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A Life Full of Challenges: Exploring the Stressors and Coping Strategies of Emerging Adult Undergraduate Student Parents

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**A LIFE FULL OF CHALLENGES: EXPLORING THE STRESSORS AND
COPING STRATEGIES OF EMERGING ADULT UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENT PARENTS**

by

KALEB C. ESPLIN

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of the requirements for the degree**

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Abstract

Stress is a natural part of life. However, there are some demographics which experience stress at heightened levels due to their circumstances, making them more prone to negative consequences. One such demographic is emerging adult undergraduate student parents (EAUSPs). Research on highly stressed demographics allows for the creation of programs and strategies to aid them. Unfortunately, research on EAUSPs is very scarce, making supporting them difficult. This study sought to understand the stresses which EAUSPs identify being prevalent in their lives along with coping strategies which they have found to be effective. To do so, interviews were conducted with 12 EAUSPs and communications regarding stresses were coded into four central themes: health, time management, uncertainties, and finances. Three coping strategies also emerged: seeking social support, taking things one day at a time, and physical fitness. By better understanding these common stressors, I hope to establish a foundation for future research which may lead to the development of university policies and social support strategies which may improve the ability of EAUSPs to reach their goals and improve their quality of life.

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Introduction

Stress is a natural part of life and can have both positive and negative effects (Anderson & Pulich, 2001). However, if stress is experienced in copious amounts, it can lead to negative consequences such as depression (Kessler, Berglund, Borges, Nock, & Wang, 2005) and suicidal thoughts (Floyd, Mimms, & Yelding, 2007). College students are especially prone to experience high levels of stress (Brown & Ralph, 1999). One group of students which experience a high degree of stress are emerging adults, who are aged from late teens to late 20s (Arnett, 2007). Emerging adults face the challenges of developing identity, financial independence, and identifying their roles in society (Arnett, 2000), as well as making decisions regarding religious beliefs, sexuality, and relationships with parents (Lefkowitz, 2005). These challenges are common among college and university students, as 71% of all undergraduates are 24 or younger (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

A specific demographic of undergraduate students with a high degree of stress are student parents. These individuals are more likely to experience higher levels of stress due to the addition of family obligations outside of academic achievement (Springer, Parker, & Leviten-Reid, 2009), as well as the burdens of high financial strain which not only affect the wellbeing of the parent, but also that of their children (Gerard & Roberts, 2006). These factors combined make student parents especially at-risk for leaving college without a degree (Perna, Fester, & Walsh, 2010).

Little research has been conducted regarding undergraduate students who are members of all three of the above groups, that is, emerging adult undergraduate student parents. By better understanding the stressors this complex demographic faces, options can be explored to increase the degree of happiness they experience (Schiffrin & Nelson, 2010) as well as assist in student retention and challenge the misconception that college is not worth the money (Card & Krueger, 1992). This study seeks to understand how these stresses converge upon these individuals and how they cope with their unique situation.

Literature Review

Undergraduate Student Stress

Emerging adults, especially those attending college, experience a variety of stressors. This is attributed, at least in part, due to a major shift in social networks (Reifman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1990). Students have many stressors that cause them to drop out early, not finish their degree, or take exceedingly long breaks before graduating (Hudd, 2000). These stressors can take a wide variety of forms, such as changing sleep habits, altered eating habits, taking on new responsibilities, and managing an increased workload (Niebling, 1999). Indeed, research suggests that it is the daily tasks that can produce the most stress as opposed to major life events (Ross, 1999). Past studies suggest that these stressors can cause depression, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem (Pisarik 2009). High levels of stress are also linked to burnout, which is a state of feeling worn down, exhausted, or like a failure resulting from excessive demands made on energy, strength, or resources (Freudenberger, 1977). Furthermore, Holinka (2015) argues that stress can holistically influence a student's global assessment of their life because stress decreases the likelihood of being happy at school and increases the chance of experiencing

depressive symptoms. Consequently, students might need to learn coping strategies to face their significant stressors if they want to succeed at college.

First-Time Parent Stress

Through the observation of couples during the transition to parenthood, studies have shown that having a child is particularly stressful (Miller, 1980). When becoming a parent, the stress begins as early as conception and during the pregnancy (Cowen, 1985). Additional studies have shown that throughout the transition to parenthood, both men and women have developed mental health problems such as anxiety and depression both in during pregnancy and postpartum (Parfitt, 2014). In addition to the individual effects that becoming a new parent can have on wellbeing, this transition can also create negative tensions in the relationship between the parents (Miller, 1980) as well as throughout the entire family unit (Widarsso, 2014).

