

PhD Parenting Report

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This is a brief report on the experiences of PhD students (both NWCDTP-funded and non-NWCDTP) who are navigating the demands of research alongside parenting. It draws on experiences and responses shared as part of a PhD Parenting workshop for students which I led under the auspices of the NWCDTP in May 2024. It is also drawn from my own experience as a PhD student funded by the NWCDTP who had three children during my doctorate.

Overview

As an advanced postgraduate programme, a PhD often coincides with various responsibilities involved in adult life. Among them is raising a family. There are also likely to be other forms of caring responsibilities beyond parenting, including elder care, disability care and beyond. PhD programmes and funding bodies therefore need to bear these realities in mind in their provisions including studentship packages. Ensuring there are adequate provisions will not only benefit the students but benefit the research output in ensuring PhDs are seen through to conclusion to a high standard and Early Career Researchers (ECR) continue to successful and valuable careers.

In my own experience, I began a family during my PhD. Attendees in the course included those considering beginning a family, new parents, parents of older school-age children, single parents, parents who are international students, among others. Some of these students were funded in part or fully, whilst others were unfunded. The burden of parenting is great on a mental, physical and financial level and without the necessary support can be overwhelming when coupled with the demands of an advanced research degree. This was expressed by attendees, several of whom cited the impact on mental health and the struggle to find necessary support or accessible information about support.

Parenthood brings both benefits and challenges to the PhD experience. The additional immense responsibility nurtures a capacity for time management, efficiency and multitasking that not only make the PhD student a better researcher but are incredibly transferable skills in the broader job market. It has certainly been my experience, as one who had three children during my PhD, that parenting made me a better scholar by virtue of these skills. I am certain they contributed to my relative success as an ECR, including bolstering my capacity to publish and build research projects and networks that made me stand out in the job market. As such, supporting PhD parents is in the interest of research and scholarship outcomes overall: not just to the individual students in question. It contributes to producing accomplished scholars who can go on to make valuable contributions and pursue successful careers.

An important point regarding PhD parents is that they are disproportionately women. Attendees of the PhD Parenting workshop were overwhelmingly female. Several were single parents responsible for most, if not all, of their children's care. That academia has a gender imbalance weighted against women is established, and the disadvantage and its impacts begin early. If student parents can be better supported, it can help mitigate some of the structural challenges that disadvantage women, contributing towards a more equitable research sector.

Challenges

In this section I will outline the key challenges faced by PhD students with parenting responsibilities, as drawn from the workshop attendees and my experiences.

- **Finances and cost of childcare:** The cost of childcare was perhaps the key issue that was raised. Childcare is an enormous expense – at £60-£80 per day it can be the equivalent of a second rent. Students in already challenging financial circumstances find it an extraordinary burden to bear. Combined with a cost-of-living crisis where general expenses have risen considerably, it can become extremely difficult to manage. In my experience, I was only able to afford childcare on a part-time basis while simultaneously pursuing a full-time PhD. When I switched my PhD to part-time after my second child (and with it a 50% reduction in monthly stipend) it is the privilege of having a working partner who contributed to the cost that enabled me to continue with the necessary childcare. My PhD was thus supported to completion by a second salary. This, however, is not the reality for many students and particularly single parents. While government childcare services, including childcare hours, have now been extended to begin from the age of 9 months, not everyone is eligible for this. This means that many students cannot benefit from what few provisions there are. There is also little by way of institutional support from universities to assist student parents.
- **Mental health and managing research schedule:** Another issue raised frequently is the pressures on mental health from the challenge of parenting during a PhD while there is inadequate support available. Parenting in itself can have an impact on mental health. For some mothers, postnatal depression can prove debilitating. The stress of managing responsibilities of children and household alongside intensive research and writing can also take its toll. The situation becomes more complicated in cases where students are single parents and/or far from friends and family support (for example, international students). University staff, including supervisory staff and administrative staff, may also fail to recognise the students' circumstances in order to manage expectations of the student.
- **Difficulty in accessing information:** Students have also cited a difficulty in sourcing/accessing information pertaining to their needs as parents. Some students spoke of chasing several people across departments and/or administrations seeking information without success.

Recommendations

In recognition of the above, I offer the following recommendations. While these recommendations are shaped towards the NWCDTP, I request they be shared with the central AHRC, the NWCDTP's institutions, and passed to other consortiums too.

