

Photo courtesy of Sherry Yennello



Is there room in the high-energy physics community for families?

"Bob, you know my new graduate student asked me the other day why there were no women speaking at this conference. I told her women often made choices that are inconsistent with a career in physics. She asked me what I meant, and I told her, 'Well, for example, like having kids.' I once had a promising graduate student named Alice, but she decided she wanted a family. When I thought she should give a talk on her thesis work, she said she couldn't go to the meeting without some assistance for childcare. Since the data were so exciting, I sent James, who worked on the project with her, to give the talk. At the meeting, James met Dr. Famous, who had already been talking to Alice about a postdoc position; James got the position instead. James now has tenure on the faculty of Prestigious University. Alice eventually became an instructor at a teaching school. Not going to that meeting probably cost Alice her career."

"But, Sam, that is better than what Sara did. When I offered to send her to a meeting, she brought the kid. Sara went to very few talks, and when she did, the kid was there distracting her and everyone else. Needless to say, she didn't get a job, and I wasted my money supporting her."

Do you want our field to be responsible for such a conversation? We have a choice to either leave things the way they are and claim there are no women to hire, or we can think about ways to enable women to succeed and become integrated in the field. The case for childcare at meetings is simple: In a field as tightly knit as high-energy physics, being at meetings to present your work, hear about others' progress, and network with people who are established in the field is critical to advancing one's career. Furthermore, it is unrealistic to tell female students that they must wait until they are tenured professors to have children; biologically, that might be too late. So, we must enable them to have a career trajectory that is compatible with having children

earlier—whether as graduate students, postdocs, or junior faculty.

Being a graduate student is not a lucrative situation—it wasn't when I was a student and it isn't now. Add to that the financial burden of childcare, which grad students often need beyond normal hours, and of health insurance for dependents, which is often not covered under graduate student policies or covered only at a significant premium, and you have a very financially strapped individual. If there is no affordable childcare available at meetings, you have just priced that critical activity out of the reach of many female students with children.

This challenge is not unique to high-energy physics, but it is certainly significant in a field where the percentage of women in committed relationships with other professionals is much higher than for men. A 1998 survey by the American Institute of Physics revealed that 43% of its women members are married to other physicists while only 6% of married male physicists have a physicist spouse. Other fields have risen to the challenge by awarding childcare grants or providing sponsored or subsidized childcare at meetings, opening a family room nearby, or setting up bulletin boards where families can work out shared childcare arrangements. Some universities also have started to provide childcare assistance so graduate students or junior faculty can attend meetings. The American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics has proposed that childcare grants be made available for the March and April meetings.

Smart women will make smart choices. Some will decide the allure of uncovering nature's hidden secrets is worth the sacrifice, and become existence proofs that women can do physics. But others may decide that the cost of belonging to this club is too great. And the loss will be ours. Wouldn't we all prefer the following conversation?

"George, that was a great talk your student Jennifer gave yesterday. I was afraid she might not be able to come to the meeting because of the baby. But then she told me about the Kids Club, and how childcare was provided at the meeting. I know I've enjoyed having some of my colleagues' kids around for evening events, but I hadn't realized that it was such an organized program where they take the kids to parks and children's museums. I suppose this might be why we have so many more top-notch women in the field these days."

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