

Students with children feel “invisible” at U of T ^[1]

University Family Care Office notes difficulty of finding childcare

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EXCERPTS

Students who have to juggle school responsibilities with caring for children do not have the typical university experience. While U of T’s Family Care Office (FCO) provides services to students with dependents, there are gaps that still need to be filled.

The Varsity spoke to student parents about the biggest barriers they face when it comes to being students with children.

Liron Cohen, a fourth-year undergraduate student studying Chemistry, said that it is sometimes difficult for professors to understand how her situation differs from those of other students.

“You basically have some kind of responsibility that you cannot postpone,” she said. “If my child is sick... this would be my top priority and not my study.”

Cohen said she finds that she’s more busy and exhausted than other students. “But everyone has something that they’re dealing with” and that “people’s lives are very complicated.”

Chilombo Njolomba is a first-year graduate student completing her degree in social work. She was an undergraduate student at U of T 11 years ago when she had her first child, and she said that it was difficult to deal with the lack of understanding about her situation.

“It was always like, ‘Oh you should have waited to have kids.’ That is not the issue,” she said. “Just because I have children does not limit my desire for higher education.”

“I’m not going to be denied an education because I have children.”

Nevertheless, Njolomba believes that U of T has become better since she first became a parent, and she credits the FCO for helping her get through her undergraduate degree.

The FCO aims to provide “confidential guidance, resources, referrals, educational programming and advocacy for the University of Toronto community and their families,” according to their website.

While this includes running childcare centres on all three campuses, the number of spaces can’t always meet the demand. In the past, when Njolomba had wanted to use the university’s childcare services, she was never able to find space and had to look for alternatives.

When asked what some of the biggest barriers facing students with children were, the FCO’s Kaye Francis immediately mentioned the difficulty of finding childcare.

“Working in the field for so long, I realize childcare is so expensive and there are not enough spaces perhaps for the number of students who need them,” said Francis. “Universal childcare is something that’s applicable in this case — that would make a difference.”

For students with children, the availability of childcare is often what keeps them from being more involved at school.

“Sometimes there are events I cannot attend because it’s definitely up to me to pay for childcare at that time,” said Cohen.

Njolomba echoed her statement. “If you have a welcome to university event, is there an option for childcare? You’d actually be surprised at how many students won’t come to an event because there’s no way to take their child.”

The barriers preventing student parents from participating in university life contribute to the overall sense of isolation that Njolomba and Cohen expressed.

Francis said that students with children “feel invisible sometimes,” especially because it’s hard to find people in their situation around campus. She noted that a major gap at post-secondary institutions is that people don’t acknowledge that students may have children. She believes that it is important to make “the school, the staff, the faculty all aware that children can be a part of this equation.”

Cohen knows that she’s not the only undergraduate student with a child, but she also finds it hard to find people who have a similar experience. “I’m sure there are others out there,” said Cohen. “But I don’t see them in lectures, I don’t necessarily know about them.”

She suggests that having events that bring together students with children in a way that helps them focus on schoolwork while also taking care of their children would be beneficial.

When Njolomba started at U of T, there was the expectation that students were “coming from high school and [had] no family responsibilities.” This made it difficult for her to explain instances where she had to miss class because of family obligations, such as one of her children being sick.

“Whatever the reason may be, it was really difficult to explain at that time if it didn’t have anything to do with me directly.”

Through the years, Njolomba said she has learned how to better advocate for herself, because the university does not.

“Just as you accommodate other needs, you should be able to accommodate this because it’s important. We’re raising people, humans,” she said. “The onus needs to be removed from the individual to always fight the institution.”

-reprinted from The Varsity

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