Undergraduate Student Parents

Existing research on undergraduate student parents is very scarce. One specific article recognizes that “[student parents] ... remain a significant although largely unrecognized proportion of the student population.” (Gerald, 2006). In addition to the dearth of research, studies often focus on specific problems rather than the total experience of a student who is also a parent.

Research suggests that students and new parents experience a significant amount of stress. The purpose of this study is to explore the stressors that undergraduate students experience. It is possible that the combination of being an emerging adult as well as an undergraduate student parent is extremely stressful and/or might create unique stressors. Given the number of students who fail to graduate, it is important to explore the factors that influence an undergraduate student’s ability to succeed. Thus, I propose the following question:

RQ1: What are the stressors, if any, that emerging adult undergraduate student parents identify?

Coping and Stress Management

The present study argues that being a student and becoming a parent are both stressful experiences. When dealing with stress, the role of perspective is important in the processing and management of the situation. The ABCX model of stress and coping states that stressful events are interpreted through the combination of the individual's or family's perspective and available resources (Hill, 1985). Furthermore, McCubbin and Patterson (1983) elaborated on this model to state that individuals and families also use perspective and resources to respond to a stressful event. From this framework, it is possible that the way in which EAUSPs view their situation can have a direct effect on the amount of stress they experience and how effective their coping strategies will seem. To better understand how coping strategies affect EAUSPs, I will examine existing research regarding the coping of major stresses which EAUSPs face.

In relation to coping with the stresses of the transition into parenthood, Levy-Shiff (1999) observed that coping was best done when the situation was viewed as being dynamic and unfolding rather than a unitary, static event. This was found to connect to the fact that the effectiveness of some coping strategies change over time. It was also found that coping efforts immediately became more prominent directly following the birth of the child. This would lead to the conclusion that many EAUSPs are beginning to create and engage in new coping strategies to successfully navigate this major life event. In another study regarding new parent stresses, Jarvis and Creasey (1991) found that over time, many parents made use of positive reappraisal, the adaptive process by which stressful events are re-constructed as benign beneficial in some way, to successfully re-frame the stressful situations they experienced. Understanding how stress is

managed long-term could help to understand how to assist student parents in dealing with stressors.

Regarding academic stressors, Adler (2013) observed a correlation between quality of coping skill and adaptive responses reducing stress in undergraduate students. The more adaptive the responses of the students the less depressive symptoms occur within the individual.

By better understanding the stories of emerging adult undergraduate student parents, relevant populations (e.g., counselors, professors, school administrators) will be able to understand how they perceive their stressful life situations and how they successfully or unsuccessfully cope with their stressors.

RQ2: What coping strategies, if any, do emerging adult undergraduate student parents use to help manage their stress?

Method

Data Collection

With IRB approval, participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling. Sampling included posting a research announcement on a college campus (Utah State University) and on social media (e.g., Facebook). Participants who were willing to reach out to others were also asked to forward the form emails along to other student parents. Participants were compensated \$20.

Aligned with similar interpretive narrative approaches to data collection (see Holmberg, Orbuch, & Veroff, 2004), participants were instructed to tell their story from the beginning and then step-by-step. This encouraged participants to construct an account in light of their own experience and later in response to the interviewer's questions. Participants were instructed:

Today, I'm going to ask you to tell me the story of how you distanced yourself from the relationship with your [mom and/or dad]. I'm going to ask that you think of yourself as the author of a novel. There's no right way to tell your story but I am interested in hearing about it from the beginning and then step-by-step ... or we can think of everything you did as a different chapter of the novel.

Semi-structured and probing questions (see McCracken, 1998) were also asked throughout the interview to attain additional information about participants' interactions and experiences. All interviews were audio recorded then uploaded and transcribed using ExpressScribe transcription software and Microsoft Word. During the transcription process, all identifying information (e.g., names, locations) was replaced with pseudonyms or deleted. In total, 99 single-spaced pages of transcription were produced from the interviews.

