

Family Friendly Conferences

By Jaime Teevan, Microsoft Research

I gave birth to three little boys while in graduate school, and a fourth as a newly minted researcher. This means that I spent seven years in my early academic career pregnant or nursing. During that time I also attended a lot of conferences, traveling with, at a minimum, the children who were dependent on me physically. My oldest, for example, flew one hundred thousand miles in his first year of life. As a result, I can tell many stories about chasing down breast pump parts by pantomime in foreign countries and messy airplane diaper explosions.

Although my colleagues were always supportive of me when traveling, attending a conference on my own with a child was very hard. There are a number of clever tricks that a parent can use to make it easier, but somehow I learned most of these too late for them to be useful for me. As a community, we can save others this trouble by designing family friendly conferences. What follows is a list of ideas for supporting parents at conferences, particularly when the parent does not have a supporting spouse traveling with them. The list includes ways to make children feel welcome, support childcare, and minimize the amount of travel necessary.

Welcome Children

The easiest way to support parents traveling with children is to make sure that they know that their kids are welcome. While people like to tell stories about the time some well-known researcher gave a talk while wearing a child in a wrap, or about how another always attended sessions with her baby, such examples are, in reality, few and far between. When I brought my children with me to conferences I rarely saw other children and was never sure whether I was crossing any boundaries. I worried: Could I bring a baby with me into the sessions? Was it appropriate to pump in the women's restroom? Should I buy a banquet ticket for my two year old if he would be attending with me?

Conference organizers could make it clear that children are welcome by offering children's registration. At little to no cost, a child could get a registration badge, a box of crayons, and official entrance into the conference. Web Science provided one of my sons a badge when the organizers learned I would be traveling with him, and it made him so happy that he still has it hanging in his cubby several years later. A colleague reports that she always requests badges for her children, but it never crossed my mind to ask for one until Web Science offered.

Providing a children's registration has the side benefit of supplying the conference organizers with a list of parents and children attending the conference, which could be useful for providing onsite support or connecting parents prior to the conference. Additionally, the child's registration packet would be a good place to provide local child-related information to parents. Useful information includes the location of nearby parks, grocery stores, pharmacies, and urgent care or emergency rooms (yes, unfortunately, I have needed this), and contact information for baby sitters and childcare services.

"Perhaps our daughter Rachel is best known for the many years during which she sat at a registration desk and decorated badges. This started because a caregiver we hired did not arrive at a conference in California, and so we were left with a 6 year old and no childcare. I ran out, bought lots of art supplies, and lots of books and gave her the choice of decorating badges or sitting in the back of the room and reading."



-- Elaine Weyuker, Independent Consultant and Researcher

Many people who travel with children also attend with a spouse, family member, or friend who provides their childcare. However, companion registration is often prohibitively expensive. These tickets are typically priced at the marginal cost of including another person, but a conference could further subsidize companions if it wanted to encourage people to bring childcare providers with them. An alternative would be to provide a free, stripped-down companion registration that does not include access to expensive items (e.g., drink or banquet tickets), but does provide the companion with access to the conference for childcare transitions.

To support parents traveling without childcare, conferences should make an explicit policy that children are welcome in sessions. If there is concern that children might be disruptive, this policy could include a request that loud children be taken outside as appropriate. But such a caveat is most likely unnecessary, as I have never seen a parent allow a crying baby or talking child to disrupt a presentation. If organizers expect sessions to be very crowded, a few seats could be designated for parents by the door so that it is easy for them to come and go as needed.

A designated onsite space for children to play could make it easier for parents to briefly entertain their children when they find it necessary to step out of a session. Such space could include a comfortable seat for nursing and a few quiet toys. If the talks are being recorded, it would be nice to stream them into the play space so that parents could keep abreast of what they were missing. The play space should be out in the open rather than hidden away, since parents attending conferences want to be visible and randomly encounter colleagues. It should also be accessible to companions and childcare providers, and as such could double as a meeting space for parents at transition times.

Additionally, a designated private space for pumping would be valuable for nursing mothers. The worst part of attending a conference while nursing was having to spend my coffee breaks in the bathroom pumping because my child was somewhere else. The other women using the restroom were always very nice about it, but sometimes the facilities left much to be desired in terms of space or cleanliness, and it was fairly awkward to meet a colleague for the first time with a loud machine attached to my breasts. Individual women I have spoken with report that conference organizers are usually able to identify a private room for pumping when asked, but at the time I did not know to ask. Conference organizers could instead collect this information proactively during registration. Note that while the children's registration form could be used, the need applies to nursing mothers regardless of whether or not the baby is actually present. For example, at SIGIR 2005 I had to pump regularly even though I was traveling alone because I wanted to be able to continue nursing when I returned home.

Another way to explicitly welcome families would be to hold a Family Welcome Reception early in the conference. For example, a family gathering could be held shortly before the traditional larger general Welcome Reception. This would allow families to get to know each other and create the opportunity for connections to be made for setting up conference play dates and shared childcare.

