

How Colleges Can Ask Students About Parenting Status

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March 2026

This resource draws on insights from the Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students and provides recommended question options colleges can use to collect parenting status data. It accompanies a longer guide to data collection (Sick and Anderson 2025) and presents options across varying levels of complexity. Some recommendations have been refined from prior publications.

How to Define Parenting Status

“Parenting” takes many forms. We recommend the following inclusive definition of a parenting student (or student parent):

A parenting student is someone enrolled in education or training who is currently—or soon will be—responsible for providing care or support for a child of any age. This may include a biological parent, stepparent, unmarried coparent, adoptive parent, foster parent, guardian, grandparent, extended family member, or sibling caregiver.

This definition is designed to maximize inclusion and flexibility. It intentionally avoids restrictive criteria that can limit who identifies as a parent (see Sick et al. 2023). Some states, however, define “student parent” more narrowly in statute, including:

- **California (Education Code §66025.81):** A student with a child under 18 who receives more than half of their support from the student.
- **Illinois (110 ILCS 149):** The parent or legal guardian of a child under 18.
- **Minnesota (HF 4024):** A student who is the parent or legal guardian of, or can claim as a dependent, a child under 18.
- **Oregon (ORS 350.203):** A parent, person acting as a parent, or legal guardian.
- **Texas (TEC §51.9357 referencing §51.982):** A student enrolled at an institution of higher education for the current academic year who is the parent or guardian of a child under 18.

These definitions may determine how specific questions are framed or worded for students. Colleges operating in states with specific statutory definitions can adapt the inclusive definition above as needed (for example, by specifying “a child under 18”). Or colleges can collect more expansive information, but it is likely important to be able to disaggregate the data to match the formal definition.

Please note that survey questions and response options should align with the definition, but the full definition is typically not presented to respondents.

THE DATA-TO-ACTION CAMPAIGN FOR PARENTING STUDENTS

The [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students \(D2A\)](#) has partnered with colleges in California, Illinois, Oregon, and Texas to strengthen data collection and supports for student parents. Participating institutions work with the Urban Institute to assess existing resources, gather student input, refine parenting-status questions, and implement data-informed strategies to improve student success. In Texas, institutions are also building leadership hubs to support colleges statewide.

Throughout this document, boxes along the side share examples of how Texas colleges and universities can implement the recommendations.

How to Inform Students about Parenting Status Questions

Transparency and trust are essential when collecting parenting status information. Colleges should explain why the information is being collected, how it will be used, and whether responding is optional. The sample language below can be adapted, shortened, or expanded to match colleges' campus and state context.

Base Script

"We will now ask about your parenting status. COLLEGE uses this information to improve supports for parenting students, including child care, course scheduling, and basic needs. Your response will help make our college more family friendly. If you prefer not to share this information, you may select 'prefer not to say.'"

Expanded Script

"We will now ask about your parenting status. [COLLEGE] uses this information to improve supports for parenting students, including child care, course scheduling, and basic needs. Your response helps us design and improve services for students with children. [Optional: Provide a specific example of a goal or recent action.]"

[If required:] We are required to report this information to the state each [term/year] to measure how well we are supporting the success of student parents [but we do not identify individual students]. [STATE OFFICE] uses the information to track outcomes and inform funding or support programs for parenting students.

We respect your family's privacy. Your parenting [pregnancy/expecting] status will remain confidential and will not affect your academic options.

[If applicable:] If you indicate that you are a parent, we may contact you with information about parenting-related resources and supports. You may opt out of these communications at any time.

If you prefer not to share this information, you may select 'prefer not to say.'"

Context-Specific Language

Colleges may wish to tailor messaging depending on when the question is asked, such as:

- asking upon application;
 - » Because a student's parent may sometimes complete the application, clarify who the question refers to: *"This question refers to the student applicant. If a parent or guardian is completing this application on behalf of the student, please answer based on the student's parenting status."*
 - » At colleges where admission is selective, students may worry that disclosure could affect admission decisions. Consider adding: *"Your response will not affect your admission decision."*
- asking at course registration;

SAMPLE EXPANDED SCRIPT FOR TEXAS

"We will now ask about your parenting status. [COLLEGE] uses this information to improve supports for parenting students, including child care, course scheduling, and basic needs. Your response helps us design and improve services for students with children. [Optional: Provide a specific example of a goal or recent action.]"