Participant Demographics

For this study a total of 12 participants (50% Male, 50% Female) were interviewed over a one month period. All participants were current students at Utah State University. To qualify for the study each participant had to be an undergraduate student, be between the ages of 18-30, and have at least one child. In total, 75% ($N = 9$) of participants reported have one child and 25% ($N = 3$) reported having two children. The average age of participants was 25.42 ($SD=2.61$). Additionally, 100% ($N=12$) of participants identified as "White, non-Hispanic."

Information about the participant's college placement within the university and marital status was also gathered. About 33% ($N = 4$) of participants were enrolled in the College of Education & Human Services, 33% ($N = 4$) were enrolled in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, 17% ($N = 2$) were enrolled in the College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences, 8% ($N = 1$) were enrolled in the College of Engineering, and 8% ($N = 1$) were enrolled in the

Huntsman School of Business. None of the participants interviewed were enrolled in the Caine College of the Arts, College of Science, or the S. J. & Jessie E. Quinney College of Natural Resources. The majority of the participants reported being currently married (75%, $N = 9$); whereas, 17% ($N = 2$) reported being divorced and 8% ($N = 1$) reported being separated.

Data Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis requires researchers to ask themselves a variety of questions, typically surrounding the question of “what is a theme?” They argue that a theme captures a particularly salient aspect of the data in a patterned way regardless of whether that theme captures the majority experience. Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis method, which is an iterative process consisting of the following six steps, was conducted: (1) becoming familiar with the data, (2) generating coding categories, (3) generating themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) locating exemplars. For the purposes of this study, becoming familiar with the data consisted of reading and re-reading the data and taking note of initial ideas. Becoming familiar with the data was also achieved during the transcription process. Generating initial coding categories emerged from the salient words and phrases participants used to label the chapters of their story. Generating themes involved an iterative process of taking the initial codes and organizing them into broader themes. Reviewing themes details the process of checking whether the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Themes were then named and finally, exemplars were selected. Saturation was achieved at interview #8 (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Verification Procedures

To ascertain whether this analysis is valid, three interrelated verification procedures were conducted: (1) peer debriefing, (2) audit trail, and (3) exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). To peer debrief, other trained qualitative researchers in addition to myself discussed the themes as a group, arguing through differences to establish themes that best represented the data. Another trained qualitative researcher also read the data, identified emergent themes, and then discussed his findings with me (i.e., investigator triangulation). I also kept an audit trail which contained detailed notes about my decision-making processes and the emergent codes. Finally, I identified exemplars that captured the rich detail of the participants' accounts.

Results

Stressors (RQ1)

After analyzing the data for stresses (RQ1) faced by EAUSPs, four common stress themes emerged: health, time management, uncertainties, and finances.

Health. General health came through as an important theme in the interviews. Health is a daily concern for many people, and student parents are not an exception. One interviewer listed both her own health as well as her child's health:

ELLEN: Health is definitely probably the most stressful thing to deal with as a parent. My health, as well as, like, my daughter's health, um, if anybody is sick it's just; it's ultra-stressful, the whole house is on edge. It's just... It's a bad thing. Because, I mean, it's hard enough to do it, you know, on a normal basis. To balance everything, to make things work, to keep going, and then you add in a cold or you add in strep throat or something, and it just, it makes things so much harder. So much more stressful.

From this student parent, we can see a clear worry about health and see that it influences daily stress, especially when the balance between school, parenting, and employment are also present. Another interviewee raised the issue of child health and how it can engender absence in classes.

CHRISTIE: Um the uncertainties about being a parent? I mean gosh there's a lot. You know, you always, for instance, this isn't really a big deal, but if my child gets sick and she can't go to her school then I can't go to my school and that's stressful and that's definitely an uncertainty.

Clearly, being absent from classes due to a child being ill can have an effect on the academic stressors in the life of a student parent.

Ellen also talked about the stress of student parenthood and how she finds it difficult to relieve the stress in her life:

I feel guilty for taking an hour or so to read what I know I want to read because...I don't know, sometimes it doesn't really feel like stress relief so that's probably why it's such a low amount of time. Because sometimes it's like, 'oh! I can't handle it.' And, it doesn't really feel like I've relieved the stress.

This description demonstrates how stress levels and feelings of obligation create circumstances where she cannot take time to do things which relieve stress, making a state of prolonged stress hard to reverse or overcome.

Sleep. One sub theme which emerged regarding health was concerns and stress from a lack of sleep. The statements regarding this stressor showed that that losing sleep increases both academic and parent stress. One EAUSP said:

BRIAN: Waking up several times a night even though you have a big test in the morning. Usually we take care of each other but you know when the baby wakes up then you wake up and so that is losing sleep, it's a challenge.