"The best situation is if you can coordinate with other parents at the conference to bring their children as well. If you've got a large enough pool of parents and kids, then you can take turns watching the kids so that each parent can get to attend the talks that they really want to attend. Also, you feel a lot less awkward having your child around, when there are other parents there with their children."



Support Childcare

For parents attending a conference without a companion, childcare is easily the most significant challenge. While there are several notable conferences that provide onsite childcare (e.g., Grace Hopper and CSE), most of the attempts to provide conference-organized childcare that I am aware of have failed. For example, the organizers of SIGIR 2007 tried to setup childcare and faced challenges with enrollment, cost, legal issues, and the variety of age and needs in the children who would attend. Likewise, CHI used to provide childcare but dropped it for similar reasons. Further, even when CHI's childcare was available, I was unable to use it because it was not offered for infants, which was a shame because it is much easier to find care for a five-year old than for a five-month old.

Despite these challenges, childcare is a particularly important issue to address if a conference is interested in supporting families in order to increase participation by women. Mothers are significantly less likely to have a stay-at-home spouse who can travel with them, and much more likely to be traveling on their own with a child.

It may be possible for a conference to provide limited childcare at important networking events like the banquet or reception. A children's entertainer, for example, could keep kids engaged while not officially assuming responsibility for the children because their parents are socializing nearby.

Even if it is difficult to directly provide childcare, conferences can provide childcare support. For example, conference organizers could provide a list of local childcare providers. A list of university students who would be willing to babysit would be a coveted resource, as would the names of local placement services. Additionally, companions who attend a conference with an attending parent may be able to watch the child of a colleague. For example, one of my children spent a several wonderful days in Singapore with a colleague's nanny and child at SIGIR 2008. Providing structure for these ad hoc arrangements (including support for making connections and a suggested babysitting rate and tip) could make setting them up somewhat easier.

Childcare is very expensive, particularly when it is necessary to use a service that comes with placement fees. Travel grants to subsidize childcare could help defray these costs, and could be targeted to help those most in need of help defraying the cost (e.g., graduate students). Cost could also be minimized by connecting parents with children of similar ages or needs so that they could arrange joint childcare.

Specific times for childcare often need to be arranged in advance, and this can be hard to do until the conference program is published. The conference program should be advertised as early as possible. Childcare also typically needs to be arranged in blocks. When traveling with an infant, I used to try to figure out the best six hour block each day, and those blocks would be the only time I would have care. When multiple sessions with similar themes are grouped temporally (e.g., all of the social media sessions at CHI, or all of the HCI sessions at SIGIR), it was easier for me to arrange an efficient block than it was when the sessions I wanted to attend were sprinkled throughout the program.

Communicating with a childcare provider in a strange city can be hard. As ubiquitous as mobile phones are, international travelers often do not have the ability to receive incoming phone calls. These parents may value a local "emergency contact" phone number that they could give to their childcare provider. In the case of an emergency, the babysitter could call the emergency contact, who could in turn find the

parent in whatever session they are attending. Additionally, because parents traveling alone typically have to leave their children in the hotel room during the day, having accommodations located near the conference venue is essential.

Minimize Travel

The above suggestions focus on supporting parents that want to bring their children with them to the conference. However, the community could also make parental participation easier by minimizing the amount of travel necessary. Sometimes children make it impossible to leave home, particularly for women. For example, I attended SIGIR 2008 in Singapore while 32 weeks pregnant, and the airline almost did not allow me to return to the United States because they thought I was too close to giving birth to be allowed on the plane. In special circumstances, such as when an author is about to give birth or has just had a baby, conferences should waive the requirement to attend in person in order to publish. Remote attendance is a viable alternative, and registration for remote attendees can be set appropriately to cover the additional costs. While it is impossible to remotely reproduce most of the benefits of physical attendance, some benefit may be better than none at all.

“In my family, we've found that it works best for us when I travel to conferences alone, and my husband and son stay home. It gives me permission to fully be in career mode, and not feel a subconscious tug of people waiting for me at the hotel. It also means they are in familiar surroundings with known activities and comforts, instead of having the added pressure of navigating a foreign city.”

-- Kathryn Rotondo, Author of upcoming article *The Working Mother Myth*



The impact of time away from home can also be minimized through conference planning. Co-located conferences allow multiple trips to be merged into one, and enable parents to meet with a diverse set of colleagues with minimal travel. Conference timing can also make a difference. It is less disruptive on my family for me to travel by myself during the week, and I can often attend weekday events by myself as long as I am able to be home over the weekend.

Great research is produced when we remove the obstacles that keep segments of the population, such as women or parents, from fully participating in our community. By welcoming children at conferences, supporting childcare, and minimizing the amount of conference travel necessary, we can help parents engage and the community grow and prosper. In addition to supporting existing families, family friendly conference policies demonstrate to young researchers who do not yet have children that the community supports families, which, in turn, could have a positive impact on their career decisions and family planning down the line.

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