“I Don’t Really Have Many”: Student Parents Navigating Social Supports

Amber-Lee Varadi, Rebecca Raby and Christine Tardif-Williams

Abstract

Drawing on the social support hypothesis, this paper examines social supports available to a sample of student parents in a small city in Southern Ontario and how they experienced and valued those supports. Our wider research project investigated the experiences of young student parents enrolled in an alternative high school, particularly looking at the effectiveness of a newly introduced mentorship program. Following protocols approved by our university’s Research Ethics Board, we conducted up to three qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 11 female student parents before, during, and after the summer closure of their high school program (29 interviews in total), most of whom were working-class, white, and heterosexual. In this study, we explore three questions: (1) what challenges do student parents experience in their daily lives; (2) when and where do student parents receive supports, and what form do these supports take; and (3) how do student parents perceive and value these supports? Using thematic analysis, we identified that participants experienced daily challenges due to a lack of mental health supports, adequate housing, childcare, and time. Six spheres of social support were shared by most of our participants: friendships, family members, intimate relationships, relationship with child/ren, mentorship, and program support. These spheres provided a variety of the three types of support distinguished by the social support hypothesis (i.e., emotional/social, tangible, and informational). Implications for the design of programs aiming to meaningfully support the well-being of student parents are discussed.

Keywords: social support hypothesis, student parents, social supports, young parenthood, daily stressors
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This work was supported by the Brock University Social Justice Research Institute and the United Way Special Projects Fund.
Introduction

Young parenthood frequently combines stressors related to parenting, schooling, and work. Living circumstances, including poverty preceding parenthood, make young parents especially vulnerable to material and mental health challenges (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016; Varadi et al., 2020). Chronic stress, limited social supports, and related cumulative disadvantage contribute to mental health challenges that are compounded by their stigmatized parenting status, where young parents are frequently positioned as irresponsible, illegitimate, and unmotivated parents, students, and/or employees (Cense & Ganzevoort, 2018; Kelly, 2000). Thus, parenthood can be a stressful and isolating experience for young parents and the availability or lack of meaningful supports available to these parents can either alleviate or compound personal and structural obstacles.

According to the social support hypothesis (Shaefer et al., 1981), people are at increased risk of poor physical and psychological health if they experience stressors and lack the social supports to manage or address these stressors. We applied this framework to repeat interviews with 11 student parents, which were originally conducted to examine the supportive value of a mentorship program in an alternative high school for young parents, to consider young parents’ experiences with accessing supports and, importantly, how they perceive and ascribe meaning to these supports. Three questions guided our research: (1) what challenges and needed-but-unavailable supports do student parents experience in their daily lives; (2) when and where do student parents receive supports, and what form do these supports take; and (3) how do student parents perceive and value these supports?

The Multidimensional Challenges Experienced by Student Parents

The primary challenges that student parents face intersect between their youth, parenting, and socioeconomic status. Not unlike middle-aged parents, student parents struggle to obtain accessible and affordable childcare, reliable transportation, and flexible work (SmithBattle, 2006). A lack of childcare limits student parents’ availability for work and employed young parents may thus rely on their own parents for childcare, which can create new familial stressors (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016; Varadi et al., 2020). Research also reveals young parents’ likelihood of experiencing a range of mental health challenges (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016). These challenges can be exacerbated for those who lack social support and quality health care, have experienced mental health challenges prior to childrearing, live in circumstances characterized by poverty, and have experienced other adversities in childhood such as physical and sexual abuse, criminal activity, and substance abuse (Hodgkinson et al., 2014; SmithBattle & Freed, 2016).

Young parents who have faced such adversities are also likely to experience stress and mental health challenges due to their stigmatized parenting status and associated social exclusion and isolation, lowered self-esteem, and negative self-beliefs (Jones et al., 2019; Varadi et al., 2020). Indeed, negative representations (e.g., in the media and health promotion campaigns) tend to treat young parents, especially young mothers, as at-risk, delinquent, and, ultimately, irresponsible young people who have made bad choices (Kelly, 2000). These representations reinforce young parenthood as a pathology deserving of social, economic, and public health
concern while failing to sufficiently address the social inequalities that precede and follow young parenthood (Barcelos, 2014; SmithBattle & Freed, 2016; Thompson, 2016). Research with young mothers suggests that many internalize these judgements, while others strive to defy negative assumptions (i.e., through financial stability and independence) (Amod et al., 2019; Calver, 2020; Jones et al., 2019; Varadi et al., 2020).