We are required to report this information to the state each year to measure how well we are supporting the success of student parents, but we do not identify individual students. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board uses the information to track outcomes and inform funding or support programs for parenting students.

We respect your family's privacy. Your parenting status will remain confidential and will not affect your academic options.

[If applicable:] If you indicate that you are a parent, we may contact you with information about parenting-related resources and supports. You may opt out of these communications at any time.

If you prefer not to share this information, you may select 'prefer not to say.'"

- » If parenting students are eligible for priority registration or other benefits: “Your response may determine eligibility for priority registration or other parenting-related supports.”
- offering proactive outreach;
- » If the college uses this information to contact parenting students directly: “If you answer that you are a parent, we may contact you with information about parenting-related resources and supports. You may opt out of these communications at any time.”

How to Ask about Parenting Status

Some states specify the exact wording colleges must use to identify parenting students. Where institutions have discretion—or where states are considering new guidance—we offer the following question sets. These can be expanded to collect additional information (such as number and age of children), if needed.

Because parents sometimes complete forms on behalf of students (especially applications), it can be helpful to include brief instructions before the question(s), such as: “Please note: This question refers to the student.”

Core Principles for Parenting Status Data Collection

- Align wording with applicable state law.
- Be transparent about how information will be used.
- Include a “prefer not to say” option.
- Make any options that cannot be selected together mutually exclusive.
- Collect only information you plan to use.
- Use standardized, consent-based processes.

Simplest Approach: One Question, One Status

Colleges can determine parenting status with a single question.

Option 1: Category Selection

Check the category that applies to you: *[one option allowed]*

I am parenting [or am the legal guardian of] at least one child

[add “under 18” or other statutory language, if required]

I am not parenting [or am not the legal guardian of] any children

[add statutory language, if required]

Prefer not to say

Option 2: Yes/No Format

Are you parenting [or acting as the legal guardian of] at least one child [add “under 18” or other statutory language, if required]? *[one option allowed]*

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

SAMPLE “SIMPLEST APPROACH” WORDING FOR TEXAS

Category format

Check the category that applies to you: *[one option allowed]*

I am the parent or legal guardian of at least one child younger than 18 years of age

I am not the parent or legal guardian of a child younger than 18 years of age

Prefer not to say

Yes/No format

Are you the parent or legal guardian of at least one child younger than 18 years of age? *[one option allowed]*

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Including Pregnancy or Expecting Status

Some colleges choose to capture pregnancy or expecting status to provide pregnancy-related supports required under federal (and sometimes state) law and to anticipate future parenting student needs.

Before collecting pregnancy-related information, states and colleges should carefully consider whether it is necessary and appropriate to track. Pregnant students have explicit protections under federal Title IX regulations.¹ However, pregnancy status is sensitive. In states where collecting pregnancy information raises additional privacy or legal considerations, colleges may determine it is not advisable unless there is a clear and immediate use for the data.

One option is to include pregnancy within the single parenting status question:

Check the category that applies to you: *[one option allowed]*

- I am parenting at least one child
- I am not parenting a child, but I am pregnant
- I am not parenting or pregnant
- Prefer not to say

Colleges may wish to distinguish students who are pregnant from those who expect to become parents through adoption, fostering, a partner's pregnancy, or other pathway. Identifying pregnant students is recommended only if the college will use the information to proactively connect them with relevant supports and guidance. For example:

Check the category that applies to you: *[one option allowed]*

- I am parenting at least one child
- I am not parenting any children, but I am pregnant
- I am not parenting or pregnant, but am expecting to become a parent in the next nine months
- I am not parenting, pregnant, or expecting
- Prefer not to say

Nuanced Approach: “Check All That Apply”

A “check all that apply” format lets colleges collect multiple data elements with a single question but adds implementation complexity. As with earlier examples, pregnancy and expecting options are optional and colleges may omit them if they are not necessary, appropriate, or aligned with institutional policy.

