

Seen But Not Heard:

The status of students with children at Dalhousie University

[...] Instead of regarding traditional female tasks as something to be abandoned, we can assert the positive value of nurturing and caring work, of direct investments in human capital, and of voluntary and community service.

- From: Gender Equity in the Genuine Progress Index,
Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health
Dalhousie University

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We dedicate this document to our children

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Finding the Women's Centre here at Dal is a problem of its own. I only found this place after using "google" to see if there were any community centres in the Halifax area that I could offer help to. *Why as a Dalhousie student do I not know about this place? [...] I am simply asking that you put a link on the Dalhousie website that links a person directly to this part of the page so the University is better able to help people help themselves.*"

- Dalhousie Student, 2006

Since 1993, The Dalhousie Women's Centre has been an integral and vital member of the Dalhousie Equity community, working closely with our friends and allies on campus to enhance the University experience of our students, faculty and staff. Yet there still remains a sizeable gap in the relationship between the DWC and the University: we struggle to be included in the bundle of services provided by the University to students, we struggle to be recognized as a service for students, we struggle as we are often forced to compete with partners for legitimacy. In turn, the scores of students who use, access, partner with and turn to the Centre are rendered invisible: their voices ignored, their concerns unaddressed. The Dalhousie Women's Centre hopes to build a sustainable, open, collaborative relationship between the students and Student Services, where the needs, ideas, energies, and talents of Dalhousie students are made visible.

Today, we are here to bring voice to a sizeable portion of Dalhousie students who are *seen but not heard*: students with families. At Dalhousie, we have professional degree programs in Law, Medicine, Social Work, Engineering, PhDs; each Spring, we reach out far and wide across Canada, and indeed the globe, attracting new students; also, the majority of students at Dal are women, many of whom are pursuing their education during the very time of their lives when they are more likely to become pregnant.

Despite these realities, Dalhousie University still has a long way to go in terms of providing resources and services to mature students and/or students with families. The campus culture is family 'unfriendly' as most social activities centre around alcohol consumption, parties, and 'hooking up'.

The DWC is requesting that Dalhousie Student Services provide an avenue for students with children to seek the resources available to them. Indeed, the greatest issue facing students with children is that there are no resources available to communicate the resources that currently exist on campus and in the community. **For this reason, we request Dalhousie Student Services provide a link on their webpage for students with children. We request this link be included under "Student Resources" and "Faculty/Staff Resources" on the University Services main page.** We believe that a link on the Dalhousie University webpage would help to guide students with children to the available resources on and off campus. Moreover, the addition of a link and the creation of a webpage for students with children will demonstrate that the university recognizes the needs and unique circumstances of students with children.

The Dalhousie Women's Centre Experience

Students with children are a diverse group on campus and they face particular challenges that go beyond the struggles of most students. The DWC has worked to fill the gaps that exist on campus when attempting to juggle the double workload of going to school and raising a family. The DWC is committed to the success of all Dalhousie students regardless of gender, sexual orientation, language, race, creed, religion, economic status, and family status (to name a few). To this end, the struggles of female student parents on this campus are well known to the Centre and are indicative of the overall status of women experienced on this campus. Indeed, empowering single mothers is not charity. It is necessary for the success of all our students, particularly women.

Consider that the DWC has:

Developed a Student Parent portfolio to address the particular needs of students who have come to the centre looking for information and support services at Dalhousie.

Recruited a core group of student parents for volunteer run, Saturday afternoon *parent swaps*: parents are welcome to bring their children to the centre for 4 hours for free babysitting by other parents.

Recruited DWC volunteers to *assist parents with free childcare* on an as-needed basis, namely during exams, midterms, and class time.

The DWC *provides a safe space* for student parents to receive support from one another. We are trans and queer positive. We are members of DalAllies. We are wheelchair accessible (as of this year).

The DWC provides the only financial assistance on campus specifically for students with children. We dispense \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year in single parent student bursaries (depending on our funding)

Coordinated monthly "meet & greets" for parents and children. The aim was to get students with children interacting with each other, to meet/discuss/share their experiences, and to provide a safe and loving environment for the children to meet each other and feel included.

The DWC *offers resources for parents on campus*. The centre is wheelchair accessible & *offers a children's playroom*, quiet study space, a fully equipped kitchen, bathroom/shower facilities, etc. We provide clothing, furniture, and toy distribution to students in need.

The Dalhousie Women's Centre has compiled feedback of testimonials from Dalhousie students and come to understand the latest obstacle facing them is that they are 'seen but not heard as they are seen as 'students' but with no recognition of their unique circumstances. Some examples:

"Dal doesn't care. Without the Centre (DWC) I would have crawled into a corner and died. Profs have said to me... 'childcare problems are not an acceptable excuse' and 'Maybe this isn't the right time for you'. When is the right time? Where's the support and encouragement? I had to find the Women's Centre through google..."

--First Year Arts student with two children

"I was walking down the street with the kids in their stroller. This woman stopped me and said, 'You know, birth control works, you should try it'. I was like, wow!"

--Second year Nursing student, married with two small children under five.

"I have been bringing my 7 month old son to class with me but was informed today I wasn't allowed to bring him anymore because someone complained. I really can't afford a babysitter and someone told me you might be able to help me find someone who could watch him and maybe I could do the same for them? I don't know how this kind of thing would work. Please let me know if you have any ideas of what I can do. I have almost every class covered by a friend or god parent but there are wednesday morning classes 9:30-11:30 and again 9:30-10:30 fridays."