This statement explicitly shows that sleep lost as a parent might affect exam performance. The same student also listed sleep as an uncertainty. Sleep is listed as contributing to stress by

Christie: “I’m not getting a lot of sleep and that always contributes to stress”. Adam said “...and that’s something that we really struggled with, with her sleeping. If she's not sleeping in the night neither are we which affects my school, which affects work, which affects everything.” In his interview, Phil said that for “the past 3 or 4 months”, he has been “going to the gym after work from about midnight to 1:00 a.m.,” leading to the loss of sleep. He finished by saying “It’s those moments where it’s hard.” This exemplifies that in seeking balance between school, family, and self-care, sleep is often sacrificed, leading to the possibility of further health-related stress.

Time Management. Time management is another stressor which emerged in the talk of ESUSPs. Since it was such a common stressor I classified two different sub themes within time management: time management in family and school and coordinating with spouse/partner.

Time management with family and school. A prominent time management issue identified by EAUSPs pertains to their time in school and the time they have with their children. For example, one woman explains:

BARBARA: I definitely don’t spend as much time on my homework as I probably should. Um, the assignments, I really breeze through them. I don’t really do a whole lot of reviewing what I did, I just kind of put the answer in and move on to the next one.

In this exemplar, Barbara discusses how parents might have difficulty managing time with their children and their schoolwork. She seems to feel that she is not giving a full effort to her homework.

Barbara gives another experience of her child asking for her attention then expresses a struggle in entertaining her child as well as accomplishing her homework.

Challenging is definitely trying to find time for homework. Um, so he’s four right now. And so it’s a lot of just coming up, “Mommy, can we go do this?” or “Mommy, do

this with me.” And it’s like, “Well I’m working on homework right now.” Um, so it’s hard finding that balance of, I don’t want to say no every time, but I can’t say yes every time either. So, um, just having to find ways to keep him entertained while I’m busy and then taking breaks to help um, be engaged with him. So, definitely finding that balance.

Barbara describes in this account how she not only has to deal with the internal factors which make it hard to concentrate on her academic tasks at hand but also direct pressures from her child to direct her attentions elsewhere. Brian describes a similar experience with the pressures he feels when his infant is crying:

I feel like the only thing I can think of hindering is like when you have to study or when you have to get something done by a certain time like midnight, and your baby’s crying and you just have to be like I got to get this done. It’s kinda hard to sacrifice one for the other.

This example directly shows how a child’s immediate needs can interfere with deadlines, which can have direct impact on academic performance.

In addition to feeling pressure to meet deadlines, another EAUSP shares how feeling the need to constantly attend to her newborn makes it hard for focus on most academic endeavors:

ANNA: Um it’s hard to do homework cause she’s still a newborn. And so most of the time she wants to be held or just do something with because she can’t entertain herself really too much. And so, when my husband is at class and I am watching her and I have to wait till she goes to bed to do homework or to study. Or if he is home, like he has to study too if he is home. So it’s just hard to find that time.

Feeling a complete inability to do what is needed to succeed academically due to needing to pay undivided attention to a child is stressful in and of itself, but having to wait until night when the

child goes to sleep can further impact sleep and time management, which can further increase the degree to which stress is experienced.

Coordinating with spouse or partner. When childcare is shared with one's spouse or partner, research shows an arising issue in time management with coordinating two demanding schedules. Several interviewees expressed this concern in their interviews.

Brian expresses, in this excerpt of his interview, stresses that arose when scheduling his and his wife's school schedules to meet the needs of their education and the needs of their child:

Umm the things I find challenging is schedules. Both me and my wife go to school, and so scheduling times to watch her, times to make sure our classes align with each other because umm usually the higher up you get in your education the less classes are offered so you generally only have one time. So we have to work our schedules around when works for each other's classes. That's challenging...Umm scheduling things. Sometimes, especially with both of us in school, it can be hard to schedule things. Scheduling plans, meetings, and study groups is pretty difficult. And then planning for sleep is difficult as well.

Not only does this example show how difficult it is for EAUSPs to schedule classes around the needs of their child, but it also shows how complicated this process can become if both parents decide to pursue degrees simultaneously.

Chris provides another example of how not only needing to meet the needs of his child but also sacrificing his time to meet the needs of his wife as well.