The Social Support Hypothesis and Support Programs for Student Parents

With attention to young parents’ mental, physical, and emotional well-being in a context of material inequality and discrimination, we use the social support hypothesis to consider the impact that support systems and social networks have on young parents’ lives. The social support hypothesis frames social support as a resource that mediates between stress and physical and mental health, thus helping people deal with stressful situations and events (Cobb, 1976; Shaefer et al., 1981). Research indicates that support networks are significant in offsetting stress, including parenting stress among young mothers (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016) and parents more generally (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). This approach argues that without social supports, daily stressors are more difficult to manage, thereby contributing to physical illness, emotional distress, and psychopathology (Cobb, 1976; Shaefer et al., 1981).

Some necessary supports for young parents include affordable housing, quality childcare, healthcare, and everyday essentials (e.g., groceries), but also social connections. A lack of social connections can have salient negative consequences for youth, including poor emotional, psychological, vocational, and interpersonal well-being and weakened self-concept and confidence for their futures (Matos et al., 2023; Sica et al., 2016). One’s lack of social support can have negative intergenerational implications as well: without positive and accessible social supports (e.g., respectful adult mentors and meaningful and flexible educational programs), young parents are less likely to obtain a high school diploma, which can limit their future opportunities and life chances, and their children’s overall well-being (SmithBattle, 2006).

In contrast, supportive resources can benefit parents in navigating and coping with the various demands of parenting (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). However, such resources are unevenly distributed “across social statuses and life stages...[and] across countries with diverse social policy contexts, with parents faring better when supports from the state aid them in raising children” (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020, p. 201). Thus, differing life stages, social contexts, and social positions (e.g., gender, race, age) can shape a young parent’s real and perceived demands, strains, and rewards surrounding their parenting.

The social support hypothesis also distinguishes between supportive networks in an individual’s life and their perception of the supportive value and helpfulness of their social interactions (Shaefer et al., 1981). Research has demonstrated that the ways in which social supports are perceived by individuals is more strongly associated with mental health outcomes than the quantity of available or received supports (Lynch et al., 1999). This is an important distinction to consider. Shaefer et al. (1981) suggest that “perceived social support might be more strongly associated with health outcomes because it is a more direct measure of the support afforded to a person” (p. 384). Situating student parents in a context of disadvantage by virtue of
their youth, class, and, often times, race (Hodgkinson et al., 2014), it is valuable to consider how student parents meet their social support needs, if at all, but also how they perceive the support they gain from their social networks.

The social support hypothesis further acknowledges that perceived supports can produce both positive and negative outcomes that are unrecognized through measurements that only focus on the quantity of supports available to an individual. As outlined by Shaefer et al. (1981), the positive outcomes of supports can include a variety of practical supports for specific situations, while negative outcomes can involve the effort, time, and overall work involved in maintaining connections, disappointment from others, and others making stressful demands or constraining one’s choices. Thus, the social support hypothesis importantly recognizes that not all forms of available support are exclusively beneficial.

Shaefer et al. (1981) also distinguish between tangible, informational, and emotional/social support. Tangible supports are more material and actionable, such as money, gifts, and useful services like caretaking and childcare, while informational supports include problem-solving information, advice, and feedback that can help someone overcome a challenge or stressful situation. Emotional/social supports foster feelings of connection and social cohesion through intimacy and reassurance, which allow someone to feel that they are cared about and loved. These categories reveal how social support can be thought of as both a relationship (e.g., teacher/student, parent/child, mentor/mentee) and what a relationship gives an individual (e.g., knowledge or a feeling of being understood). Moreover, these distinctions enable us to thoughtfully acknowledge the nuances around both available and perceived supports in the lives of student parents, especially as research indicates that young parents are more likely to succeed “in circumstances that include supportive social networks, a positive parenting environment, and limited adversity” (Thompson, 2016, p. 1).

**Research Aims**

This paper is guided by the following research questions: (1) what challenges and needed-but-unavailable supports do student parents experience in their daily lives; (2) when and where do student parents receive supports, and what form do these supports take; and (3) how do student parents perceive and value these supports? To address these questions, we reflect on our data through the social support hypothesis to identify our participants’ supports, challenges, and needed-but-unavailable supports, as well as how they perceived their support networks. We also distinguish between the use and benefits of Shaefer et al.’s (1981) (a) emotional/social, (b) tangible, and (c) informational supports. With attention to these distinct supports, we draw on the student parents’ narratives to provide insight into the meaning and value that they assigned to the different forms of support in their day-to-day lives, and into young parents’ lives more broadly.

