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Viewpoint
Organizing Family Support Services at ACM Conferences

Seeking to improve access to conferences and provide support for attendees with children.

CONFERENCES MATTER. THEY offer a one-stop forum for academics and industry professionals alike to communicate recent findings, meet new people, foster collaborations, maintain connections, and nurture a sense of community. Conference attendees who are also parents, however, face a notable barrier: how to attend and gain the aforementioned career benefits while also balancing childcare responsibilities—a challenge Calisi et al.[2] refer to as the "childcare-conference conundrum." While all primary caretakers of children are affected, women often experience greater disadvantages due to multiple factors (for example, biological, cultural) further affecting their community participation and, ultimately, their careers. Indeed, recent work studying family formation on academic careers found that a "baby penalty" negatively affected women's but not men's career mobility, with a larger negative impact for women of color.[4]

To help address these issues, academic and industry conferences are increasingly offering some sort of family-support services (for example, on-site nursing rooms and/or childcare).[1] Here, we describe planning, organizing, running, and assessing family-support services at ACM CHI2018—a large (3,500 participants) multidisciplinary conference of researchers and practitioners in human-computer interaction and design; CHI2018 was located in Montréal, Canada.

Smaller attendees appreciated the colorful CHI2018 giant hashtag.

Our goals with this Viewpoint are to provide insights into the logistics, policies, and complexities of offering family services at CHI and to reflect on and offer guidelines and best practices for future ACM conferences.

History of Services Offered at CHI

Unlike many academic conferences, CHI has a rich, though inconsistent, history of offering family support services. In 1996, Allison Druin started the CHIkids program—a fun, interactive "CHI daycamp" based on Druin's research in children-focused participatory design.[3] To help run

CHIkids, Druin contracted a professional childcare service and invited members of the CHI community to volunteer as "CHIkids Leaders." To help cover childcare costs and to provide computer equipment to the children, Druin sought out and received external sponsorships.

Because detailed records are not available for these early initiatives, it is not possible to comprehensively analyze demand, successful outcomes, challenges, and cost; however, an archived CHIkids page from 1999 indicates 38 children enrollees (ages six months to 14 years old). An additional

archived page from CHI2001 discusses two childcare options: one for $85/day intended for six-month to six-year-olds and the other called "CHICamp" for $130/day for 7–14-year-olds (which amounts to $121/day and $185/day in today's dollars, respectively). Though CHIkids and its later incarnation CHI-Camp required a significant grassroots effort to organize and run, the program continued for nine years.

While some community-based initiatives occurred in the interim (such as social media groups to coordinate babysitters), CHI did not offer on-site childcare again until 2016 when Jofish Kaye and Druin co-chaired the conference. This reintroduction of services was, in part, a reaction to certain previous flashpoints in which children were unable to accompany a parent into a conference social function (for example, the reception), but also seen by Kaye and Druin as an important initiative to increase the inclusiveness of the CHI conference. To formalize the effort, they created a childcare chair position within the organizing committee. While a symbolic success in highlighting family inclusivity to the CHI community, childcare enrollment did not meet expectations (approximately 15 children participated). Consequently, childcare services were not provided at CHI2017 and no one was appointed to the role of family services chair. It is with this context that we began planning for CHI2018.

Planning Family Support Services at CHI2018
To plan for CHI2018, we began with a background survey soliciting feedback about potential family support services and childcare options. We summarize the main findings here; see http://bit.ly/2tDntjo for a full report. In all, we had 95 respondents, including 66 faculty, 17 students, and 10 people from industry. Of these, 69.5% indicated being likely or very likely to use childcare services at CHI2018. Most respondents preferred on-site childcare (92%) followed by on-site shared nannies (62%) and independent babysitters/nannies (38%). They estimated needing childcare services for 108 children at CHI2018.

When asked about the maximum pay rate for a full day (eight hours) of childcare for one child (a closed-form question ranging from $60 USD/day to $140/day), the most common response was $80/day (27.8% of respondents). Over 69% preferred $100/day or less; however, 14% of respondents were willing to pay $140 or more. When asked about who would pay for childcare—for example, the parent or the employer—72.2% responded paying themselves "out-of-pocket" and only 12% thought that they could get some or all of the childcare costs covered by their institution (14% were not sure).