Option 1: Parenting and Pregnancy in One Question

Check all categories that apply to you: *[check boxes or yes/no fields]*

- I am parenting at least one child
- I am pregnant *[optional]*
- I am not pregnant but expect to become a parent in the next nine months *[optional; should not be selectable with “pregnant”]*
- I am not parenting, pregnant, or expecting *[exclusive; leave off pregnant or expecting if not included above]*
- Prefer not to say *[exclusive]*

SAMPLE “CHECK ALL THAT APPLY” WORDING FOR TEXAS

Check all categories that apply to you:

- I am the parent or legal guardian of a child ages 0-2
- I am the parent or legal guardian of a child ages 3-5
- I am the parent or legal guardian of a child ages 6-12
- I am the parent or legal guardian of a child ages 13-17
- I am not the parent or legal guardian of a child younger than 18 years of age *[exclusive]*
- Prefer not to say *[exclusive]*

Option 2: Adding Child Age Categories

If colleges want more detail about children's ages:

Check all categories that apply to you: *[check boxes or yes/no fields]*

I am parenting at least one child or children under 18

I am parenting at least one child or children age 18 or older

I am pregnant *[optional]*

I am not pregnant but expect to become a parent in the next nine months *[optional; should not be selectable with "pregnant"]*

I am not parenting, pregnant, or expecting *[exclusive; leave off pregnant or expecting if not included above]*

Prefer not to say *[exclusive]*

Age categories can be simplified (for example, under 18 vs. 18 or older) or expanded depending on intended use.

Option 3: Most detailed version (age ranges)

This version captures parenting status, child age ranges, and a minimum count of children in one question.

Check all categories that apply to you: *[check boxes or yes/no fields]*

I am parenting at least one child or children ages 0–2

I am parenting at least one child or children ages 3–5

I am parenting at least one child or children ages 6–12

I am parenting at least one child or children ages 13–17

I am parenting at least one child or children ages 18 or older

I am pregnant *[optional]*

I am not pregnant but expect to become a parent within the next nine months *[optional]*

I am not parenting, pregnant, or expecting *[exclusive; leave off pregnant or expecting if not included above]*

Prefer not to say *[exclusive]*

Colleges should select age ranges that align with eligibility, campus services (such as child care), or reporting needs. Commonly used age groupings include:

- 0–5, 6–12, 13–17
- or 0–2, 3–5, 6–12, 13–17

Asking Supplemental Questions about Parenting-Related Statuses

Colleges may collect additional information, such as number of children, age ranges, or related parenting statuses if there is a clear and planned use for the data (e.g., child care planning, reporting, or targeted outreach). Supplemental questions should appear only after a student indicates they are parenting in the primary status question.

If You Need Data on Students' Number of Children

Option 1: Numerical Entry

This accurate count is recommended when technically feasible:

How many children are you parenting? *[numerical field]*

Option 2: Categorical Response (If Numerical Entry Is Not Feasible)

This format provides a lower bound rather than an exact count:

Indicate the number of children you are parenting: *[one option allowed]*

- 1 child
- 2 children
- 3 children
- 4 or more children
- Prefer not to say

If You Need Information about the Ages of Students' Children

Age information may be useful for planning services such as on-campus child care or age-specific programming. Colleges should choose age categories that align with program eligibility or reporting needs.

Option 1: Youngest Child (Simplest)

This is the least burdensome approach but does not capture full age distribution:

What is the age (in years) of the youngest child you are parenting? (If your child is less than 1 year old, enter 0.)
[numerical field]

Option 2: Age Categories (No Numeric Counts)

For each age category, indicate whether you are parenting at least one child in that range: *[one option allowed]*

- Ages 0–2
- Ages 3–5
- Ages 6–12
- Ages 13–17
- Ages 18 or older
- Prefer not to say

Age ranges can be condensed (e.g., 0–5, 6–12, 13–17) if fewer categories are sufficient.

