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Are conferences providing enough child care support? We decided to find out

13 DEC 2018 • BY [KATIE LANGIN](#)

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Krista Soderlund, a research associate at the University of Texas in Austin, brought her daughter along when she attended an astronomy meeting in 2017. ROBIN SODERLUND

Robin Nelson was a bit nervous as she prepared for her trip to Austin, where she was giving a talk at the annual meeting of the American Association of Physical Anthropologists this past April. But her talk wasn't the only thing making her antsy; it was also the child care arrangement. Nelson, an assistant professor of biological anthropology at California's Santa Clara University, would be bringing her 10-month-old daughter, who "was kind of crawling then but wasn't yet walking, so very dependent," Nelson says.

The conference provided free child care, which she appreciated. There's been "a huge sea change in our discipline in terms of how receptive we are to families at the conference," she says. On-site child care—much less *free* on-site child care—was "unthinkable 15 years ago." At the same time, "it's kind of a scary thing to ... not be able to vet those people before you leave your child with them, but knowing that professionally you need the opportunity so you're going to do it."

When it comes to child care availability, Nelson is one of the lucky ones. For years, parents have wrestled with the challenges of bringing kids to conferences that don't provide any accommodations for families. Earlier this year, a group of scientist mothers published an opinion piece in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, arguing that [conferences need to do a better job supporting parent attendees](#). The authors' roadmap for improvement recommends that conferences provide support for child care—either at the conference facility or at the parent's home—as well as a [lactation room](#) equipped to accommodate the needs of nursing mothers. To see how this year's conferences stacked up against

those recommendations, *Science Careers* examined resources provided to parents at 34 scientific conferences with more than 1000 attendees that convened in North America this year.

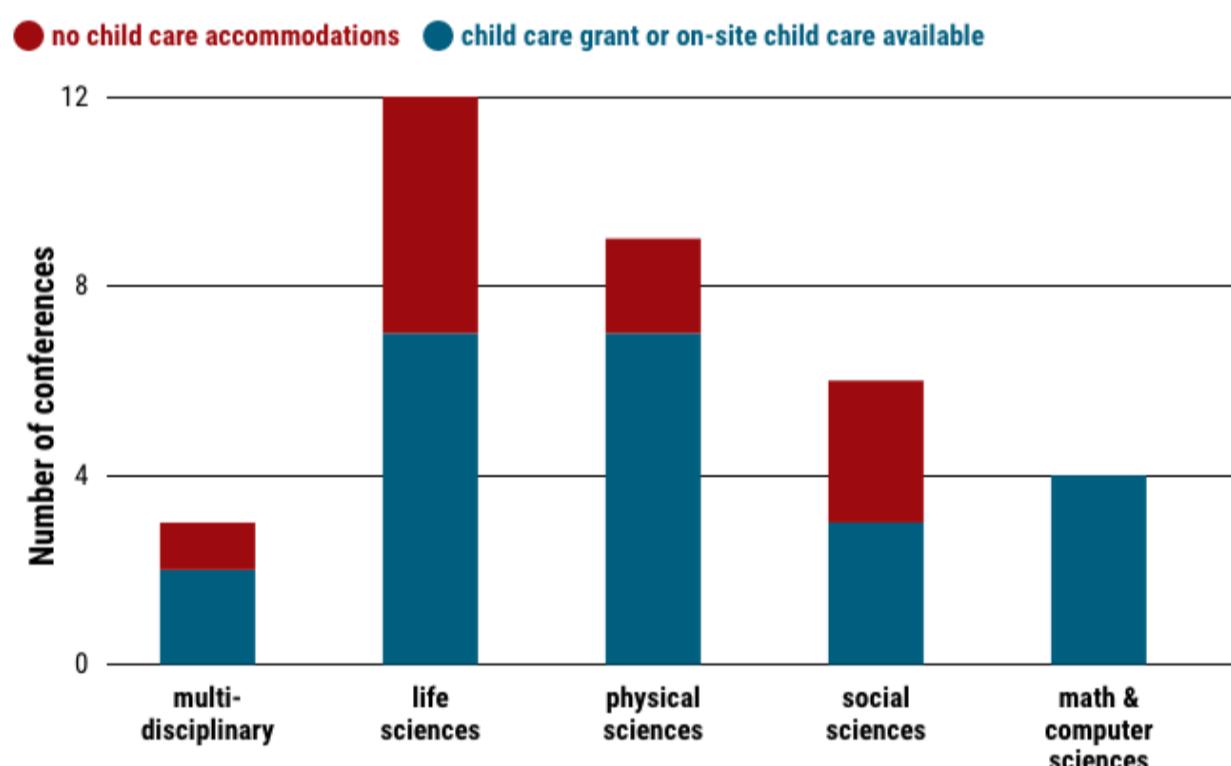
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The overall results are encouraging: All but two conferences—a full 94%—provided a lactation room, and 68% provided child care support in one form or another. "That's good," says Rebecca Calisi, the lead author of the *PNAS* paper and an assistant professor of neurobiology, physiology, and behavior at the University of California, Davis. But, she adds, the results still aren't good enough—those statistics should be 100%.