Informed by this background survey, our own research into family support services at other conferences, and available childcare options in Montréal, Canada (the conference location), we met with conference leadership and discussed options. There were three main considerations:

▸ **Financial**. The general chairs allocated $15,000 to subsidize on-site childcare, which was approved by the SIGCHI Steering Committee and ACM. This was justified with the survey data described here, combined with our shared desire to provide an important service, particularly beneficial to women and women of color.[4] Further, the childcare provider needed to be contracted before knowing how many children would use the service, requiring a financial commitment from the general chairs.

▸ **Space.** With up to 23 parallel tracks at CHI, it can be complex to find space for non-program activities, such as on-site childcare and a nursing room.

▸ **Liability.** ACM is required to pay insurance to cover any liability for anything that occurs on the premises of the conference. The addition of on-site family services introduces additional concerns, including: children accessing the site need to be approved and tracked, just like adults; local laws governing the presence of children at events with alcohol; and the potential harm that could come to children must be included in the liability policy, such as a child harming themselves with a toy provided by the conference.

Running Family Support Services
Based on parents' needs voiced during the survey and organizational constraints, the conference and family chairs decided to support attendees with a multipronged approach: a child pass, on-site childcare services, and a nursing room. We hoped this would enable broad attendance for CHI2018.

Child Pass: We included a $10 USD pass for children 0–18 to accompany their parents, both to provide access to the conference center and to make children feel welcome. It included a conference badge. We used the child pass registrations to communicate information to parents. Children were welcome to all on-site events, except for technical paper presentations as we thought that the potential disruption to speakers and audience members was greater than the benefit, given that all papers were livestreamed.

Childcare: We offered on-site childcare via KiddieCorp, a professional on-site childcare service. Children had a large common room with toys, snacks, and activities such as crafts, toys, and books. The Kiddi-

The chalkboard column was quite popular with children and adults in the CHI2018 exhibit hall.

IMAGES BY AUDREY GIROUARD

eCorp team members are uniformed, screened, and experienced employees who have completed the KiddieCorp training program. The services were in English, for children 6 months to 12 years old.

Childcare was available during the technical sessions of the main conference (not during the workshops due to space constraints) at the cost of $10 USD/hour. Parents registered for childcare in advance on the KiddieCorp site or onsite. Based on pre-conference registrations, we contracted the daycare services to to care for up to 18 children simultaneously with four daycare providers for each block of time.

Nursing room: We provided a quiet, semiprivate nursing room for feeding and changing. The nursing room had comfortable sofas, a changing table, nursing chairs, a play mat, a kettle, and a fridge to store milk. Signs in the nursing room directed caregivers to online live streams of paper sessions to watch on their own devices.

Assessing Family Support Services at CHI2018

In total, family support services at CHI2018 enabled 61 children to accompany their parents at the conference with the conference badges, and 24 children from 17 families used the onsite childcare services. The service was full on the first two days of the conference and used at over 80% capacity for the last two. Many attendees commented on the higher proportion of children around the conference site, typically quite positively. This is supported by the general post-CHI survey—sent to all 3,372 attendees—in which 63% agreed the conference was family-friendly, with only 8% disagreeing.

To gain understanding of how childcare services at CHI were used and perceived, we designed a custom family services follow-up survey, which was advertised on social media and emailed directly to attendees who registered for a child pass and/or indicated interest for childcare at the conference. Our 62 respondents included 33 who identified as female, 24 as male, and 2 as nonbinary or gender noncomforming; 47 reported being parents. Of respondents who brought their children to the conference, 77% stated the family support services

The childcare room with the theme of "Camp CHI" at CHI2018.

made a difference in being able to attend the conference. The top three reasons indicated for bringing a child included: not having a good caregiving/childcare option at home (32%), enjoying travel with children (18%), and providing an enriching educational experience (18%).

Of parents that did not bring children, half reported considering it before ultimately deciding no. Their top three reasons included: travel costs (45%), preferring not to travel professionally with children (32%), or that the services were considered inappropriate for the child's age (32%).

In general, parents were satisfied with the services provided: all parents (14 of 14) were satisfied or very satisfied with the onsite childcare, 83% (14 of 17) with the child pass, and 75% (3 of 4) with the nursing room. Similar to the general survey, 79% of respondents felt that children were welcome at the conference, with 7% indicating "not really."

The survey also solicited open-ended feedback, which was largely positive, emphasizing the impact these services had on the conference: *Extremely happy with the on-site childcare program this year! This service made a HUGE difference to our travel decision and experi-* *ences this time; and Thank you because of this type of effort, I plan to attend CHI in the future!!!* Most of the negative comments were about the high cost; one was about safety concerns.