SAMPLE SUPPLEMENTAL QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS IN TEXAS

Number of children

If a student indicates they are the parent or legal guardian of a child younger than 18:

How many children younger than 18 years of age are you the parent or legal guardian of?
[numerical field]

Alternatively, if numeric entry is not feasible:

Indicate the number of children younger than 18 years of age for whom you are the parent or legal guardian: [one option allowed]

- 1 child
- 2 children
- 3 children
- 4 or more children
- Prefer not to say

Children's ages (under 18)

For each age category below, indicate whether you are the parent or legal guardian of at least one child in that range: [one option allowed]

- Ages 0–2
- Ages 3–5
- Ages 6–12
- Ages 13–17
- Prefer not to say

If precise counts are needed:

For each category below, indicate the number of children younger than 18 years of age for whom you are the parent or legal guardian:

- .[#] Ages 0–2*
- .[#] Ages 3–5*
- .[#] Ages 6–12*
- .[#] Ages 13–17*

Single parent status

Are you currently a single parent to any of the children younger than 18 years of age for whom you are the parent or legal guardian?
[one option allowed]

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

Option 3: Age Categories with Numeric Counts (Most Detailed)

For each category, indicate the number of children you are parenting: *[numerical fields]*

[#] Ages 0–2

[#] Ages 3–5

[#] Ages 6–12

[#] Ages 13–17

[#] Ages 18 or older

This approach allows colleges to understand both age ranges and approximate counts.

Single Parent Status

Because partnership and household arrangements are complex and fluid, self-identification is recommended. If relevant for programming, grant applications, or analysis, it may be useful to ask:

Are you currently a single parent to any of the children you are parenting? *[one option allowed]*

Yes

No

Prefer not to say

Young Parent Status

“Young parents” are typically defined as age 24 or younger. Usually, this does not require an extra question. Colleges can analytically identify current young parents by combining students’ age (already collected) with parenting status.

Implementation Notes

- Supplemental questions should appear only if a student indicates they are parenting.
- Collect only information that will inform services, reporting, or decisionmaking.
- Ensure alignment with applicable state law.

Approaches We Do Not Recommend

This brief focuses on recommended question formats and language. Because colleges operate in different legal and technical contexts, there is no single “best” approach. However, some practices are generally not advised.

1. **Collecting Excessively Detailed Child Information:** Avoid requesting detailed information about each child unless there is a clear and specific need. For example, do not ask for details like:

- Child 1: Name, Gender, Date of Birth
- Child 2: Name, Gender, Date of Birth
- Child 3: etc.

This level of detail is typically unnecessary for institutional reporting or service planning. It increases respondent burden, may create confusion, and can feel intrusive. An exception may apply in limited circumstances, such as when an office delivers individualized services that require this information (e.g., direct child care enrollment).

2. **Using Compliance-Only Explanations:** In states where parenting status data collection is required, avoid framing the question solely as a reporting requirement, such as, stating that the question is required for state reporting purposes. Compliance language alone can create hesitation or mistrust. When reporting is required,

colleges should also explain how the information will be used to improve supports for parenting students and how privacy will be protected.

3. **Omitting a “Prefer Not to Say” Option:** Students should always have the opportunity to decline to answer. A “prefer not to say” option supports student autonomy and can improve trust in institutional data collection.
4. **Informal or Ad Hoc Staff Tracking:** Avoid informal tracking of parenting status without the student’s knowledge or consent. For example, if a student casually mentions having a child in conversation, staff should not record that information in an institutional database unless the student has been informed and given the opportunity to consent. Students may not expect such information to be retained or shared.

Notes

- ¹ “Title IX Basics,” *The Pregnant Scholar*, Center for WorkLife Law at UC College of the Law, San Francisco, accessed August 8, 2025, <https://thepregnantscholar.org/title-ix-basics>.

References

- Sick, Nathan, and Theresa Anderson. 2025. [*How Should Colleges Collect Parenting Student Data? \(Version 2.0\) An Updated Guide for Policymakers and Practitioners*](#). Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
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Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the feedback on this brief provided by Allyson Cornett, Andrea Roblado, Jennielle Strother, Jonathan Feinstein, Kristina Flores, Leslie Gurrola, Waylon Metoyer, and other members of the Urban Institute Data-to-Action Campaign resource team. We thank Lexi Mills for editing this brief.

This brief was funded by Greater Texas Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission. The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. The opinions expressed also do not necessarily reflect the views of Greater Texas Foundation or any director, officer or employee thereof. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © March 2026. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.