Definitely there are time conflicts. My wife wants to have a life too, and so I need to babysit sometimes and that takes away from study time and stuff like that. I think that is probably the biggest challenge.

This example illuminates the issue of coordinating personal time with a spouse on top of academic pursuits, adding yet another element of complexity to the scheduling process.

Another EAUSP describes how the complexity of these coordinating and scheduling efforts can even lead to conflicts with their spouse:

ELLEN: Um, but, my obligations did not stop. It's like, well, I'm still going to school. I still need to maintain a certain GPA, and all this other stuff, and we've had fights, definitely, um, about time management. Just learning about how to balance things.

When coordination with a partner involves balance academic, recreational, and parenting abilities, it can be reasonable that tension could arise. However, by adding conflict as another element of the situation, stress levels can continue to rise, further enhancing the negativity of the situation.

Uncertainties. Uncertainties often emerged when EAUSPs expressed doubts regarding to their abilities or the future. Three types of uncertainties emerged regarding the following: (1) academic ability, (2) parenting ability, and (3) identity management.

Academic ability. A common uncertainty for many EAUSPs regarded their ability to succeed in achieving their degree for various reasons. As Barbara described, "I started out at full time but had to drop a couple of classes, but only ended part-time with not so great grades. And so it was kind of a disappointment. I felt like kind of a failure in that."

After describing stressors, she faced balancing having a child and going to school, she expressed how a semester of negative grades affected her entire paradigm of her competence and ability to succeed academically. Some EAUSPs even feel these doubts without having a semester of struggles. Another participant reported the following:

ANNA: Sometimes I definitely think that I should drop out. That I don't need to graduate. My husband is getting a degree and we will just live off of him. But it's hard at those times and usually my husband is the one that helps me by saying "you know you want this education" and I am like " ok ya I do, you are right." um, but it is hard because it's very stressful and if you don't have the drive for it it's easy just to be like... I am done.

In this example, Anna expressed that she had begun doubting whether her academic endeavors were worth the effort while trying to balance the other stresses she was facing. This provides evidence that the stress facing EAUSPs can affect their perceived goals and values.

Parenting ability. Another common uncertainty shared by many EAUSPs reflected on their ability to be a successful caregiver to their dependents. Ellen recalls the following:

It was a very anxious, daunting feeling I guess. Going home, being by myself with this brand new baby. I was like "I don't know what I'm supposed to do! I don't know how to be a mom. I don't know anything about, you know, being a parent.

Ellen expressed how she felt a great deal of uncertainty regarding how to be a successful mother. Such self-talk could potentially be damaging to one's confidence and need to feel competent, which may be damaging to self-image.

Identity Management. Several participants described the challenges of maintaining a desired appearance to others. Such negotiation is common among emerging adults, and thusly, relevant to EAUSPs (Arnett, 2000). Barbara explained this tension when describing her desire to maintain independent of her parents despite needing their support:

I mean I don't want to feel too dependent on them, you know? Because I have tried to establish that independence. I got married, I moved out and I felt that whole like grown

up experience. And then I feel like going through the divorce and being more dependent on them again is kind of going backwards. But it's also necessary for right now. Um, so yeah I do have that concern of feeling dependent on them again and trying to reestablish my independence.

This example illustrates the competing discourses of independence and connectedness which Barbara had to negotiate through. This is also described by Anna, but rather than describing her need to be independent from her parents, she describes her need to appear self-reliant and independent to her peers despite needing to find someone to watch her child:

I feel like I was just like passing off my baby sometimes you know? Like I really need a sitter and my husband won't be home till like 9 or 10 from work or school and so I was like hey 'Here's my baby!' you know what I mean? I didn't want to be like 'Here you go, this is for you!' So, it's kind of hard.

Anna described how her desires to appear competent to those whom she interacted with conflicted with her needs to accomplish her tasks and coordinate with her partner. She expressed the discomfort and uncertainty this caused within her.

Overall, uncertainty was a common theme expressed in many of the statements EAUSPs gave regarding their stressors. As these individuals work to balance academics with social and financial strains, self-doubt and developing identities demand their attention, creating dissonance and conflict within themselves, and in turn, increasing the stress they experienced.