**Methods**

*Participants and Procedure*
The data informing this paper was originally collected to assess the impact of a new mentorship program for student parents created by Young Parents Support Program (YPSP), an alternative school program in a small city in Southern Ontario that provides education, childcare, and social supports to a classroom-sized group of young parents as they obtain their high school diploma, and Family Mentor, a nonprofit organization offering mentoring opportunities to underserved children and youth. The mentoring program paired student parents with adult, volunteer mentors to address the isolation the student parents would often experience, especially over the summer months when YPSP was closed. We conducted qualitative, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with the 11 student parents participating in the mentorship program at the time of our research. Participants were recruited during a class break at YPSP when the authors spoke about their research. All of the students in the program provided consent and were later interviewed in the same location, in private rooms to maintain confidentiality. While we aimed to interview each participant three times (before, during, and after YPSP’s summer closure and corresponding summer mentorship program), only eight of the student parents participated in all three interviews; of the remaining three students, one was interviewed once and two were interviewed twice, for a total of 29 interviews. Interviews were conducted by all three authors, with the same interviewer speaking with the same participants across all repeat interviews, and each lasted between 17 and 98 minutes. To learn about participants’ day-to-day lives and challenges, we asked questions about school, employment, relationships, well-being, risk-taking, parenthood, and mentor relationships (e.g., how do you feel you are doing in terms of your schoolwork? How well connected do you feel with the people around you? What are some of the positive things about your relationship with your mentor?). This study received ethics clearance through the authors’ university research ethics board (file 17-173).

Participants were between 18 and 23 years old, and their children ranged from six months to five years old. Most had only one child, although one participant had two children, and another had three. Two participants were Indigenous and nine were white. Based on their living situation and family background, we determined that one participant was middle class while the rest were working-class. Seven participants were in longer-term relationships with boyfriends and one with a girlfriend; the remaining three had boyfriends at the beginning of the project but became single over the course of the research. Many participants spoke to us about mental health challenges they faced, including anxiety, bipolar disorder, borderline personality disorder, bulimia, depression, postpartum depression, obsessive compulsive disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder. All participants were enrolled in YPSP to complete courses to earn their General Educational Development (GED) certification (Canadian high school equivalency). All participants are referred to using pseudonyms of their choosing.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by the lead author. While our data centred on the summer mentorship program and our participants’ daily lives, our open, inductive analysis revealed many key challenges that our participants faced as student parents and how they navigated and overcame these challenges with limited resources and available support. These data-driven themes – challenges and supports – prompted us to turn to Shaefer et al.’s (1981) social support hypothesis to identify spheres where student parents received social support, the forms those
supports took (i.e., emotional/social, tangible, informational), and the value assigned to these supports by the student parents, especially when used to overcome certain challenges. Thus, aligning with Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide to performing thematic analysis, the data set analyzed in this paper included all instances where challenges (e.g., codes such as stigma, lonely/social isolation, parenting struggles) and supports (e.g., codes such as peer support, child as protective factor, self-care, teacher support) were identified. Accordingly, our analysis shifted from an inductive approach to a theoretically-driven approach, including thematically organizing the data set into different spheres of social support (e.g., friendships, family members, mentorship), and then identifying the form and value of these supports as informed by the social support hypothesis. Through our theoretical thematic analysis of this data set, our findings provide a detailed account of a sample of young parents’ daily challenges, the formal and informal forms of social support they received, and how they thought about and valued those supports.

**Findings**

Our findings are divided into two sections. First, we outline the ongoing challenges and needed-but-unavailable supports that our participants experienced in their daily lives: (1) mental health challenges; (2) lack of adequate housing; (3) lack of childcare; and (4) lack of time. Second, we discuss the types of supports that were available to our participants, when and where they were received, and how their supportive value was perceived. Aligning with the social support hypothesis, these supports varied in form, purpose, and effect, which we divided into six spheres: (1) friendships; (2) family members; (3) intimate relationships; (4) relationship with child/ren; (5) mentorship; and (6) YPSP.

**Daily challenges and Needed-but-Unavailable Supports**

Four significant challenges emerged across our repeat interviews with the student parents. While the three interviews were held over a span of seven months, these challenges persisted, although they varied in intensity and immediacy. For instance, the participants all had at least one young child, and most were dealing with mental health challenges alongside a lack of adequate housing, childcare, and time. Importantly, these challenges were often elicited by one or more of the constraints the young parents faced due to their age, working and/or student status, familial arrangements, and socioeconomic status, and were exacerbated by a lack of access to needed-but-unavailable supports such as transportation, therapy, and affordable housing.

1) Mental Health Challenges

All but one of the student parents indicated a struggle with mental health as a primary challenge in their day-to-day lives. When asked about the struggles she faced, Raven (age 22) said “my mental health and dealing with that every day.” Selena (age 21) echoed this sentiment: “my mental
illness [...] cuz my mental illness affects everything else in my life.” Others talked about their mental health struggles in ways that dismissed and consequently undermined the pain and strain inherent in navigating these pervasive challenges. For instance, while talking about her depression, Monica (age 22) explained that: “It comes and goes. I definitely have my highs and lows. Lately it’s been a lot of lows. [...] I have, like, one or two high days and then it’s weeks of lows. Yeah, I’m used to it.” Other participants laughed or made dismissive comments to minimize the impact of their ongoing struggle with depression. While talking about a doctor’s appointment she recently scheduled to discuss her depression, April (age 21) said: “I’m making the steps towards making sure that, like, my mental health is in order. Like, I’m not suicidal or I’m not, like, that miserable. I just--I’m more sad than I should be, more often than I should be. And it’s been for quite a while.”

