



FAFSA FAQs

These questions reflect real situations that students have brought to the FAFSA process for the 2017-2018 FAFSA. Answers were provided by the professionals at Tennessee Student Assistance Corporation (TSAC).

Parents, Legal Guardians and Dependency

Q: How do I fill out a FAFSA with a student who doesn't live with their parents?

A: First, is the student able to answer "yes" to any of the 13 FAFSA dependency questions (e.g. is the student in a legal guardianship or does the school or school district consider the student homeless or unaccompanied)? If the student is able to answer "yes" to one of the dependency questions, then he or she is considered independent and only his/her information is needed to complete the FAFSA.

If the student is unable to answer "yes" to any question, then the student will have to submit the FAFSA as a "special circumstance" and later speak with the financial aid office about the situation to see if it will deem the student independent. To submit the FAFSA as a "special circumstance," after answering "no" to all the dependency questions, the student will be asked if he or she is able to provide parental information. The student will select "I am unable to provide parental information" and continue answering questions from there.

With that said, as the subsequent FAFSA screens will explain, if the student goes down the "special circumstance" path, he or she is at the mercy of the college. If the college refuses to consider the student independent, the FAFSA will have to be updated with parent(s) information. If a parent refuses to cooperate, then the student will only qualify for student loans (i.e. the student will NOT be eligible for TN Promise, HOPE Scholarship, Pell Grant, etc.).

Q: What's the difference on FAFSA between having a guardian and being adopted?

A: If a student is currently in a legal guardianship as determined by a court or was in a legal guardianship immediately before he or she turned 18, then the student may answer "yes" to the FAFSA dependency question. He or she is considered independent at that point and only his/her information is needed to complete the FAFSA.

On the other hand, if the student is adopted, more than likely, the student will be considered dependent, and the student's adoptive parents' information will be needed to complete the FAFSA. As a reminder, FAFSA defines "parent" as only the biological or adoptive parent(s). The exception would be if the student was in foster care or a dependent/ward of the court at any time since he or she turned 13 and was adopted thereafter. In this case, the student would answer "yes" to the foster care dependency question which would make the student "independent" and only his/her information would be needed to complete the FAFSA.



Parents, Legal Guardians and Dependency (continued)

Q: What happens if a parent won't reveal their tax information for the FAFSA? What should you do and how could you get them to reconsider?

A: If the student is considered dependent by FAFSA (which most will be), the parents' information is required. If the parent(s) refuse(s) to provide information, then the student will only qualify for student loans (i.e. the student will NOT be eligible for TN Promise, HOPE Scholarship, Pell Grant, etc.). FYI, a parent's refusal to provide information does NOT warrant a "special circumstance" by the financial office. When I encounter such parents, I communicate that and hope they will acquiesce. My experience is some parents will eventually acquiesce if multiple people from the school or community talk with them about the negative implications their refusal has on the student.

With the 01/17/17 FAFSA deadline quickly approaching for TN Promise students, such students can submit the FAFSA initially without their parents' information to satisfy the deadline (after answering "no" to all the dependency questions, they will select "I am unable to provide parental information, and I do not have a special circumstance"). When (hopefully) the parents finally acquiesce, the student's FAFSA may be corrected and parental information may be added. But again, until the parents' information is added to a dependent student's FAFSA, he or she will only qualify for student loans (i.e. the student will NOT be eligible for TN Promise, HOPE Scholarship, Pell Grant, etc.).

Q: What if the student's parents are incarcerated?

A: If both parents are incarcerated, you will be able to submit your FAFSA without parent information despite being considered a dependent student. The online FAFSA will ask you whether you are able to provide information about your parents. If you are not, you will have the option to indicate that you have special circumstances that make you unable to get your parents' information. The site then allows you to submit your application without entering data about your parents. Be sure to contact the college's financial aid office to alert them of your special circumstance and they will work with you on calculating the appropriate EFC.

Q: What if the student is pregnant? Does this change a student's dependency?

A: (via www.finaid.org) An unborn child counts for making the student independent if the child will be born during the award year (July 1 to June 30) and the student intends to provide at least 50% support to the child during the award year. The student's dependency status should be updated regardless of when the pregnancy is discovered. The unborn child also counts toward household size if the student reports the child as part of household size during the initial application or if the student's application is selected for verification (i.e., the pregnancy is discovered before the verification date).

Documentation consists of a letter from the student's doctor verifying the pregnancy and indicating the due date. The due date must be before the end of the award year. The student should also provide a written statement concerning the support of herself and her child. Note that if the mother of an unborn child is not providing more than half her own support, she cannot count as providing more than half the support of the unborn child.