Finances. Finances are a very common stressor in the lives of adults. When paying for university as well as children, finances become an even bigger stress in the lives of EAUSPs. One student parent, Barbara, recounted the following experience which illustrates a paradox of paying for school or working:

BARBARA: Um, always in a financial bind. Like, how am I going to pay for college, pay for daycare because daycare is so expensive too? And if I'm going to school full time, working full time isn't really an option to try and afford that. So it's kind of a tossup. Like, do I go to school part-time so I can afford part-time daycare because I can't afford full time daycare? Or do I try to go to school full time and work part-time to try and afford daycare? So, financially it's definitely really stressful.

School is difficult to pay for by itself, and children bring financial burden as well, which led Barbara to express how she experiences elevated stress.

Similarly, one participant, Devin, outlined the difficulty to pay for both parents to attend school, saying "It's a little bit stressful to pay for tuition and pay for her school." Another theme was being unable to pay for non-essential activities such as recreation or going out to dinner: "Yeah, there's definitely a lot fewer things that were able to do because of budget reasons" (Christie). Other student parents are forced to work full time in order to pay tuition. Debbie mentioned that since she's been married, her husband has had a "full time job with excellent benefits," which has helped the pair to be able to keep up with finances. Yet, despite having a husband with a secure job, Debbie still feels the pressure of managing financial strains.

Coping Strategies (RQ2)

In addition to the stressors EAUSPs experience, the present study also sought to illuminate the coping strategies identified by EAUSPs: seeking social support, taking time for introspective thought, and physical activity. Specifically, they discussed what they thought provided their lives with a healthy balance.

Seeking Supportive Communication. One way which many EAUSPs managed their stress was by seeking support from their family or friends. Devin described what he sought from

his social circles when seeking support in this way: “You know, I have really supportive family and friends and I think the main thing I need from someone is just for someone to listen.” This demonstrates that just knowing there is someone there to listen allowed Devin to find relief from his stress. Christie explained how her family was able to not only help their presence but also with tangible support:

Um, mostly my family. I live with my parents and they’re a great help and a support for me as far as like caring for her but as far as like support for school like I if I need help with something or if I’m feeling stressed out about school, I turn to my brothers who are also in school right now.

By having family as a resource, Christie is able to receive both emotional and tangible support which assist her in decreasing her burdens.

Taking Things One Day at a Time. Coping skills in this category describe the strategies many EAUSPs took to obtain time to do something meaningful to them or allow for the change to sort their thoughts. In the following example, Barbara describes how she uses time with her son to take a break from her pressures and feel successful:

But, yeah, it’s definitely a day by day process of at the end of the day if I got all my homework done and I was able to Skype Mike, or if he’s here, if I was able to get all my homework done and still spend time with him I feel like it was one successful day. And I just need to do that day by day.

By taking time away from her academic or financial tasks, Barbara could root herself in something she found important which increased her sense of doing things which are meaningful. Barbara later described how taking time to journaling allowed her to work through her situation, especially since she often felt she could not discuss her situation with others.

Physical Fitness. Other EAUSPs engaged in direct behaviors such as physical fitness to relieve their stress. Devin very simply described this by stating “I have found that physical fitness really helps me cope with my stress.”

Social support, introspective thought, and physical fitness are all common ways EAUSPs cope with stressors. Understanding this construct provides a foundation for the creation of effective ways to help these EAUSPs attend university. This could lead to possible workshops or fitness programs.

Discussion

Stress is common in the lives of Emerging Adult Undergraduate Student Parents. At a broad level, these stressors can be seen as having origins in health, time management, uncertainties, and finances. Health stresses reflected desires to maintain not only their own health, but the health of their dependents as well. Health stresses were commonly seen in the form of a concern for sleep and how sleep impacted other aspects of their life. These sleep concerns often resulted from either struggles with dependents sleeping or trying to accomplish other tasks.

Time management was also a major source of stress for EAUSPs, which was predicted from pre-existing research on student parents (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994). This was seen within two contexts: balancing school with family, and coordinating with spouse. Many of the participants expressed feeling a weight from wanting or feeling a need to be with their spouse or dependent while simultaneously feeling the need to accomplish academic tasks to succeed in coursework. This tension was a common source of stress. Many others felt stressed trying to coordinate schedules with spouses or working to be mindful of what tasks their partner needed to accomplish and acting accordingly.