The disciplines with the most room for improvement are the ones that tend to have a [greater share of women](#). Approximately half of the 18 conferences in the life sciences and social sciences offered child care accommodations for parents—a much lower percentage than in the physical sciences, mathematics, and computer sciences (85% of 13). Of three multidisciplinary conferences, two provided child care accommodations.



(GRAPHIC) K. LANGIN/SCIENCE; (DATA) K. LANGIN/SCIENCE

Of the conferences that supplied child care support, 83% arranged for a licensed child care provider to operate at the conference facility. This can be a convenient option for parents, but the cost can be problematic. Only two were free: the anthropology meeting that Nelson attended and the American Chemical Society's annual meeting. The rest charged between \$40 and \$110 a day per child, with an average of roughly \$85 for an 8-hour day.

That's "quite a bit for a grad student budget," says Javiera Rudolph, a Ph.D. student at the University of Florida in Gainesville who brought her 6-month-old baby to this year's meeting of the Ecological Society of America (ESA) in New Orleans, Louisiana. The cost of child care there—\$45 for a half day and \$94.50 for a full day—deterred her from using it for more than 1 day, and she thinks that other parents were probably deterred by the cost as well. "Child care is great," Calisi says. But "we need to figure out how to make it more affordable for those that need it."

Five conferences offered flexible child care grants, which parents could use to pay for their child's travel, for travel expenses incurred by a caregiver, to hire a nanny, or for other approved child care costs, with the option of leaving their kids at home or bringing them along to the meeting. At one conference—the January meeting of the American Astronomical Society (AAS) in Washington, D.C.—parents could both apply for child care grants and register for on-site child care.

The flexibility that the child care grants offer is important, Calisi says, because "everybody has something different that will work best for their family." For instance, it can be hard for nursing mothers to leave their babies or toddlers at home, even when there's a caregiver there to look after them. Conversely, some families prefer to avoid traveling with school-aged children so that the kids can maintain their regular schedule and the parents don't have to pay for their flights.

Another benefit of child care grants is that they diminish out-of-pocket expenses for meeting attendees rather than adding to them, notes Justyna Zwolak, a postdoc at the University of Maryland in College Park who brought her 2-year-old daughter to the March meeting of the American Physical Society (APS) in Los Angeles, California. Conferences are generally quite expensive, and they can be even more expensive for parents because families don't have the option of sharing accommodations with other attendees and splitting the cost. As Nelson says, "I don't know anyone who wants to room with a 10-month-old."

Beyond the data

The numbers are interesting and encouraging, but they don't quite capture the full range of parental experiences. So *Science Careers* also spoke with parents who attended meetings this year to find out whether they were satisfied with the accommodations offered to them and whether they had suggestions for improvement.

In Nelson's case, she was relieved to find that the child care offered at the anthropology meeting was top notch. After leaving her daughter with the provider for at least 4 hours a day, the 10-month-old was "in great shape and perfectly happy" when Nelson picked her up. It was so helpful and convenient that Nelson would have paid for it if she had to. "I've found it more feasible [to be at a conference with a baby] than I ever would have imagined when I was finishing [my Ph.D.] in 2008," she says.