While some participants might have wanted to play down their challenges for the interviews, the need to get “used to it” may also suggest that many were not receiving the support they needed to navigate their mental health struggles. Some of the young parents outlined thwarted attempts to receive support for their mental health (i.e., through therapy or medication). Selena’s circumstances epitomize these challenges:

> I did have, like, a therapist last year but he’s in [another city] and I stopped seeing him. [...] I don’t have a car so, like, I can’t even go all the way up there [...] [he’s] the only person that--in the area, basically, that will take my insurance or whatever, cuz I’m covered under Indian Affairs. [...] I thought the group therapy would be a good thing [...] but everything that they have is during the day and I couldn’t do it because I was either working or I was here [at YPSP].

Selena’s inability to attend the therapy sessions that she needed speaks to the multidimensionality of the challenges faced by student parents. A lack of needed supports can create a domino effect, with an inability to address their mental health concerns leading young parents to experiencing poor overall well-being and being limited to independent forms of self-care, such as taking baths, exercising, and engaging in hobbies (e.g., drawing or reading), and also turning to “self-medicating.” Indeed, mental health challenges were in turn connected to some of the young parents’ unhealthy behaviours, including smoking, drinking, suppressing or ruminating on negative emotions, binge eating or not eating at all, and not sleeping.

2) Lack of Adequate Housing

The student parents also struggled with having their rental applications accepted and accessing affordable housing more generally. As Bobbi (age 19) stated: “Housing takes forever and there’s nothing affordable out there. [...] I keep [submitting applications] [...] I usually never get it though.” Participants’ inability to access adequate housing led to criticism and resentment from family members, crowded living conditions, and, in one participant’s situation, physical violence. When asked if she was engaging in any behaviours that were bad for her, Kikyo (age 22) revealed:
Just besides living at home and my [relative], that’s about it. I mean, I don’t get along with her at all […] she’ll put me down a lot. Like this morning she told me she hated me because I couldn’t figure out her phone. [I: […] So what’s keeping you in that situation?] It’s hard to find a place that I can afford, really.

Toxic living conditions like Kikyo’s underscore how a lack of adequate housing, a needed-but-unavailable support, can have harmful effects that can spill into other areas of a young parent’s life, such as their mental and physical well-being, self-confidence, and sense of autonomy.

3) Lack of Childcare

A lack of accessible and affordable childcare was another challenge in the student parents’ daily lives. For some, like Bobbi, a lack of childcare impacted her availability to work: “I’m just with my kid all day, so I don’t really have time to work. […] I don’t have daycare and my grandma won’t watch him. […] I don’t really have anybody to watch him.” Others, like Kikyo, experienced strain in their familial relationships when they relied on their own parents for childcare. Further, some participants confessed that necessary tasks, such as errands, chores, and repairs were often postponed because they could not be done while caring for their children, thereby compounding stress.

4) Lack of Time

Another daily challenge that our participants faced was a lack of time, which undermined their feeling of connection to the people around them and left many participants feeling burnt out and without moments of self-care. As Monica stated, “I put myself on the backburner, usually.” This was an ongoing challenge for the student parents, especially in relation to the mentorship program, where scheduling regular mentor-mentee meetings was difficult. The participating student parents talked about being busy with their children, schooling, work, personal relationships, and life circumstances, while mentors were also often busy with work and supporting their own children. It was for this reason that some, like April, did not even participate in the mentorship program: “I didn’t think I would, like, have time or energy, really. I don’t have energy to do anything at all (forced laugh).” Because she was “super stressed out and super busy”, April did not want to disappoint a potential mentor who was making time to connect with her.

Available Supports

We now focus on the types of supports that were available to our participants, when and where they received these supports, and the value that our participants attached to them. Aligning
with the social support hypothesis, these supports varied in form, purpose, and effect. We divided them into six spheres: (1) friendships; (2) family members; (3) intimate relationships; (4) relationship with child/ren; (5) mentorship; and (6) YPSP.

Following the social support hypothesis, the young parents generally did not consistently prefer or benefit from one form of support over another, as different life challenges required different needs or solutions. As Shaefer et al. (1981) explain, “[s]ome stressful situations may be better resolved by a loan or by services than by the offer of emotional support, whereas other stresses such as a blow to self-esteem… may be better managed by indications of positive regard or affection” (p. 386). While these six spheres of social support were shared by most of our participants, they sometimes faced different complications in drawing on these supports and thus perceived the supportive value of these supports nonuniformly.

