Expanding the Pipeline

Childcare an issue for conference attendees

BY Elaine J. Weyuker

Childcare, or the lack thereof, is an issue for all of us. It affects us, at least tangentially, whether we are female or male, old or young, parents or not. There have been many articles decrying the lack of high-quality, affordable childcare, and a variety of suggestions about what employers and the government should do to alleviate the problems.

In this article, I will focus on one narrow aspect of this broad and complex topic: how childcare issues affect the ability of a researcher with young children to attend and participate in conferences, and consequently how career advancement is affected. As a mother who has no option but to travel with her 4-year-old daughter, I write from first-hand experience.

The first issue to consider, and one that frequently is the deciding factor, is the traveling expenses of a child. Expenses include:

• airfare (full fare starts at age 2),

• childcare (in addition to normal childcare expenses at home, which must be paid whether or not the child attends),

• car rental (cabs rarely have seatbelts, therefore child safety seats cannot be used),

• meals (for logistical reasons, these often must be bought in the notoriously expensive hotel restaurant) and

• additional hotel costs.

Usually, none of these costs are reimbursable by a research grant or employer. These costs are not even tax-deductible, although they are mandatory for the employee to attend the conference. It is not unusual for it to cost $1,000 to take my child to a conference. How many conferences can a parent afford to attend with this type of financial burden? How many people at the junior level can afford any such trips?

Given that the parent somehow manages to handle the expense, the real challenge still looms. How do you arrange for childcare in an unfamiliar, distant place? If you can locate a caregiver, how can you feel secure about leaving a child with a caregiver you have never met?

Frequently, large hotels list babysitting as an available service. However, my personal experience is that the babysitters rarely exist. My daughter was 5 months old when I took her with me for the first time. It was the most important conference in my field. I was on the program committee, and I had a paper in the conference. I would not have missed it for the world. I phoned the hotel and was told they had a babysitting service and that no reservations were needed. When we arrived, I learned the reality—maybe they could think of someone I could phone and ask if they wanted to come to the hotel and babysit. After some discussion, they concluded they could not think of anyone. My daughter therefore attended her first conference. Needless to say, it affected my ability to participate.

Similar situations happened at the next several conferences we attended. Finally, I realized I was not likely to find childcare at a hotel, and had better make other arrangements. I have devised many creative ways to arrange for childcare when I attend a conference. When I cannot locate what seems to be high-quality, safe childcare, I simply do not attend the meeting.

Several months before the conference, I begin phoning everyone I know who lives and works in the conference area. I ask if they have colleagues with children my daughter's age. I then phone those "leads" and ask about their childcare arrangements. Could they find out whether their caregiver would take an extra (wonderfully bright, easy-going, ever-cheerful)

child for the necessary days? If not, could they ask their caregiver for a recommendation? If this does not produce leads, I look for faculty members near the conference and ask them to ask students if they would like to earn extra money babysitting. I ask colleagues whether their teenage children will be attending and might be interested in babysitting. It is a lot of work, and it is not for the faint-hearted. I have had some wonderful luck, but on other occasions, I have come up empty-handed and simply decided there was no solution, and that I would just have to miss the conference.

The bottom line is that I am a fairly senior researcher and much better able to absorb the costs than many other people. Being senior, I know lots of people around the country and therefore have good contacts. Still, travel to a country where English is not the primary language seems impossible to me now. I simply do not submit papers to conferences overseas, and I do not attend those conferences.

It is certainly true that there are men who are single parents or the primary caregivers for their children, and who face these problems. And there are women whose personal situation allows them to travel without their children. Still, at the present time, childcare responsibilities, especially for young children, fall disproportionately on women, and therefore women suffer most often and most directly.

How many women face these situations and find them insurmountable? How does this affect their careers? Are they taken less seriously because they cannot attend meetings, and therefore publish less than their male colleagues? Are they considered unprofessional if they attend with a young child because that is the only way they can attend? Even if a parent manages to attend and arrange childcare, it is difficult, if not impossible, to attend the social events surrounding the conference. What contacts are missed as a result?

We need creative solutions, or we will continue to lose the participation of

valuable members of our professional community. Possible solutions include:

• Professional societies can adopt the policy that all sponsored conferences should be held at hotels that provide childcare facilities. Hotels, like other businesses, are responsive to what they perceive as their economic self-interest. If major organizations, such as ACM and IEEE, demand on-site childcare, change is much more likely to occur than if individuals simply request it or individual conferences require it.

Although I believe there is a reasonable argument that the cost of this childcare should be borne by all since it is for the common good of the professional community, I am not proposing that. I am only suggesting that our professional societies require that a fee-for-services facility be *available* at the conference site.

• Rules of granting agencies could be changed to permit additional expenses to be charged, when necessary, for the grantee to travel. I frankly have mixed emotions about this suggestion. There generally is a fixed, finite amount of travel money available, and funds used to pay for a child's travel could not be used by a student or grantee. However, if this is the only way for someone to attend, then perhaps it is worth the tradeoff.

Another possibility is that if the grantee can obtain another source of travel funds for themselves, the grant travel money can be spent to pay for a child's travel. It is sometimes possible to arrange to give a colloquium at an industry or university site near the conference. If that source pays the grantee's expenses, then the grant money could be used instead for the child, thereby allowing the grantee to attend.

Whatever solutions we settle on, it means changing public policy. We are not likely to accomplish this in the near future. As long as it is not perceived by our community as a serious problem requiring action, nothing will change.

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they need most is not more gigabit communication, but a variety of other things.

• Focusing research on committee-determined methodology is a recipe for narrowness. In the 1970s, DARPA had a speech recognition project that set out to pick five research teams initially, then narrow it to three, then later end up with one enormously narrowed speech recognition research. Everyone hoped to be part of the team that was finally selected and knew quite a lot about the prejudices of the committee members.

Although there is a government crisis over the support of basic research, I believe that computer scientists should act

collectively with other scientist in its defense and not try to take advantage of the others by an illusory merger of computer science and computer engineering.

In this connection, the NSB commission's report on NSF [See Page 4] is encouraging. It emphasizes the importance of investigator-initiated research, restates the mission of NSF as being the support of basic research and shows no bias in favor of research empires. In this, it agrees with the petition rather than with the NRC report and the line taken by Peter Likins and Fred W. Weingarten in the September issue of *CRN*.

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Please note: The 1991-92 CRA Taulbee Survey results will be printed in the March issue of *CRN*. One copy of the results will be mailed in January to department chairs who participated in the survey.

Correction: The first paragraph of a page 1 article on federal policy in the November issue incorrectly identified a House subcommittee.