But not all experiences are so positive—even when conferences offer resources. Rudolph had attended the ESA meeting in 2017 when she was pregnant, and she was "happy to see so many women with babies around." So she wanted to bring her baby to the 2018 meeting and keep it going. "I thought, 'Why wouldn't I?'" she says. "I was looking forward to interacting with other parents."

She enrolled her son for one full day of child care, but she was disappointed to find that the room was chilly and lacked natural light. "It seemed like a sad place to leave him," she says. "Very few people actually used the day care." She also disliked how inflexible it was. There was a half-day option each morning and afternoon, but



Parents had access to on-site child care at the American Society of Human Genetics meeting in San Diego, California. ELIZABETH TSENG

she couldn't pay an hourly rate to enroll her son for a shorter period of time—for instance, when she wanted to see a particular talk. Moreover, child care wasn't available during a premeeting workshop that a grant agency required her to attend. "That was really tough," she recalls. She hired a local nanny that day, but that person wasn't experienced with infants, so Rudolph was constantly answering phone calls from the nanny and ended up needing to leave the workshop early.

But there were bright spots too: Rudolph used a nursing room at the conference facility and recalls that the chats she had there with other mothers "were probably some of the most inspiring conversations that I had throughout the whole conference," she says. They would tell her, "Hey, you're doing a great job" and "If he cries, don't let that make you feel uncomfortable"—words of encouragement that she appreciated as a new mother.

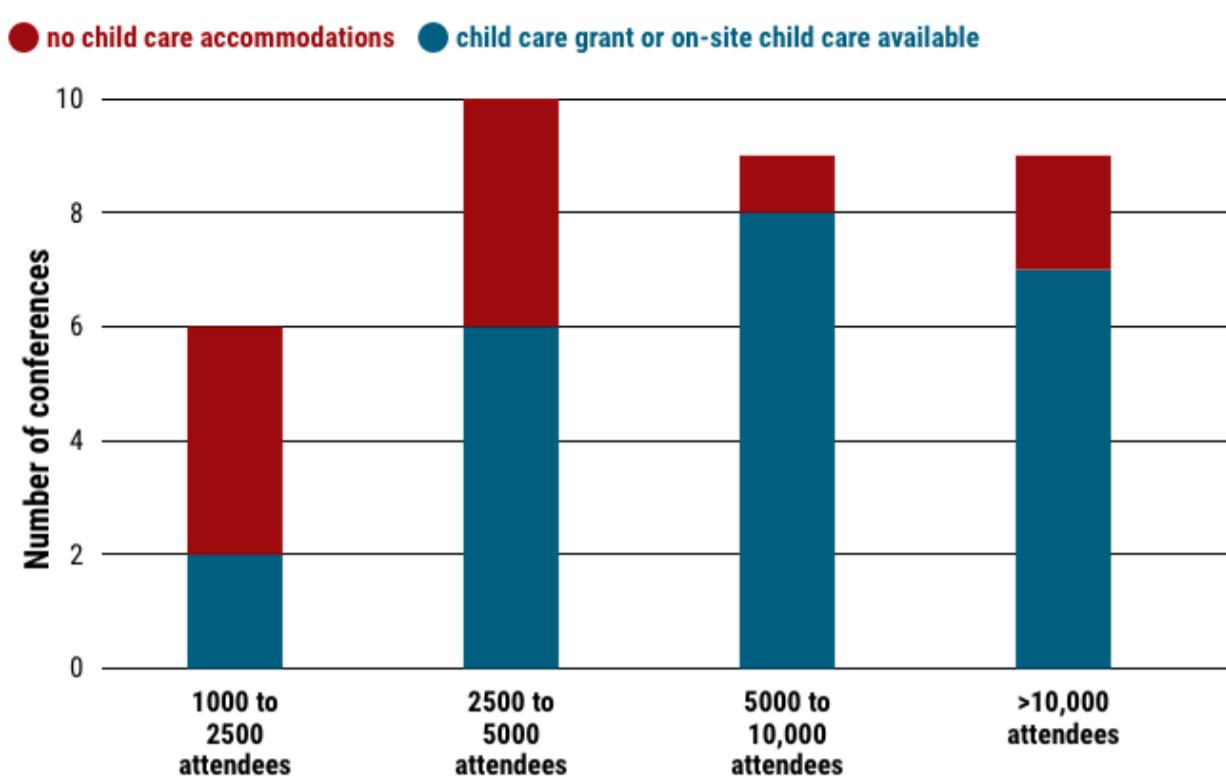
For Krista Soderlund, a research associate at the University of Texas in Austin, conference child care came in the form of her mom. Soderlund used a \$250 child care grant from the AAS's Division for Planetary Sciences to fly her mom from Duluth, Minnesota, to the division's meeting in Knoxville, Tennessee. It was "the perfect amount" to cover the airfare and taxi, Soderlund says. Her mom looked after Soderlund's nearly 2-year-old daughter, leaving her free to attend the conference sessions.