1) Friendships

All participants mentioned friendships as a form of emotional/social support that helped them feel cared about and comforted. As Jade (age 22), a mother of a four- and five-year-old son, described: “[Y]esterday I was having kind of an off-day and I was feeling kind of down so […] I went and hung out with a friend. […] I told her that [I was feeling down] and she was like, ‘oh, come watch a movie!’ So we did, and it was therapeutic.” Friendships could also provide informational supports, offering advice and feedback, as illustrated by Charlie (age 22), who had “a few really good friends who are good for certain things. […] Like, if I have a problem with one thing, I go to this friend, and another--yeah.” The student parents’ friends also provided tangible supports, such as car rides to the grocery store and appointments.

Despite their supportive value, participants often noted the challenges of maintaining consistent contact with friends due to their busy schedules, lack of funds, lack of reliable transportation, and/or physical distance. For instance, while discussing the challenge of maintaining connection with her only friend, Bobbi stated: “It’s hard to bus cuz [my son and I] gotta, like, catch the regional bus and that’s, like, 12 dollars […] sometimes I go visit her, but it’s, like, four busses I have to take […] with the baby. I’m like, ‘oh my god, stop crying, please.’” Drew (age 19) mentioned that her friends were a support, but she only contacted them “every once in a while, just cuz they’re either working or in school themselves.” Monica said that, while she liked talking to her friends, “they all have their own things going on in life, so I don’t really wanna (pauses) burden them, I guess?”

While physical distance and a lack of time contributed to loneliness and disconnection, some participants, like April, pointed out how these considerations made her feel especially cared about in these friendships: “Everyone I know has, like, a lot of their own stuff going on too so, like, the fact that they can still talk to me and make time for me is still really nice. Makes me feel like I mean, like, more.” Some participants, like Drew, felt that motherhood reshaped friendship priorities: “I also have cut a lot of people out cuz they weren’t really good people […] my group of friends is now very small […] we don’t have the same outlooks on life anymore cuz, like, they don’t have children. They still want to party and be stupid and I don’t.” Several others, like Jade and Topaz (age 18), similarly noted that they ended toxic friendships and became “choosy” with
the people they spend time with once they became mothers. The friendships that the young parents maintained were especially positive and beneficial overall, however. Unlike some of the supports outlined below, the participants had control over who they chose to call their friend.

2) Family Members

Overall, the participants who felt they had the support of their family members seemed to fare better than the participants who did not. Supportive family members were some of the most consistent people that the young parents interacted with daily, especially when they were living together. This was the situation for Katia (age 18), who did not mention any mental health struggles, had good grades and many hobbies, and said she did not “struggle with too many things right now.” Katia described how her mom and stepdad were “very supportive and helpful”, from helping with her daughter to driving her where she needed. Her older sister, a criminology student who Katia admired, was also a source of emotional/social and informational support.

Some family members could provide all three forms of support – emotional/social, tangible, and informational – but most of the young parents felt that they only received tangible supports from family members, usually in the form of childcare. Notably, family support could be mixed. While some stress was reduced with childcare support from family members, new stressors sometimes arose due to strained family relationships. For example, Drew was living with her boyfriend and his grandparents, who were a significant source of negative judgement and stress: “They say that I don’t do anything with her […] apparently, I don’t feed [my baby], never changed a diaper, don’t wake up in the middle of the night. […] It made me feel bad […] cuz I know it’s not true.”

3) Intimate Relationships

Some participants were in romantic relationships that they felt were positive sources of emotional/social support. Katia explained how her boyfriend’s positivity and care were “very helpful. He’s always like, ‘keep a positive mind’ [and] ‘cut that negativity.’” For some young parents, like Charlie, intimate relationships could also provide informational support. When asked how she approaches stressful situations, Charlie outlined how she and her girlfriend worked together to solve problems: “We kind of sit down and just review the problem and focus more on the solution and less on the problem. So […] when I got offered that job […] I kind of weighed the pros and cons and ‘how would this benefit?’” Charlie’s intimate relationship not only offered her emotional support, where she was able to confide in her girlfriend about a job opportunity, but informational support as well. Intimate relationships also provided tangible support via childcare, chores, and purchases (e.g., diapers and cellphone cards).

Intimate relationships, while mainly positive, were also a source of emotional distress for some of the student parents, however. Over the course of the three interviews, some of the participants had “take[n] a break” from their relationships or ended them altogether. For instance, after leaving her “mentally abusive” boyfriend of three years, Kikyo claimed that she was feeling “[a] lot better”, especially when compared with the year before, where she was “more nervous and
had more breakdowns.” Even though Kikyo identified her ex as a support in her previous interview – “I don’t really have many supports besides [my boyfriend] and [my best friend]” – she attributed her improved well-being and happiness to leaving her ex, a negative support who she did not perceive as healthy or supportive, thereby revealing the nuanced qualities of social supports.

