

Tips for **STUDENT PARENTS** in College

Parenting is a challenge. So is earning a college degree. Doing both at the same time can be daunting, especially if you're also the sole breadwinner for the family.

The good news is that thousands of parents graduate from college every year, in a number of majors achieving their dream of a better, more secure life for themselves and their children. Not only do parents succeed in college, they bring some definite advantages to the college experience. Among other things, Parents tend to be more focused, determined and mature than other students as a result of their life experiences and added responsibilities.

While there's no question that parents can succeed in college, there's also no question that it requires an extra degree of planning and self-discipline, as well as a healthy sense of perspective. Here are some tips for parents on the path to a college degree.

1. Keep a Schedule

Time is your scarcest resource, so it's important to make the most of it. Just like it's always a good idea to know where your money is going, it's important to know where your time is going too. If you're not intentional about scheduling regular time for study and the other important things in your life you'll quickly find yourself behind and overwhelmed.

Consider doing a time audit. Take a few days to be intentional about tracking how you spend your time. You might be surprised by how much of it you spend on things that are little more than distractions from the important things in life. It's all about priorities. When it comes to balancing life and classes, you need to have the discipline for [time management](#), and to stick to your plan. Though you can be flexible as to *when* you choose to complete your work during the week, you can't put it off indefinitely.

2. Leverage Your Relationships and Network

Don't try to do this alone. You're going to need all the emotional and material support you can get. Develop relationships with other parents in school that you can share your experiences with and find encouragement from. Many schools have support groups for parents. If yours doesn't, check out one of the online groups in the resource section below. Let your extended family and friends know what you're doing and ask for their help with childcare, meals, transportation for the kids, etc. Finally, get to know your professors. Let them know about your responsibilities. Many professors are willing to make special arrangements for parents, granting extra time to complete assignments, etc. The [Title IX department at Mason](#) is a great resource in navigating these conversations if you come up against an unwilling professor.

When it comes to online courses, it may sometimes make you feel like you are learning on your own, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Most online courses are built around the concept of collaboration, with professors and instructors actively encouraging that students work together to complete assignments and discuss lessons.

Build relationships with other students by introducing yourself and engaging in online discussion boards. Your peers can be a valuable resource when preparing for exams or asking for feedback on assignments. Don't be afraid to turn to them to create a virtual study group. Chances are good that they will appreciate it just as much as you will.

3. Take Care of your Physical, Emotional, and Mental Well-Being

Busy people can be tempted to skip meals, put their sleep on the backburner, and forget about the importance of their mental health. All of these things have an enormous affect on your immune system, energy levels, motivation, and mental alertness. It's generally better to spend the extra time it takes to prepare a healthy meal or take a nap when needed. The time you spend in class and studying will be much more productive, plus you will get sick less often and have the energy to concentrate longer. You'll be setting a good example for your kids as well.

Like eating well, regular exercise increases alertness, energy, productivity and reduces anxiety. Make it short and simple. Take a walk. Ride a bike. 10-15 minutes a day, or even every other day, is enough to make a difference.

Sleep is usually one of the first things to go for college students and parents. And yet, like eating healthy and exercising, the benefits of getting enough sleep usually far exceed the costs involved (like having less time to study). Among other things, sleep aids memory retention, problem solving and the ability to maintain perspective. If you're having a hard time concentrating, find yourself getting stressed out, or losing patience with your kid(s) more than usual, try taking a short nap or going to bed earlier. This will likely require sacrificing other activities, but it will pay off in the long run. Again, it's all about priorities.

Here are some things at Mason you can take advantage of to help you succeed:

[Make an appointment with a counselor.](#)

Utilize the **[Patriot Pantry](#)** for non-perishable food items and toiletries.

Take advantage of the many **[resources through out Center for the Advancement of Well-Being](#)**, including resiliency programs, managing anxiety and stress, and mindfulness.

5. Have Realistic Expectations for Yourself

Most universities and professors design their curriculum with traditional, non-working, childless students in mind. Obviously, these students have much more time to devote to

their academic studies than a working parent. The trick is not to hold yourself to these same unrealistic expectations. To do so is a quick path to burnout, and eventually, to stopping out. Make sure your faculty are aware that you may have to have different standards and expectations for yourself. Create a network of staff, faculty, and other students who understand this to be true in case you get pushback.

It might be helpful to remember that prospective employers are going to ask to see your degree, not your grades. And graduate programs will allow you to provide context if you end up not making the grades you intend to. So, work hard and learn what you need to, but if you can't get all the reading done because you were up all night with a sick kid, or you couldn't finish all the homework problems because you were just too tired after work, don't sweat it. Make sure your professor knows about your situation and cut yourself a break.

6. Keep Your Eyes on the Prize

When things get tough, which they inevitably will, take time to reflect on what all this is for. Utilizing [resources on resiliency](#) can be the most helpful thing in those moments. Take the time to reflect on how far you've come and imagine yourself walking across that platform or receiving your degree in the mail. Imagine the job opportunities opened up for you with a college degree. Imagine the life you will be able to provide for you and your kids. Imagine the example you are setting for them. Perhaps most importantly, imagine what this will mean for your own sense of self. You will be a college graduate!