"It was a lifesaver because I can't even imagine bringing [my daughter] to any type of professional setting, really. Terrible twos is what we're dealing with now." Having her mom there also allowed Soderlund to attend evening social events, which are important for networking. "That's easier to do if you have someone who is with you versus having child care that is organized by the conference."

For Zwolak, a \$325 child care travel grant from APS was similarly crucial. Had she not received that financial support, she probably wouldn't have attended the society's meeting in Los Angeles, she says, as the meeting was across the country and in a pricey location. She used the money to cover most of her daughter's airfare. "As a postdoc you don't exactly make that much money." APS has offered child care travel grants for more than 10 years, giving preference to early-career applicants.

"I've noticed that there's more and more of the physics meetings that do offer some kind of support," Zwolak says. "It's sending a very positive message" that the physics community views it as "OK to have a family."

Before APS started offering grants, the society provided subsidized on-site child care at their March meeting—which draws more than 11,000 attendees—but "that didn't work well," says Theodore Hodapp, director of project development at APS in College Park, Maryland. We'd get "one or maybe two parents, or none, so it was not a cost-effective way of doing it." Hodapp thinks the problem boiled down to parents not trusting a child care provider they weren't familiar with. He's consulted with other professional societies in North America and Europe, and he says that it's common to hear that on-site child care doesn't work well. "A lot of places have gone more to these minigrants."



(DATA) K. LANGIN/SCIENCE; (GRAPHIC) K. LANGIN/SCIENCE

Calisi doesn't have a prescription for what's best: child care grants or on-site child care. She thinks that societies should survey conference attendees to identify the needs of the community, and to see how many families would use on-site child care. Many parents with "really little ones, or ones with special needs, are just not OK with a stranger taking care of their child," she notes.

Then, Calisi says, societies should reassess each year to see whether there's something that could be improved upon and whether funds could be shifted to have more impact. We "have to create the space for organizations to make little mistakes," she says. "Whether it's one small baby step, or a huge leap, as long as we're going in the right direction that's what's important."

Possible baby steps

Child care and lactation rooms are only the tip of the iceberg. There's a lot more that societies could do to help families. For starters, it's helpful to foster a kid-friendly atmosphere so that parents feel comfortable at the meeting. "It's great for a conference to provide accommodations for parents, but if the other conference attendees are giving you dirty looks for bringing a baby, it won't feel like a very welcoming environment," notes Sara Kross, a lecturer at Columbia University who brought her 7-month-old baby to this year's North American Congress for Conservation Biology in Toronto, Canada—a meeting that she says was very welcoming to parents.

Of the conferences that *Science Careers* looked into, many stated explicitly—either on the meeting website or in the program—that kids were welcome to attend sessions as long as they weren't disruptive. Some even issued official conference badges to underage attendees with cutesy sayings under their names, such as "Future Planetary Scientist."

But not all meetings are open to kids. At this year's Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections in Boston—which hosted more than 4000 attendees—meeting organizers didn't arrange for on-site child care, free or otherwise. They also warned parents in the conference program that "children are not permitted into any meeting room, including the poster area."

A meeting spokesperson told *Science Careers* by email that, to their knowledge, no parents had requested a change to that policy—perhaps going to show that, if you want something, you should ask for it.

