and some would-be parents end up missing out, which is sad. When we are (even more) grey-haired and look back on our time as student parents we will not regret having been brave and/or crazy enough to bring our children into the world. We will be profoundly grateful.”

Sam Shearn (OUSU Parent & Carer Officer 2015)
“The most important thing for being a student parent is to establish your support system: your college, department, supervisors, friends and colleagues. Be as confident and assertive about yourself as possible!”

Yuge (DPhil Geography and Environment)
Money matters

Student parents at Oxford fund their studies in various ways, usually calling upon several sources. A 2015 survey suggested student parents often rely on a partner’s salary (50%), part-time work (40%), scholarships (45% partial, 35% full) and family support (20%). Other sources include loans, benefits, and personal savings.

Unlike more progressive EU countries, scholarships do not offer additional stipends for dependants. British students or those with British partners on low incomes often rely on various UK benefits (Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit, Housing Benefit, etc.). International students, ineligible for such benefits, may find themselves therefore particularly in need of help.

Some colleges (Balliol and Wolfson) offer childcare bursaries. Some departments have been known to provide extra conference grants for taking a child or carer to a conference.

Colleges have hardship funds. Some departments have hardship funds. British students may apply to the Access to Learning Fund. All may apply to the University Hardship Fund.  

http://www.ox.ac.uk/students/fees-funding/assistance/hardship

Note that current hardship funding policy says that pregnancy is not usually considered an unforeseen circumstance.² However, if you are in financial difficulty, do not be put off, but apply. In the past several student parents have been supported by their college, department, or the university in this way.

² If you consider the analogy with employment law, there is a massive equality issue which needs to be addressed in this regard. Pregnancy should not be seen as a foreseen circumstance, or students expected to prove that a pregnancy was unplanned. If the university had admitted you to your course, you are considered one of the brightest and the best.
Charitable Funding

You may be eligible for the following external charitable grants:

**Funds for Women Graduates (FfWG)** helps women graduate students with their living expenses (not fees) in Great Britain in their final year of a DPhil. They can also provide emergency grants.

[www.ffwg.org.uk](http://www.ffwg.org.uk)

See also:

“Sitting in the college bar after a college formal dinner, I saw the jaws of two 19-year-old freshers drop as I explained to them that I was married with children. To them I appeared an extra-terrestrial – so far removed from their student experience that they were momentarily lost for words.

But student reactions to parenthood are in my experience always positive – many people are interested to see someone living out a way of life they may one day wish to follow, and appreciate an invitation to a family meal.”

Sam (DPhil Theology)
Communities

At some of the Graduate Accommodation sites, kids whizz around on scooters and bikes and several student parents are well-connected, meeting for BBQs, kids’ birthdays, and chatting day-to-day. It makes a massive difference to student well-being to be able to meet people in similar circumstances.

Join the facebook groups of various Graduate Accommodation areas, if you live there. They are often a great chance to exchange information and baby things, and even arrange social events:

Castle Mill: www.facebook.com/groups/castlemillresidents/
Court Place Gardens: www.facebook.com/groups/CourtPlaceGardens/
Summertown House: www.facebook.com/groups/299521963584674/
Alan Bullock Close: www.facebook.com/groups/alanbullock/

Baby and toddler groups run at Castle Mill (Friday mornings) and Court Place Gardens (Tuesday mornings). If you don’t see things like this happening, why not put up a poster and organize a child-friendly meeting in a communal area where you live?

The University Newcomer’s Club aims to help the newly-arrived wives, husbands or partners of visiting scholars, of graduate students and academics to settle in and to give them the opportunity to meet people in Oxford:

http://www.newcomers.ox.ac.uk/

NB: No-one’s student experience is plain-sailing, and some things are hard to talk about with friends. Some discover their college welfare officers, chaplains, and the university counselling service to be important resources.
“There is a lot of support available for parents, but it can sometimes be hard to find. I encourage everyone to visit their local Oxford County Council Children’s Centre as they have information on many different services – including toddler stay and play sessions, financial advice and children’s health programs.”

Jodi (DPhil Law)
OUSU Events

In the past, OUSU have organised events for student parents including:

- picnics
- tea&toy events
- local playground dates

Keep track by joining the student parent facebook group and mailing list (see p. 5).

The rationale behind these events is to be a catalyst and facilitator of student parent relationships. Some student parents have great networks of support – others feel more isolated. Come to our events to contribute to the wellbeing of your student parent peers and find support where it’s needed.

If you have an idea for an event or wish to host one near where you live, please be in touch and it can be publicised more widely.

Children’s Activities

Click ‘Activities’ at the Oxfordshire Family Information Service for a very helpful searchable database of toddler groups, children’s clubs, etc.:

W OxonFIS https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/familyinformation
Student Parent Advice

Your part-time Student Parent and Carers Officer wants to hear from you. Get in touch with ideas, initiatives, or problems encountered. They will campaign for change on your behalf.

Email: parentsandcarers@ousu.ox.ac.uk
Facebook: www.facebook.com/groups/oxfordstudentparents

For concrete advice about various issues contact the OUSU Student Advice Service.

Tel. 01865 288466
Email: advice@ousu.ox.ac.uk

Visit at 2 Worcester Street Oxford OX1 2BX.

Drop-in times: Mondays 10am-12 noon; Wednesdays: 12-2pm; Friday 2pm-4pm.