Parents, Legal Guardians and Dependency (continued)

Q: How should I advise a student who lives with their grandparents and has had no contact with their biological parents since an early age but has no court documentation of adoption or guardianship?

Grandparent tax information should not be used on the FAFSA unless the grandparents have adopted the child and has the court documentation stating that they have completed the formal adoption process. In this case, you should contact your school's student homelessness liaison to see if this student is classified as unaccompanied. If so, a letter from the school will serve as documentation and the student will be independent on the FAFSA. If the student is not classified as unaccompanied, the student should complete the FAFSA to the best of his or her ability then contact the college with their special circumstance.

Financial Questions

Q: Say a student's parents are divorced. The student lives with the custodial parent and a step parent, but the non-custodial parent is claiming the student as a dependent on their taxes. Whose tax information should go on the FAFSA?

A: This student should use the custodial parent and the step parent's tax information on the FAFSA. The other parent is not the custodial parent and the student does not live with him or her the majority of the time, so their tax information is not considered on the FAFSA.

Q: If a student's family has a farm that makes different amounts of money/requires different expenses each year, what's the best way to fill out the FAFSA?

A: Complete the 2017-18 FAFSA using 2015 tax information. Thereafter, if the parents' income in 2016 is much less than their 2015 income, they should schedule a meeting with the financial aid office at the student's prospective college(s) in the spring to discuss the situation and see if a professional judgment is warranted.

Q: How do I fill out the FAFSA if the parent's only income is disability?

A: First, did the parent file taxes? My experience is most parents on disability are not required to file; hence, the parent will answer "not going to file." When asked "how much did the parent earn from work," the parent will enter \$0. At this point, the student's FAFSA will be eligible for an auto zero EFC calculation. The parent will be prompted "do you want to skip the remaining income/asset questions related to the parent and student?" The parent should select "yes" which will then take the parent/student directly to the signature page.

On the other hand, if the parent on disability filed taxes, then use the IRS Data Retrieval Tool (DRT) to import the tax information. For example, parents are married, Mom (parent 1 on the FAFSA) works, and Dad (parent 2 on the FAFSA) only receives disability. More than likely, they filed taxes specifically due to Mom's job. After using IRS DRT, when prompted "how much did parent 1 earn from work," enter Mom's "wages, salaries, and tips" from her W2. When prompted "how much did parent 2 earn from work," Dad will enter \$0 since he does not work



Financial Questions (continued)

and only receives disability.

With that said, there are different types of disability; some of which may need to be reported as "untaxed income" if prompted. However, most parents who receive disability qualify for a simplified FAFSA meaning they will be asked "do you want to skip your remaining asset and income (i.e. untaxed income) questions?" The parent should select "yes" and move on

Q: How do you include survival benefits on the FAFSA?

A: Like disability, there are different forms of survival benefits; some of which may need to be reported as "untaxed income" if prompted. However, most "survival benefits" are Social Security death benefits a student receives due to the death of a parent. Here's a great rule of thumb to remember, if it's Social Security, it is excluded from the FAFSA unless it has been taxed at which time the amount taxed would be factored in to the adjusted gross income.

Q: Who qualifies as a dislocated worker on FAFSA?

A: In general, a person may be considered a dislocated worker if he / she... is receiving unemployment benefits due to being laid off or losing a job and is unlikely to return to a previous occupation;

- has been laid off or received a lay-off notice from a job;
- was self-employed but is now unemployed due to economic conditions or natural disaster;
- is the spouse of an active duty member of the Armed Forces and has experienced a loss of employment because of relocating due to permanent change in duty station;
- is the spouse of an active duty member of the Armed Forces and is unemployed or underemployed, and is experiencing difficulty in obtaining or upgrading employment; or
- is a displaced homemaker. A displaced homemaker is generally a person who previously provided unpaid services to the family (for example: a stay-at-home mom or dad), is no longer supported by the spouse, is unemployed or underemployed, and is having trouble finding or upgrading employment.

Technical Assistance

Q: A student began the FAFSA before creating an FSA ID. They went back to create the FSA ID and now the FAFSA and the ID aren't matching up and the FAFSA says it isn't submitted. What should they do now?

A: If the FAFSA is not matching up with the FSA ID, chances are that the name, birthday or social security number are where the student made an error. Have the student double check that their information is correct on the FSA ID. Then, log in to FAFSA with that FSA ID and help the student complete a new, correct FAFSA. The new FAFSA will override the old, incorrect FAFSA and they will receive the EFC.