



OPFS survey results: Single parents and further education

Why do single parents have a lower level of qualifications than the general population?

Why are so few single parents entering education?

The answers to these questions may seem obvious, but our Single Parents and Further Education Survey threw up a few surprises.

Introduction

One Parent Families Scotland's Lone Parent Helpline gets frequent enquiries from single parents thinking about going to college, or university, but many single parents wishing to study do not. Why? One Parent Families Scotland carried out a survey of to get some answers.

Background

Information from students, potential students, bursary officers, and other professionals within the education system confirms that single parents have found it increasingly difficult to enter education. Single parents in general have a disproportionately low qualification level.¹

Accessing education has been a problem, particularly, for students wishing to study Further Education (FE) courses such as NQs, SVQs and vocational courses. While most Higher Education (HE) students, studying for an HNC, HND or degree, have an entitlement to a loan and grants FE students do not have this certainty. Their funding comes from welfare benefits they may be entitled to claim, such as Income Support for parents with a child under 5 and Jobseeker's Allowance for part-time students, or from a discretionary bursary. Welfare reform, with its austerity measures, has decreased both entitlement to certain benefits and availability of the discretionary bursary (mainly because there is more demand for it).

For these reasons this survey focused on single parents already doing, or wishing to start, an FE course.

1. Office of National Statistics (2009) Social Trends 39, Chapter 3

The survey

In order to find out why many single parents who want to study FE do not do so, the survey asked questions about their concerns. There were specific questions around known issues such as childcare and finances, but respondents were also encouraged to give details of any problem they considered relevant.

The survey was posted on the One Parent Families Scotland website.

There were 101 responses to the survey, of which 51 were single parents who would like to study and 23 were single parents already studying.



Although this is a small number there were some obvious patterns.

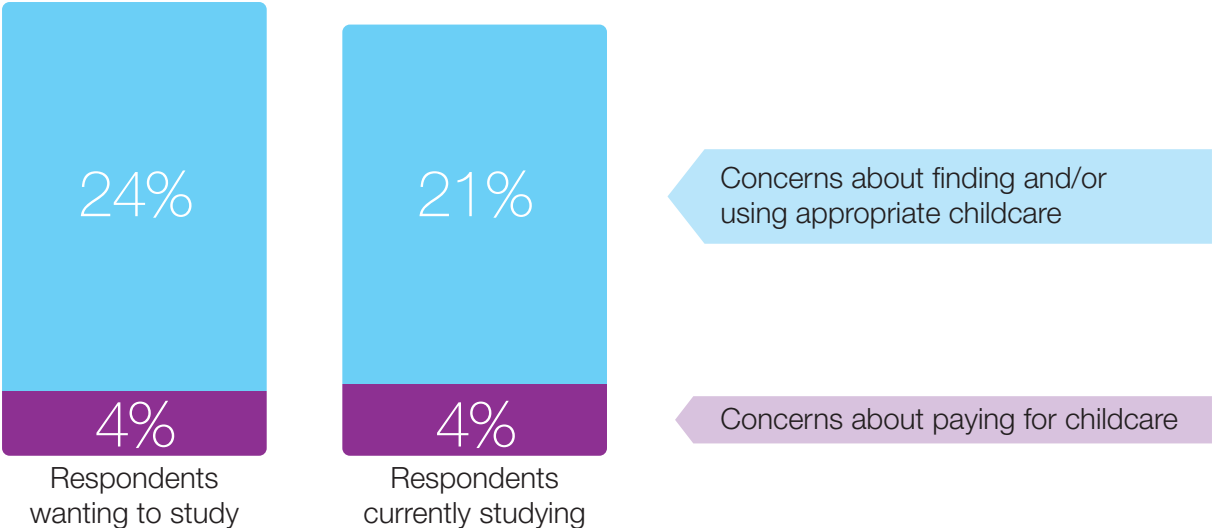
Findings

There were concerns common to both groups of parents but those of the parents who were not studying were not always reflected in the problems faced by the students.