In addition to feeling the tensions of time, many also felt stress originating in uncertainties felt towards academic abilities, parenting abilities, or identity management. By assuming the roles of student and new parent during the age of emerging adulthood, EAUSPs felt uncertainties and insecurities regarding their abilities to fulfil these roles. In addition, they also struggled to create and maintain the image and identity they felt they should be taking on, which confirmed other studies regarding emerging adults. Emerging adults in general renegotiate their identities, and by introducing the role of parent, this process becomes more difficult (Arnett, 2000). This led to stress when the boundaries of their identity were crossed.

Participants also identified that finances were a source of stress, which is characteristic of both new parents (Miller & Sollie, 1980) and undergraduate students (Sarros & Densten, 1989). By combining high tuition costs, living expenses, and supporting a dependent, many felt stressed regarding how much money they had, having to balance work into their busy schedules, and feeling disappointed by a lack of funds for personal expenses.

To deal with these stressors, many of the interviewees reported engaging in support-seeking, taking time for introspective thought, and physical exercise. Support-seeking occurred between EAUSPs and family members and/or friends, particularly for advice-seeking or tangible support. Many reported feeling the need to have time to themselves to accomplish tasks or perform self-reflection exercises such as journaling. Others reported that physical activity on a regular basis helped them manage their stress levels, which is also supported by previous research (Nguyen-Michel, Unger, Hamilton, & Spruijt-Metz, 2006). Overall, it can be seen that EAUSPs face a great deal of unique stressors and seek activities to maintain their mental and physical wellbeing.

Practical Applications

From my findings, I suggest several strategies that could be adopted to help reduce the stress experienced by EAUSPs. First, social circles can seek to offer support in ways that are non-face threatening to ease the stresses which arise from identity management. For example, when offering to watch the child of an EAUSP, do so in a way which suggests you are doing it out of a desire for self-gratification (e.g. “Can I come play with your baby?”) rather than in a manner which may insinuate they are incompetent or dependent (e.g. “Can I come watch your kid so you can get homework done?”). I also make a call to universities to offer greater flexibility to EAUSPs regarding scheduling. Dealing with the tension between needing to take care of family and meeting deadlines was a prevalent source of stress, and I would propose that USU professors should be sensitive to these demands to assist in retention and enabling the success of these students. By having instructors who are flexible and understanding of the unpredictable nature of the EAUSP lifestyle, these individuals would take greater confidence in their academic abilities as well as feel less pressure to forcibly divide their time between family and school.

Limitations, Directions for Future Research, and Study Conclusion

With all studies, limitations exist. Having a sample size of more than 12 participants would allow for the possibility of more descriptive exemplars which could allow for more in-depth conclusions and codes. The participants of the study were all pulled from the same university, which might provide a perspective on these issues which might not adequately represent the situations of EAUSPs in different cultures and environments.

Despite these limitations, this study was able to clearly identify stressors that were common to EAUSPs and their attempts to manage their stress levels. Using this as groundwork,

future researchers should consider these specific stressors and identify strategies which would help individuals within this demographic to manage their stress more effectively. Researchers should also examine what role universities and social circles can play in providing support and resources needed to help EAUSPs successfully complete their degrees and feel confident in their self-perceptions.

Emerging adult undergraduate student parents face a situation that is unique to any other demographic. The convergence of identities, roles, and responsibilities create levels of stress that contribute to dropout rates and overall health. By better understanding their situation, we can begin to take steps to alleviate their burdens and help them negotiate their pathway to successful contributions to society while raising a new generation who may follow a similar path.

Reflective Writing

(Word count – 1,194)

This project has been the most engaging, challenging, and rewarding project I have participated in during my time here at USU. I had always heard that research was commonplace, but always felt it was out of my reach. However, after attending a research symposium my junior year, I realized that this was something I could pull off and would be interesting. When I realized that research was required to graduate with honors, I decided to move forward and seek an opportunity to give it a try. Conveniently, around that same time, Dr. Kristina Scharp announced in my family communication class that she was seeking individuals to conduct research with her. We had our first meeting where we discussed common interests and she proposed this project. It seemed to be a topic I could feel passionate about and would be interesting, so we decided to move forward.

Initially, I felt overwhelmed with the gravity of everything going on. I was bombarded with things I had never heard about like “CITI training” and “IRB approval.” However, patient guidance from my mentor helped me through each of these phases. Then came time for recruitment, data collection, and transcription. The process of conducting the interviews was incredibly interesting for me, and I also thoroughly enjoyed doing analysis of the data afterwards in an effort of putting all the pieces together into a coherent whole. Once I had a basic understanding of the data, I presented the findings in an oral presentation at the USU Student Research Symposium as well as create and show a poster of the research at the USU Communication Studies Research Symposium. This allowed me to take what I had learned and begin sharing it with others in a professional way.