1. **Consultation:** Every PhD experience is different, and this report is keen to recognise that. Discussions with PhD parents in preparation, during and after the workshop made this reality abundantly clear and for this reason this report begins with the recommendation that a full consultation is necessary to acquire a more complete picture of PhD parents' needs. While my workshop was useful to engage with some of the current student parents and glean some of the challenges faced, it made the variance of needs all the more apparent based on the range of attendees and their individual circumstances, from those who are single parents to those who are responsible for the care of disabled children. The challenges faced by single parents, for example, are especially severe and complex. This was raised both in the workshop and during my broader discussions with single parent PhDs as part of my research in preparation for the workshop. I therefore advise that the NWCDTP arrange for such a consultation with students that takes into consideration the range of experiences and circumstances and identify gaps in support that need addressing.
2. **Childcare Fund:** The NWCDTP should ringfence funding to support childcare expenses. This should include both childcare necessary to attend research placements, conferences, etc and for general study and research. The guidance for this should also be clear and accessible. Funding for childcare should be based on an assessment of standard childcare costs at nurseries that cater to universities within the consortium. An example is [Dryden Street Nursery](#), which caters to University of Manchester students and staff and is a recommended childcare service provider by UoM People & OD. University of Liverpool similarly contracts [Kids in Bloom](#) to provide campus childcare services. The NWCDTP has a precedent in funding childcare for students to attend placements. This was in my case when in late 2017 I attended a British Library (BL) PhD placement and negotiated with the NWCDTP to cover the childcare required for me to attend. This made my attendance possible. Without it I would not have been able to take part in the placement despite having successfully secured it as part of a competitive application and interview process. The BL placement was an incredibly valuable experience during which I engaged in curatorial and archival work, published on the BL's blog, and presented a paper to BL staff and researchers. It was also a networking opportunity which enabled me to, amongst other things, continue as a researcher at the BL's India Office where I published further articles on

Untold Lives and subsequently brokered a nine-month partnership with the India Office with my memorients.com project in 2022. Providing the cost of childcare for placements should become official policy and be extended to supporting students during their general research. I also recommend that the AHRC/UKRI work with the government to ensure that PhD student stipends are accepted for securing government support for childcare from 9 months, as this is something that is currently determined based on work/income. This will be a significant contribution to supporting PhD parents and will also reduce costs for the AHRC's funding consortia who can then contribute to remaining childcare funding gaps. At present, whether student stipends are accepted by HMRC for childcare hours is not clear and, according to some students who attended the workshop, not accepted.

3. **Information and Staff Training:** As a frequently cited issue has been accessibility of information, it is crucial information be made easily available and staff be trained to be aware of provisions should students ask. PhD studentship guidebooks should include sections on support available to parents and carers. Relevant websites, including the consortium website, should have a clearly marked section with information. Additionally, I suggest developing a standalone document with all relevant information for student parents that can be easily accessed and downloaded from the NWCDTP website and that academic and administrative staff will know to provide if asked. As a sample, I have provided a student parent document developed by Manchester Metropolitan University. Some workshop attendees spoke of administrative and academic staff failing to appreciate the difficulty of their circumstances including the impact on mental health and therefore being inflexible around deadlines. Academic and administrative staff should be trained to be aware of the needs of those with parenting responsibilities to accommodate and manage circumstances as necessary.
4. **Maternity Pay:** I recommend this be available to all funded students in some form, including for students with fees only funding. During my PhD at the University of Liverpool, the NWCDTP policy was that those who did not complete their PhD would be required to repay their maternity pay. This policy was strong motivation to continue and complete, so I will not necessarily suggest removing it. But I would recommend assessing on a case-by-case basis rather than applying it as a blanket policy. This is to recognise genuine causes that may make a student not complete their PhD. Maternity pay is in its nature a difficult thing to repay given a child brings with them an immense cost, which the pay will inevitably have gone towards. Requirements for repayment should consider individual circumstances rather than potentially plunging a student parent into further hardship.

5. **Community:** At the workshop, several parents expressed their appreciation for the 'solidarity' and sense of community experienced during the session and expressed an interest in a PhD Parenting Community group. Undertaking a PhD can be an isolating experience and all the more so for PhD students with parenting responsibilities. In light of this, I recommend the establishment of a NWCDTP Parenting Community. This can be social media based on Facebook, WhatsApp or any other social space deemed suitable. Students new and old can be invited to join the group. Such a space can help students connect and build community, combatting isolation. The NWCDTP Parenting Community may also engage in social gatherings, whether in person or online, which can have a positive impact on mental health etc.