4) Relationship with Child/ren

The student parents often cited their children as a source of happiness, love, and fulfillment, and thus another source of emotional/social support. As Selena explained: “Sometimes I feel bad and I feel like I’m not doing enough […] [but] at the end of the day, [my daughter] comes to sit with me […] she’ll put her head on me and […] say, ‘I love you, mommy.’ And I’m like, ‘this is why I do this every day!’ […] It just makes me feel so full.” Other participants, like Kikyo, Topaz, and Charlie, often cited the “restorative aspects” of parenting that changed their lives for the better. Further, pregnancy and eventual parenthood were similarly positioned as a “breakthrough” for our participants, as it helped to improve familial relationships, reduced their engagement with negative behaviours and toxic friendships, encouraged self-compassion, decreased loneliness, and helped participants focus on schoolwork.

However, while some student parents perceived their relationship with their child as a source of positive emotional support, other participants acknowledged that their relationship with their child was not enough to prevent loneliness. This disconnect was voiced by Raven:

I think I just feel lonely cuz, um, most of everyone in the class and everyone I know pretty much has a pretty busy social life, so I usually end up left by myself. And then I usually just go home with my daughter and just kind of sit, or we go to the park by ourselves. But she’s obviously just my daughter so I don’t feel that kind of, like, connection. So, like, I still feel alone.

Moreover, some participants perceived their child/ren as sources of stress, not support. Monica found it very difficult to spend time with her child “because all he does is cry about things. […] I mean, I love my kid but, at the same time, it’s really stressful to be around him.” Thus, while most of the student parents gained some support and satisfaction through their children, such positive connections were not a panacea for the challenges that the young parents faced.

5) Mentorship

Within the mentorship program that was part of our study, participants and mentors tried to meet every week or two and stayed connected through texting and social media. While some participants found it difficult to maintain this connection and dropped out of the program, most found that their mentor, much like friendships, intimate relationships, and family members, was a welcomed source of all three types of support outlined by Shaefer et al. (1981). For example, Charlie boasted that her mentor was not only “the greatest friend I’ve ever had” but also someone
she could relate to in terms of politics, social issues, and future academic and career goals. Charlie’s mentor provided her with “a non-biased sounding board” and tangible supports in the form of networking, which enabled her to build connections with people in the field of work she was striving towards. Drew and Selena also received tangible support, stating that their mentors were instrumental in helping them to get new apartments.

6) YPSP

Lastly, YPSP, the program that hosted the mentorship opportunity, stood out as a vital support for all participants: it provided schooling and childrearing workshops, daycare, counselling support, daily connection with other young parents, an onsite nurse, and affirming advice and welcomed guidance from compassionate, judgement-free teachers. YPSP thus provided all three forms of support as distinguished by the social support hypothesis. However, while YPSP was a primary and necessary form of emotional/social, tangible, and informational support, it was only available during the school year and had a “graduation date” where the student parents would then have to leave to attain more education or work without the support of the program’s classes, teacher and peer support, and childcare. This was especially concerning for some participants. For instance, when interviewed before YPSP’s summer closure, Monica indicated that she was less stressed about her final school projects than about her graduation from YPSP and the imminent loss of this program and its multidimensional, young parent-specific supports.

Discussion

We learned that the student parents experienced daily challenges due to a lack of mental health supports, adequate housing, childcare, and time, and we identified six spheres of social support that were shared by most, but not all, of our participants – friendships, family members, intimate relationships, relationship with child/ren, mentorship, and YPSP – that provided a variety of the three types of support as distinguished by the social support hypothesis (i.e., emotional/social, tangible, and informational; Shaefer et al., 1981).

Daily Challenges and Needed-but-Unavailable Supports

Our findings offer insight about the daily challenges experienced by student parents and some of the needed-but-unavailable supports in their lives. First, participants noted a lack of mental health support and cited several reasons for this that align with research by Hodgkinson et al. (2014), who explain that a “[l]ack of insurance, time availability, and transportation, which are especially salient issues for teenage parents, may […] impede access to mental health services” (p. 116). Lack of adequate housing was also a daily challenge. Safe housing is critical for family stability by providing young parents with the opportunity to root their lives in a “coherent social world” that allows them to pursue daily, potentially reparative, family practices that may have been absent in their own childhoods (e.g., family dinners), foster valuable community connections (e.g., to neighbourhood resources), and help them plan for a promising and imaginable future.
Adequate housing can thus enable the development of further and consistent social supports for young parents. Without such safe and predictable environments, the often-chaotic circumstances characterizing student parents’ lives can lead to “survivor adaptations,” such as self-harming behaviours, aggression, dissociation, and social isolation, that impact healthy development (Lawson et al., 2013).

