A Qualitative Investigation of How Student Parents Cope with Multiple Roles

INTRODUCTION
Postsecondary education is associated with higher incomes, positive mental health, positive parenting practices, low levels of parenting stress, children’s academic success, and children’s social competence. Student parents experience stress as they balance multiple roles. Qualitative interviews illuminated student parent’s experiences.

METHODS
• Semi-structured interviews (N = 14) with parents who had a child aged <=36 mo.
• Average length: 20 min. (range = 12-30)
• Audio recorded, transcribed, reviewed
• Focused on:
  • Sources of stress
  • Coping strategies
  • How stress affected the parent-child relationship
• Open, axial, and selective coding phases resulted in four categories of themes

THEMES
Responses to being a Student-Parent

"Here I am, not planned, wasn't what I wanted in my life, but it's turned out to be okay. It's been good."

"We tried the whole doing homework at home and I could do it because I felt like I had to, but [my husband] was at work all day. He didn't have time to do it while [my son] was up and so it was just one of those things that we decided like, 'You need to go to the library to study.' So that he could get a lot done instead of a little over a long time."

"I think it's just hard being a parent and going to school. But I think most people just know it's going to be hard."

Causes of Stress

General Not Enough Time Balancing Roles Finances

Coping

Scheduling Family Time External Resources

Motivation

DISCUSSION
Participants had different expectations and initial reactions to being student parents. Key sources of stress were reported - time demands, having multiple roles, finances, and general stress - as well as strategies used for coping with the temporarily increased levels of stress - external resources such as family, friends, and institutional programs, spending time with family, and maintaining a schedule. Coping strategies helped keep stress from spilling over into the parent-child relationship. Parents found motivation in themselves and their family to pursue a college degree.

IMPLICATIONS
Findings should be incorporated into current and future programs and interventions, such as CCAMPIS, focusing on effective strategies for managing stress. Doing so will decrease feelings of personal vulnerability and increase overall well-being and success in student AND parent roles.

The Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) project is funded by the U.S. Department of Education. Award #P335A130120