Four common themes emerged in the suggestions: reducing cost, publishing more information prior to the conference to help with planning (for example, about the space or local child-related information), extending childcare hours to cover lunch and pre-conference workshops, and more conference-related activities for older children (five years old or older).

Reflections and Recommendations

I'm not a parent, nor do I intend to be, but [childcare] is a critical service to our community, especially for students, junior scholars, single parents, and others who may otherwise not be able to attend (and if they can't attend, they can't publish in the proceedings).

—Post-Conference
Survey Response

Here, we reflect on our findings and experiences running family support services at CHI2018, most of which should be generally applicable to other academic conferences.

Get support. Financial, logistical,

and even philosophical support from conference organizers and community leadership is critical. Financial support includes daycare costs and sponsorship, logistical support involves finding daycare providers, booking rooms, handling registration as well as covering insurance and liability issues, and philosophical support helps align the community toward investing in these services.

Have Family Support Chairs. To demonstrate a commitment to inclusivity, general chairs should consider dedicated co-chairs to manage family support services, to assess the needs of the community, source options, and implement the vision for and logistics of providing support for families. Family co-chairs can also ensure the services are running smoothly during the conference.

On-site care should ideally be subsidized by general registration fees or external sponsors. The selected childcare service should be insured, provide well-vetted professionals, and offer care throughout the day (including lunch break) with 15–20-minute buffers before the start and end of the day's conference activities. Advanced sign up is recommended with a required partial deposit so the conference can plan and adjust to demand.

Advertise early and broadly about care services so that people can plan submissions and travel. Information should be available on conference websites with regular social media reminders. Facilitate a social network of parents so they can get in touch with each other, ask questions, coordinate common resources.

Support children of all ages. Because different age groups require different types of activities and caretaker-to-child ratios, carefully consider the following groups when planning your services: infants (0–1), toddlers (1–5) and older children (6+).

Provide a nursing room: Parents need a quiet, semi-private room to feed their children, which can also be used for babies napping or general rest. We recommend including a mini-fridge to store milk, a bottle warmer or a kettle, and a changing pad. If possible, consider providing a live video feed of conference sessions.

Welcome children to events. Parents will appreciate the opportunity to bring their children to social events, demonstrations, and exhibit halls. Organizers should explicitly check policies of offsite venues to ensure that children are welcomed at official conference events. If not, we recommend announcing in advance when events can only be attended by adults, so parents can plan accordingly.

Think about diversity. While most of the CHI attendees that used childcare were faculty, this may have been due to costs. Communities should think about how to better support a more diverse set of parents, particularly student (for example, via subsidized childcare costs).

Offer registration discounts for children and caretakers (for example, spouses, grandparents), to allow families to attend certain conference events together. Badges can include insurance coverage (under the conference's insurance policy).

PC meeting support. Consider offering childcare support at an in-person program committee (PC) or other organizational meetings. As a survey respondent stated: *For me, the PC meeting is far more of a problem as a parent than CHI itself… I've declined PC committee invites for [multiple years] now. Several other parents amongst my colleagues are in the same situation.*

Give it time. Organizing family services is an ongoing process. Because of cultural norms, shifting expectations, and the need to plan conference submissions and travel far in advance, we estimate three to four years of continuous family support offerings are necessary before we can truly study and understand community impact.

Communicate to non-caregiving attendees. Announce to all attendees where children are welcome. If in paper sessions, communicate this to presenters in advance to ensure they are not taken by surprise. Further, exhibitors, demonstrators, and other presenters must be made aware that people under 18 years old may be present.

Donations. We recommend conferences donate all the family support services artifacts bought for the conference to a local women's shelter.

Toward the Future

The ACM SIGCHI community aims to be inclusive and diverse. SIGCHI conferences are taking steps to increase the participation and success of underrepresented groups in HCI. The advice page on organizing a SIGCHI sponsored conference includes a paragraph on the need to develop a policy regarding children at conferences.[a] We encourage other special interest groups to adopt similar policy and encourage their members to consider how to improve access to conferences or include supporting attendees with families.

This conference attendee summarized clearly the need for these services: *THIS. It is so needed. I am terrified this will be a "one off" (even having a nursing room has varied from year to year). Programs like these make parenting in the community visible and send the right message about participation from primary caregivers who also happen to be HCI researchers. Oh, and I've also made professional connections I otherwise wouldn't have, because we brought our kids and wanted to connect as CHI parents to swap tips AND talk about research!* Ⓒ

a See http://bit.ly/2Uy9OoN

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