Participants also cited a lack of childcare and time as daily challenges. While childcare can be found in some programs designed to support young parents and their educational trajectory, “these programs are rare and may exclude very young babies or older children” (SmithBattle, 2006, p. 132). In the case of YPSP, which was the only young-parent centred program of its kind in this small city, childcare ended with the young parents’ school day and during the program’s summer closure, leaving participants in limiting predicaments (e.g., unable to gain employment or maintain positive interpersonal relationships). A lack of time and childcare also turned otherwise ordinary activities, like shopping for groceries, into significant projects and even distressing events (e.g., a young mother may experience judgement when shopping alone due to her stigmatized association to single, young motherhood, and even more so with a temperamental child; see Varadi et al., 2020). Altogether, student parents’ exposure to daily stressors and toxic environments, alongside a lack of needed-but-unavailable supports (i.e., mental health support, adequate housing, childcare, and time), leave them vulnerable to prolonged, chronic stress. This prolonged exposure puts young parents and their children at increased risk of negative physical, emotional, and cognitive health across their lifespan (SmithBattle & Freed, 2016).

Available Supports

Our findings revealed spheres of social support that were shared by most of our participants and provided a variety of the three types of support as distinguished by the social support hypothesis (Shaefer et al., 1981). Friendships were an important source of support, especially emotional/social support, which aligns with research by Amod et al. (2019), who found that their sample of South African young mothers similarly relied on their peers for affirmation and understanding. The mentor support through YPSP was similarly valuable for some of our participants, providing all three forms of support. Recent research by Matos et al. (2023) demonstrates the significance of such “promotive relationships” with adults in their lives, where young people’s positive and trusting relationships with a “safe authority” can help improve their self-concept and motivations, especially for vulnerable and stigmatized youth.

Participants also said that family members offered key supports, including essential childcare. However, relying on family members left some participants vulnerable to family members’ negative judgements, criticism, and sometimes even violence, leading some young parents to feel discomfort, distrust, insecurity, and fear. Young parents may thus “anticipate and even facilitate their own rejection, or they may avoid relationships altogether by self-imposed social isolation” (Lawson et al., 2013, p. 331). This pattern was found among some of our participants and exacerbated their struggles with loneliness and poor mental health and self-esteem, although research demonstrates that young parents may resist and challenge such negative judgement as well (Amod et al., 2019; Ellis-Sloan, 2014; Varadi et al., 2020). We saw sparks of
such resistance in our participants; however, this capacity to critique unfair judgement – especially from family members – is grounded in a sense of confidence and security that is elusive to some student parents.

Participants also cited intimate relationships as a source of support. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that partnered young mothers may fare better psychologically, with lower levels of maternal stress and higher levels of life satisfaction and self-esteem and improved child outcomes compared to single mothers (Laghi et al., 2013; SmithBattle & Freed, 2016). However, as with family members, our participants described how intimate relationships were not always supportive. Partner support, as discussed by SmithBattle and Freed (2016), “may be constrained by meager finances or by the limited relational skills of either partner” (p. 33). Thus, as with the supports discussed above, the perceived supportive value of intimate relationships can shift based on circumstances, including the quality of the relationship and the availability of other supports.

Aligning with existing research with young parents, our participants often cited the “restorative aspects” (Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014) of parenting and treated their parenthood as a new beginning for themselves (Cense & Ganzevoort, 2018). Parenthood can improve familial relationships, encourage young parents to reduce and/or end negative behaviours and toxic friendships, practice more self-compassion, focus on schoolwork, and reduce loneliness (Amod et al., 2019; SmithBattle, 2006). Pregnancy and eventual parenthood were similarly positioned as a “breakthrough” for our participants. However, such positive connections are not a panacea for the common challenges that young parents face. Indeed, what helps student parents get grounding and solace from parenting is often rooted in other resources and supports. Without emotional/social, tangible, and informational supports, it is difficult for student parents to overcome their daily challenges, which can in turn make other goals, like finishing high school or applying for affordable housing in the face of prejudice, more daunting (SmithBattle, 2006).

As a program specifically designed to support student parents, YPSP was invaluable to all our participants. It provided supports such as education and childcare, and connected young parents with compassionate teachers, other trained staff members, outside resources, and other student parents. YPSP provided all three forms of support – emotional, tangible, and informational – in a consistent, accessible, and, importantly, parent-centred manner that was not always available from the student parents’ friends, intimate partners, or family members. Research by Hodgkinson et al. (2014) similarly underscores the success and necessity of programs for young parents that offer various young parent-directed supports (rather than parenting or childrearing supports more generally). YPSP could not address all the participants’ challenges, however, such as unreliable and inconsistent public transit, a student parent’s lack of cellular data or Wi-Fi to maintain regular contact with their mentor, and participant needs after graduating from the YPSP program.