--Fourth Year Psychology student

The DWC is honoured to work with and support these students. Indeed, as the DWC experiences, these students represent the best of what Dal has to offer. Despite their obstacles, limitations, and obstructions, students with children are more likely to excel in their academic programs, be involved in their communities, advocate for other mums and their kids, and contribute to Dalhousie in untold, unseen, unknown ways.

Background

In 1989, Dalhousie student Brenda Thompson created and self-published the first Single Mother's Survival Guide: a handbook to help support and guide single mothers through the many social, economic, and political hardships they face. This guide has been updated and republished six since with the support of NSPIRG, a Dalhousie student society.

However, since the original publication, little has changed for lone parent households headed by women. In fact, Thompson noted at the 2006 launch of the Guide, "single moms have a tougher time today" attending university than in 1989.

Provincial cuts to social services, increases in tuition and the cost of living, increasing demands for affordable housing and accessible childcare, continue to impede the success of women who chose to pursue higher education as parents. According to the Canadian Medical Association, families headed by a single mom are disproportionately affected by poverty: single mothers are more likely to live below the poverty line, experience higher levels of depression and family stress and lower levels of social support and access to mental health services (2005).

Almost 1 in 8 Canadian children live in a family headed by a single mother (CMAJ, 2005). Not only are most single parents in Canada mothers, but one in two single mothers (47.6%), compared to one in six single fathers (17.7%), raise their children in poverty.

Nova Scotia has the highest proportion of single mothers in Canada. In 2001, the vast majority (90.2%) of single parents in Nova Scotia are women (approximately 37,000 mothers versus 4,000 fathers)

Nova Scotian children living in a lone parent (mother) family are 5.7 times more likely to experience poverty than children in two-parent families (56.1% versus 9.9%)

70% of Nova Scotian single mothers live below the official low income cut-off (Gender Equity in the Genuine Progress Index, Maritime Centre of Excellence for Women's Health, Dalhousie University).

In 2004, over 70% of new jobs required some post-secondary education.

Most studies, research, as well as common sense show, the best way to empower citizens is to educate them. Active citizenship is defined by employment, so creating well trained, well prepared, educated citizens is the best way to build a viable, sustainable, competitive nation and market economy.

However, pursuing higher education continues to remain beyond the grasp of most single moms. "The need is huge and is above and beyond the funding that we can provide for them," says Pam Swiminer, assistant registrar (financial aid) for Dalhousie (Dalhousie Gazette).

Tuition fees in Nova Scotia are the highest in the country, at an average of over \$6,200 per year.

Single parent families headed by university students face budget deficits of between \$388 and \$695 per month, even when the family is accessing all available supports and sources of income.

In the 2005-2006, 228 single parents attending university applied for student assistance in HRM.

Access to education, housing, child care and support are recognized as short and long term solutions to family homelessness. *Tragically, while the best long-term solution for a single mother is to improve earning capacity through post-secondary education, that single mother must put her family at significant risk of homelessness while attaining that education.*

As observed by MP Alexa McDonough, “In one sense, you get very discouraged that conditions remain very punishing, [...] In another sense, you’re always very hopeful and your optimism is reinforced when you come to an event like this (the book launch).”

Response from the Grassroots: Dalhousie Students at Work

Besides the Single Mother’s Survival Guide and launch, a number of positive grassroots initiatives have arisen around the issue of single mother’s attending Dalhousie University. In 2005/ 2006, the Dalhousie Women’s Centre partnered and/or supported the following student initiatives:

- Fourth-year nursing students Jenna Coughtry and Carmen Hussey initiated a community health project that aimed to make the campus more accessible to students with infants and young children. Specifically, 1) they worked to promote breastfeeding awareness and breastfeeding spaces and 2) they worked to have installed “at least one” baby changing station in a female washroom on Carleton Campus. Neither initiative was adopted.
- SSW undergrads created a website to advocate for single mothers and their inability to apply for Income assistance while attending university. These students developed the petition/website to encourage change at the provincial and national levels.
- The Canadian Federation of Students, in solidarity with Student Unions and Women’s Centres from across the province, launched the Groundswell Petition which called for the Provincial government to extend income assistance benefits to single mothers attending university.
- The YWCA collaborated with the DWC and Saint Mary’s Women’s Centre to conduct a feasibility study around the creation of supportive housing for single moms attending university. This project will come to fruition this Fall when the YWCA opens ‘Herizons’ in Fairview.
- The Dal Women’s Centre offers financial support in the way of emergency loans, emotional support and material resources: childcare swaps, clothing/toy/furniture exchanges, advocacy, etc.

While these efforts are indeed, optimistic, they struggle and suffer from lack of institutional and administrative support.

The Leadership of Dalhousie University

Dalhousie has a history of leadership in Nova Scotia and there are many opportunities to provide it in this area. For example, there remain few avenues for students with children to access the info and resources that are available to them. There is no central information service, few places for them to fit into the university culture, and few ways for them to meet one another to create a social support group. Creating such a centralized location for resources and information would augment Dalhousie's visibility in the community and set Dalhousie apart from other campuses across the country.

If one in eight families are headed by a single female parent, then it would follow, that roughly one in eight students have been raised in a single parent home. Chances are, one in eight students at Dal are not from single parent homes, but then the question is where are those children who were raised in those homes? Why are they not here attending university and given the same privileges of every other citizen? What went wrong? What kind of support system was there? Do we have one now?

The issue of single parent families, and the obstacles single moms in particular face, affect all of us in some way. We believe this is a major issue that needs to be taken seriously.

We urge Student Services to take the opportunity to fill these easy gaps. It will go a long way in showing our students and the community at large that Dalhousie is committed to the creation of a campus that is supportive of and accessible to all students.

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