Childcare

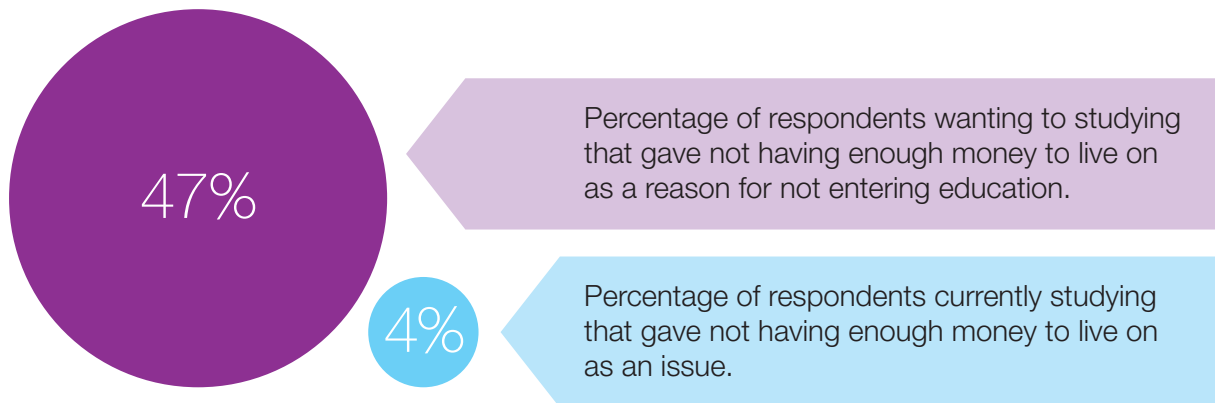
The main issues surrounding childcare were given as ‘no appropriate childcare’ or ‘problems finding childcare to fit around studying’. Twelve (24%) of the 51 parents who wanted to study were worried about finding or using childcare. Of the 23 students, five (21%) had these problems.

Only two (4%) of the 51 parents wanting to study, and one (4%) of the 23 students, had concerns about paying for it. These results suggest that the issues are more to do with finding suitable childcare, rather than paying for it.



Finances

A common perception among single parents wanting to study was that they would suffer financial hardship. While nearly half (47%) of single parents wishing to study gave not having enough money to live on as the reason for not entering education only one (4%) of the students said this.



However, one student was finding it difficult paying for course materials, two were having trouble paying for travel, and two were having difficulty remaining entitled to benefit while studying.

While students do have financial pressures, it appears that the concern over not having enough money to meet day-to-day living expenses while studying is much greater than the reality. This suggests that lack of, and incorrect, information contributes to the decision not to enter education.

Statements indicating these misconceptions include:

“ [No money for] educational fees.”

“ My housing benefit would stop.”

“ Not sure of my rights.”

“ I would have to pay full rent [the money] would not be enough so I would have to work.”

Disability and illness

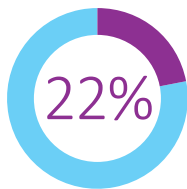
Eleven (20%) of the single parents who were, or would like to be, students had a disability and 21 (39%) had at least one child with a disability. Five (9%) families had both a parent and at least one child with a disability. One student experienced problems meeting the demands of Jobcentre Plus while studying. Only one student had problems due to the support needs of their child (paying for childcare) while three parents who wished to study expected to have difficulties due to meeting their child's extra needs. Surprisingly, where issues around disability may have been assumed to

dissuade people from returning to study this was not the case. The few perceived problems of those wishing to study matched those of the students.



Time and stress

Concerns over combining caring for the family while studying and, in some cases, working too were evident.



The worries of would-be students were borne out by the stress actually experienced by students with around 22% of both saying this was an issue.

A comment typical of those made was:

“...not enough time for attending college and completing work on top of all parental and home-running responsibilities, not coping with stress induced by these circumstances.”

Conclusion

There is no doubt that single parents have real obstacles to overcome while studying. There are the persistent problems with childcare, money and time but there were a few unexpected results. Childcare problems were practical, not financial, and the financial worries of prospective students were not experienced by those already studying. Although these observations are from a small number of single parents it would appear, from the answers and comments made in the study, that **there is a real need to get information to single parents regarding practical and financial support and that this could have a real impact on the number of single parents entering education.**

If you would like information on benefit entitlement and financial support while studying see our *Further Education and Training* and *Funding for Higher Education* factsheets (<http://goo.gl/61PUcz>) or call the Lone Parent Helpline on **0808 801 0323**.