**Strengths, Limitations and Future Directions**

Our research adds to existing literature surrounding the evaluation, accessibility, and effectiveness of multifaceted social supports, providing insights that often go unrecognized when research only considers the quantity of resources or received supports. Consistent with the social support hypothesis (Shaefer et al., 1981), our findings suggest a nuanced consideration of supports.
in the lives of student parents in terms of the received and perceived value of supports. We found that, while a student parent may feel support in some aspects of their lives, this support may not always assist them in overcoming other obstacles. For instance, emotional/social supports may help a student parent navigate stressors surrounding school, parenting, or intimate relationships, but this support does not ensure the security that comes with affordable and reliable childcare and transportation. Moreover, our application of the social support hypothesis reveals how specific supports can have positive and negative outcomes (Shaefer et al., 1981). Family members, for instance, often provided crucial childcare but sometimes also contributed to interpersonal conflict, resulting in new or compounded stress.

Further, we noted that some of the student parents participated in creative and modest acts of self-care (e.g., taking a bath or nap, dyeing their hair, reading a book, going for a walk, exercising) that were strategically employed to navigate their mental health challenges and other negative emotions arising from their particular stressors. This self-care may point to a gap in the supports outlined in Shaefer et al.’s (1981) social support hypothesis and underscore that support can be fostered by both external social networks as well as the self. Future research could consider the sustainability, accessibility, supportive value, and limitations of such self-care for student parents.

Our qualitative research also reveals the strength of conducting multiple in-depth interviews. Repeated in-depth interviews helped foster a familiar rapport and connection between participants and ourselves and allowed us to learn about their lives over time. However, our sample of student parents only consisted of mothers attending the YPSP program. Such supportive resources can benefit parents in navigating and coping with the mental, physical, emotional, and financial demands of parenting, but there are variations in the availability of such supports, as well as how supports are accessed and perceived, that are linked to gender, race, age, and other intersecting social locations. For instance, young parents who receive “adversarial advice” from family who question their ability to be good parents may feel resistant to join a program where they may feel further restricted and contested (Moloney et al., 2011). Black mothers, regardless of age, are also less likely to access services offering medical care and mental health supports due to concerns related to trust, privacy, safety, diversity and representation, and stigma (Hodgkinson et al., 2014). Further, young fathers may not participate in parenting programs because they are perceived as irrelevant and designed for young mothers, or due to their real or perceived experiences of stigmatization within parental programming (McGirr et al., 2020). Relatedly, we were unable to learn about young Black parents or young fathers’ experiences of support due to their lack of enrollment at YPSP at the time of our research. Class may also influence a young parent’s decision to enroll in a program such as YPSP. As experienced in other research with such programs, we may thus have had an “under-representation of young parents who were less involved with social and educational services” (Greyson, 2017, p. 795). With these considerations in mind, it would be valuable for future research to recruit a more diverse sample of participants, including those from outside of young parent programs.

**Conclusion**

Our research responds to the need to better understand student parents’ experiences with
daily challenges and needed-but-unavailable supports; their available social supports; and how they perceive and ascribe meaning to these supports. Drawing on the social support hypothesis (Schaefer et al., 1981), we examined the narratives from multiple interviews with 11 student parents from a small city in Southern Ontario to learn about their experiences with daily challenges, the supports available to them, and how they perceived and valued these supports. Participants discussed challenges related to mental health struggles and a lack of adequate housing, childcare, and time. We identified six spheres of social support that were shared by most, but not all, of our participants to highlight how these social supports could shift over time and address certain needs over others based on emotional/social, tangible, and/or informational supports (Schaefer et al., 1981) and sometimes bring new challenges. Finally, while we indicate that a wide range of supports are valuable for young parents, the local and parent-centred programming of YPSP was a particularly crucial support in our participants’ lives.

Our qualitative research is novel in drawing on the social support hypothesis to examine the social supports available to a sample of student parents and how they experienced and valued those supports. Prior studies have examined the types of supports available to student parents, and still other research has examined the importance of how social supports are perceived by individuals (Lynch et al., 1999). Our study’s findings crucially attest to the relevance of distinguishing between the presence of supportive networks in an individual’s life and the individual’s perception of the supportive value and helpfulness of their associated social interactions (Shaefer et al., 1981). Our study offers important new insights into the nuances around both available and perceived supports in the lives of student parents and, in this way, can inform efforts to better support student parents. Without meaningfully engaging with vulnerable and often gatekept populations drawing on available social supports, such as youthful populations like student parents, it is difficult to learn what is shaping their willingness or hesitation to first use a support and then to continually draw on it. With our careful considerations about the complexities and perceptions of support and those supports’ assigned value, we provide insight into student parents’ retention of social supports.
References