Attendees at the International Ornithological Congress, held this past August in Vancouver, Canada, saw the power of this approach firsthand. During the meeting, complaints erupted on social media when—in accordance with conference rules—a mother pushing a baby stroller was barred entry to a lecture hall. Organizers ended up changing their policy midconference, granting access to kids.

Parent scientists can also take a stand when deciding which conferences to patronize. Daniel Mennill—a father of two and a professor of biology at the University of Windsor in Canada who attended the ornithology meeting—notes that he and his wife, who is also an ornithologist, plan to preferentially attend more family-friendly conferences going forward.

Many parents told *Science Careers* that they'd also like to have a parent lounge, something that a few conferences offer—one is available at this week's American Geophysical Union meeting in Washington, D.C., for instance—but is not yet commonplace. "It would be great to go to a talk and then have a place where you can let your child crawl, for example, just crawl while you're talking to another parent," Rudolph says.

At a bare minimum, "a room with some chairs" where kids can eat and play would be sufficient, says Steve Lenik, an adjunct professor in the anthropology department at St. Mary's College of Maryland. Lenik and his wife, Liza Gijanto—an assistant professor in the same department—brought their kids to two meetings in 2018: the Society for American Archaeology meeting in Washington, D.C., and the Society for Historical Archaeology meeting in New Orleans. Neither conference had on-site child care—something the couple would have made use of, had a reasonably-priced version been offered, Gijanto says. So they looked after their kids themselves, switching out over the course of each meeting so that one of them could attend sessions at any given time.

But when they were on kid duty, Lenik and Gijanto sometimes had problems finding a place to hang out with their kids, both of whom are under 3 years in age. It was especially problematic at the Washington, D.C., meeting, where the family didn't have a hotel room nearby and seating outside official meeting rooms was sparse. A room dedicated to families would have been helpful, Lenik says.

For many parents, kid-friendly spaces are not only important for looking after kids, but they're also helpful for connecting with other parents. "Being a scientist and a grad student is isolating enough as it is," Rudolph says. "Being a parent is even more isolating, so just being able to have a conversation with someone else that is also going through either grad school or preparing tenure or anything like that, and is also juggling being a parent, I think it's extremely helpful and encouraging."



Babies were welcome in lecture rooms at this year's North American Congress for Conservation Biology in Toronto, Canada. SARA KROSS

Change on the horizon

Since Calisi's *PNAS* paper was published in March, she's received an onslaught of emails—"almost daily," she says—from parents and societies who are working to implement her roadmap for improvement. Mennill says that Calisi's paper inspired him to speak up—along with others—ahead of this year's ornithology meeting, to request changes that would bring the conference's policies more in line with her recommendations. (Only one was granted ahead of the meeting, he says: a request for a lactation room.) "All conferences should be striving to meet the goals articulated by Calisi and her colleagues," Mennill argues.

The *PNAS* paper was initially inspired by problems Calisi encountered at last year's Society for Neuroscience (SfN) conference, which hosts well over 20,000 attendees. But the recommendations, she says, can "serve not just [SfN], but all conferences—and not just big ones, but smaller ones, ones with a lot of money, ones with no money, all different kinds."

There's still some resistance, though, according to multiple parents interviewed for this story. One biologist mother, for instance, told *Science Careers* that "the old guard" opposed on-site child care at her society's annual meeting. They "thought that the meetings wouldn't be fun anymore," she says.

But Calisi remains hopeful that, overall, the scientific community is headed in the right direction. In part, that's because she's seen a lot of changes within the past year at the meetings she regularly attends: SfN's and the Society for Integrative and Comparative Biology's (SICB's) annual meetings.

Calisi was pleased to see that the nursing room facilities at SfN's 2018 meeting were [much better than what was initially provided last year](#). And at next month's SICB meeting, on-site child care will be free—a perk that eclipses what was offered at last year's meeting, where on-site child care cost \$8 to \$10 per hour.

"These services are particularly useful for folks who are coming into the academy from experiences—either work or life experiences—where they don't bring a lot of financial resources," Nelson says. Not everyone needs help, but "when we think about how urgent these things are and whether we really want to include them in the budgets for our professional organizations, I'd just urge us to think about the folks in our communities who could use it the most."

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Katie Langin

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Katie Langin is the associate editor for *Science Careers*.

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