

Parental Accommodations under GSAS

Overview of current policy:

- GSAS currently allows new parents to suspend their academic requirements for 12 weeks, while retaining any GSAS funding they were scheduled to receive. This 12-week period is required to begin after the date of birth, adoption, or guardianship, but no later than 3 months after the birth. This accommodation must be requested at least 4 months in advance.¹
- For the semester following this 12-week period, GSAS also allows new parents to take an additional semester of accommodation. This semester is unfunded; students retain eligibility for housing, health insurance, and access to university facilities but are required to pay M&F fees.
- For parents who give birth to or adopt children only (not for foster parents), GSAS currently guarantees one \$2,000 subsidy per academic year (in years 1–7) for each child who is (a) under the age of five and (b) not yet attending kindergarten.²
- Fully-funded parents who adopt a child receive a one-time reimbursement of up to \$5,000 for adoption-related expenses.³
- A fellowship reimbursing the cost of dependent coverage under the 90-level plan.

Reports from doctoral student parents at Columbia

Reaching out to parents across GSAS, we collected many reports that the implementation of current policy to be uneven across departments, and that the current policy is still inadequate to fully meet parents' needs. International students reported particular hardships stemming from the lack of an additional funded semester and the lack of housing availability beyond the seventh year. Students without additional income find it very difficult to take the unfunded semester of accommodation or pay for childcare. Multiple parents report feeling “punished” by Columbia for having children in graduate school, and asked that we use that specific language in this report. Multiple parents say they will be unable to continue in academia because they had children. Herein, what we gathered from parents:

- The 12-week vs. one-semester rule causes confusion for both graduate students and department administrators. The rule is applied inconsistently both across and within departments; some students are required to work all but twelve weeks, while others are granted a full semester of leave.
- International students report that the additional unfunded semester of accommodation is effectively unavailable to them, because they are required to demonstrate that they are funded in order to retain their visa status.

¹ <https://gsas.columbia.edu/graduate-life/student-life-well-being/parental-accommodation>

² http://gsas.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/child_care_subsidy.pdf

³ <https://gsas.columbia.edu/graduate-life/student-life-well-being/resources-parents>

- Even among U.S. citizens, parents report that only students who enter graduate school with considerable savings or external support are able to take the unfunded semester of accommodation
- Parents who had children while in graduate school report that the current policy leaves them unable to complete their degree within the seven years of funding eligibility offered by Columbia.
- One student reports being told *after* taking the unfunded semester of accommodation that they would not receive an additional semester for degree completion—in apparent violation of GSAS policy.
- Parents find that they cannot afford to stop work on their coursework or dissertations—as the 12-week policy allows them to do—because they are not granted any extra funded time in which to make up those lost 12 weeks of work. They emphasize that if a student were to actually stop progress on their coursework or dissertation during their leave, they would run out of funding, unless they sped up their work the following semester.
- Students who have medical complications during pregnancy (during which time they are still required to maintain their academic obligations, including teaching, research assistant work, and/or coursework) report extreme difficulties
- Childcare costs greatly exceed the childcare subsidy. Parents report that only parents with external support are able to afford childcare. The Columbia Work-Life Office supplies the following numbers for Columbia-Affiliated Early Learning Centers.⁴

Children’s Learning Center	\$33,957
Columbia Greenhouse Nursery School	\$19,250
Family Annex	\$26,912
Hollingworth Preschool	\$25,128
Medical Center Nursery School	\$30,150
Park West Montessori School	\$45,140
Red Balloon Learning Center	\$28,200
Riverside Montessori School	\$34,000
Tompkins Hall Nursery and Child Care Center	\$32,558

Review of policies at peer institutions

Columbia’s twelve-week leave policy is on par with that of Harvard and Princeton, and slightly higher than that of Yale. However, both Yale and Princeton provided an additional funded semester for new parents, and Harvard offers new parents a one-time stipend. Both Yale and

⁴ These are the numbers before financial aid—the Work-Life office also offers figures for the lowest possible tuition at each of these schools. Parents report that these lower figures are generally for older children, or for children attending the school part-time.

<https://worklife.columbia.edu/content/affiliated-early-learning-centers-excel>

Princeton offer child care subsidies of more than double the GSAS subsidy. Only Harvard lacks a child cares subsidy.

University	Parental Leave	Child Care Subsidy
Yale	8 weeks paid leave, plus an additional term of enrollment and financial support. ⁵	Family Subsidy \$4600 (plus \$1000 for each additional child under 6) ⁶
Princeton	12 weeks paid leave, plus an additional term of enrollment and financial support. ⁷	Up to \$5000 per year for up to 2 children under 6. ⁸
Harvard	12 weeks paid leave, and one-time payment of \$6,516. ⁹	No subsidy.
Columbia	12 weeks paid leave, and additional unfunded semester.	\$2000 per year

Suggestions

The recent increase in the child care subsidy and expansion of the health care package to include full dependent coverage has greatly improved the quality of life of graduate student parents, but we hope the following suggestions can even better accommodate the needs of doctoral student parents. The parent-sourced suggestions below emphasize ensuring that the current policy is implemented consistently, clarifying the twelve week leave policy for instructors and teaching assistants, expanding the twelve weeks to a full semester, increasing the child care subsidy once more, and offering an additional funded semester for new parents, along with housing, to ensure that international students and students with less personal wealth have access to additional time to degree.

- Explicitly require the departments of doctoral students who work as teachers to accommodate a full semester, to ensure that the policy is implemented uniformly across departments.
- Clarify this policy for parents for whom these 12 weeks fall across multiple semesters. Parents suggest introducing a policy that states that “Provided you give sufficient notice (4

⁵ <https://gsas.yale.edu/life-yale/partners-families/graduate-students-children>

⁶ <https://gsas.yale.edu/funding-aid/fellowships/phd-student-family-support-policy>

⁷ <https://gradschool.princeton.edu/life-princeton/support-resources/family-focused-initiatives>

⁸ <https://gradschool.princeton.edu/costs-funding/sources-funding/loans-and-assistance/sccap>

⁹ <https://gsas.harvard.edu/student-life/harvard-resources/parental-accommodation-and-financial-support>

months or as early as possible), the department will cover your ongoing teaching or grading responsibilities if the leave starts or ends mid-semester.”

- Allow the 12 weeks to be taken non-continuously, so that parents are better able to coordinate their time off.
- Consider offering a full semester of accommodation to students working as research assistants as well, to maintain equity across departments.
- Ask university housing (UAH) to provide extended eligibility for housing to graduate student parents, so that housing eligibility matches funding eligibility.
- Automatically extend an additional funded semester for GSAS students who have children in graduate school, to achieve parity with Princeton and Yale. This additional semester should be per child; for example, a doctoral student who had two children in graduate school would receive an additional year of funding beyond the 7th year.
- Consider raising the childcare subsidy again in the coming years, to reach parity with Princeton and Yale.
- Hold a meeting for parents to voice their concerns directly. (Multiple parents asked to attend this meeting.)