As I reflect on the experience, I realize that this truly has been a “capstone” for my education. For most my college career, the projects I do or exams that I take are really the professors creation. They decide what it is that I should know or learn, and then I regurgitate their own creation back to them. However, this research gave me free rein to create and discover on my own terms. There was no professor-created guide to what I was going to learn, what connections I was going to make, or in what forums I was required to present them. This placed me in an environment where I could work unfettered by restrictions and simply produce my best work. It made me proud as I presented my research to know that what I was saying was something of my creation and that I had contributed to something meaningful. This is something which I did not feel from any aspect of my education, making it what I consider to be the capstone of my experience.

Quite possibly the most impactful aspect of this experiment has been simply the initial exposure to conducting research. As I describe above, I always considered doing research as being scary and out of my reach. This project has allowed me to break this misconception and show me how rewarding the process is. I have found myself sitting in classes learning about a concept and thinking to myself, “I wonder how they researched that. What kind of study could I do to find that out?” This has made me much more open and interested in conducting research in the future as I have confidence that I have the capabilities to contribute.

Not only has this project made me more confident in my abilities to conduct original research, but it has also made me more confident in my ability to produce quality work in general. After conducting my research project and presenting it at the student research symposium, all my other assignments have suddenly become remarkably simple, and I feel the quality of my writing and engagement in assignments and course material has increased

immensely. My abilities regarding critical thinking has increased as well. Previously, whenever I would hear a source, my knee-jerk reaction would be to simply say, “That’s true 100%. No questions asked.” However, after having training in critical thinking from my mentor and seeing just how many limitations exist in any study, I have gained the confidence to say, “Is that really true? How did they find that out? Is it reliable?” For example, I recently remember reading an article by the Associated Press stating that flossing had no benefit. This was personally relevant for my future career in dentistry, and I questioned the validity of the statement based on personal experience from shadowing dentists for over 50 hours. However, instead of just challenging my own beliefs or rejecting the study, I read into the meta-analysis produced by the Associated Press and read the original articles published by researchers on the effects of flossing. Because of my experience in research, I found myself making comments like, “Well that sample size is too small to be significant,” or “Of course they couldn’t find direct results like the Associated Press wanted them to find, there’s no way they could get IRB approval to tell people to not floss!” This has led me to be able to not be blind follower of information but to have the confidence to question validity and find logical backings to my claims.

Another way in which this work has been influential and important to me is by showing me a new venue through which I can positively influence others. I have a passion for service and helping others, and I value having opportunities to improve the lives of those around me. My experience has showed me that research is a way in which I can challenge myself, make contributions to the academic community, and help other people at the same time. My research project was based on understanding individuals suffering from high amounts of stress to creating programs to help them. My hope was that this research could provide a platform for further research as well as help create environments where these stressed individuals can find support

and encouragement. By combining the excitement of creating something new, challenging myself, and having the possibility of helping others, I find myself in a perfect storm of elements which drive me to want to research again and do so in topics which I personally find meaningful and have capacity to help others.

In conclusion, I am incredibly grateful for this opportunity I have had to conduct this research. It has opened a whole new individual perspective on research for me which makes it not only seem possible but also attractive. I feel it has helped me create something new which I can be proud of. It has helped me to enhance existing skills and develop new ones. It has also allowed me to understand new ways through which I can help others and contribute to the communities in which I live. I am grateful that research became a part of my life before I left Utah State University, and I look forward to having it be an aspect of my life in the years to come.

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Author Biography

Kaleb Esplin is a Communication Studies Major from St. George, Utah. He anticipates a career in dentistry, leading him to balance classes in advanced sciences with his communication studies coursework, allowing him to minor in Chemistry. He has served as the President and Vice President of the USU Collegiate 4-H Club, and while in leadership of the organization, it received the USU Organization of the Year Award. He has also received the A-Pin Award from Utah State University and was named Communication Studies Student of the Year in 2016. In his free time, Kaleb enjoys playing piano and saxophone, and has played in the USU Jazz Ensemble for three years. He looks forward to his future career in dentistry where he hopes to perform additional research in the field of health communication and patient satisfaction.