



BALANCING ACT

Bring the Kids

A look at how a small group of professors set up a child-care program to serve participants at their discipline's annual meeting

By MEGAN PINCUS
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Missing the big annual conference in your field because you have nowhere to leave the kids (or nowhere affordable) can mean losing out on critical professional opportunities.

That problem came up time and again when I was a career counselor for doctoral students. We would often talk about how to make academe more parent-friendly, and, to many, the challenges of such a culture change seemed insurmountable. But I recently came across a working example of just such a shift within that hub of scholarly activity, the academic conference.

Miriam Peskowitz, an adjunct associate professor at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and author of *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, mentions in her book that professors in her discipline banded together to bring low-cost, subsidized child care to their scholarly association's annual conference. As it turned out, that very group — the Association for Jewish Studies — convened this winter in San Diego, right down the road from where I live. So I set out to find the people behind the change.

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A success story. As it stands, each year at the association's annual meeting, members who need it pay about \$40 a day for organized, licensed child care on site at the conference hotel. An outside foundation, the Center for Cultural Judaism, has made a commitment to subsidize the child care to the tune of about \$6,000 annually.

Association members at the most recent meeting said subsidized child care had meant more people were able to attend who could not have otherwise — particularly single parents, academic couples in the same discipline, breastfeeding mothers, graduate students, and early-career scholars.

Steven Weitzman, director of Jewish studies at Indiana University at Bloomington, said he was finally able to bring his wife, a rabbi, who contributed a valuable perspective to the scholarly discussion. "Conference child care is absolutely essential for academic couples to participate equally," he said.

Andrea Lieber, an associate professor of religion at Dickinson College and a mother of two, said the association's approach was slowly becoming a model. "People from other scholarly associations are calling me and asking me how we did it," said Lieber, one the original organizers of the child-care effort. "They understand that to recruit and retain the best academics, they need to support them as people, too."

But it didn't happen without some challenges. The process of bringing affordable child care to the conference started four years ago with a makeshift fund raiser in a hotel room and Lieber driving from Pennsylvania to Boston with a carload of toys and a list of local babysitters.

Persuading association members to support the idea and finding outside foundation support took time, and still requires annual fund raising and consciousness raising. In talking to people, I came up with five practical tips that any academics can use to make their conference or workplace more parent-friendly.

Demonstrate need. Lieber, Peskowitz, and Laura Levitt, director of Jewish studies at Temple University, set out to show that child care was not just a personal issue for a select few. They knew they had to make clear to association leaders that many members, and the conference as a whole, would benefit from having babysitting on site — and that meant getting people to use it.

"I went through the entire conference program and asked of every name, Does this person have kids? Is this someone I think I might've seen near a kid?" Lieber said. "I also focused on doctoral students and early-career scholars, who often can least afford childcare but most need to come to the conference for job interviews."

Find nonmommy advocates. The trio knew they needed the voices of nonmothers to overcome the notion that child care was just a "mommy issue" better left at home. Levitt stepped up as a nonparent, and they also asked male colleagues to express their support of the program to the association board and to bring their kids to the child-care room.

"I actually got involved when I saw at a different conference how Miriam [Peskowitz] was told she could not bring her child into the book-display area, and I was appalled," Levitt said. "I was in a better position to yell because I didn't have children. I have a lot more power as a nonmother to make the case."

Don't be confrontational. Once Lieber got involved, she realized there was a risk that the grassroots effort could be seen as a criticism of the association and its leadership. "I knew that was the wrong tactic," she said. That first year, after some lobbying, the association's executive director offered a hotel room to the group. "It was a small show of support but a big breakthrough to get them to just give us a room, allow us to be there," Lieber said. "We needed to be thankful for that and acknowledge them."

The same principle came into play when the group encountered an intimidating obstacle: a generation of parents (mostly mothers) before them who had struggled to make do in cutthroat academe without subsidized child care and were less than willing to go to bat for something they had never had.

"The generational tensions were tricky," said Levitt. "Feminist academics are figuring out what is mentoring and what is ongoing responsibility. This is still really new, and it echoes problems in the feminist movement."

This year, which marked the fourth time that organized child care had been offered at the conference, one association leader who originally had been wary about on-site babysitting spoke out at the meeting about the program's accomplishments. "It is important to allow them to claim it when it is successful," Lieber said, "to celebrate with them the fact that AJS can be a model."

Get creative with fund raising. As any parent knows, child care is expensive. Within the association, the organizers started fund raising each year with a hotel-room auction of cashmere sweaters they had collected all year from thrift shops. The cashmere auction has become an annual event, consistently raising close to \$1,000 for the child-care program. Another idea they have is to add a \$5 child-care donation checkoff to conference registration forms.

At the 2004 conference, the professors met Myrna Baron, executive director of the Center for Cultural Judaism, which

provides large grants for Jewish scholarship in the United States. Baron took an immediate interest in their effort and brought a proposal to her bosses, a father and son who run the Posen Foundation. The duo immediately pledged their support for 2005 and beyond. "There are so many foundations out there," Baron said, "and if you can find one with similar interests, it is absolutely worth contacting the grants officer."

Be prepared for a long haul. An academic association (or any organization) does not change overnight. The trio of organizers committed to keeping the program going for several years, no matter what. "You have to do it for a while so people can rely on it and believe that it is not something ephemeral, but something that we do," Levitt said.

The story of how a group of professors took steps to create a parent-friendly annual meeting sets an example — for academics and society at large — of how a few determined individuals can begin to transform a seemingly unbending system. "Conferences were born of a time when academia was male-dominated and most households were single income," Weitzman said. "Providing child care is one way modern-day academics can adapt to new realities."

Megan Pincus Kajitani, a former graduate-career adviser, now runs her own freelance business.

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Volume 53, Issue 27, Page C2

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