Childcare an issue for conference attendees

By Elaine J. Weyuker

How many people at a conference can deduct the cost of childcare, although they are reimbursable by a research grant or a fellowship? How many people at a conference have to pay for a babysitter (or car rental) for the days off? How many people at a conference have to make other arrangements? How many people at a conference can afford any such travel? How many people at a conference can afford to miss the conference? How many people at a conference can attend and arrange childcare in an unfamiliar, distant place? If you can locate a babysitter, do you have enough confidence in leaving a child with a caregiver you have never met?

In the past, I have taken each of my children and one of our friends' children to a childcare center. In the future, I am not sure what I will do. Last year, I couldn't afford to hire a professional babysitter. I explored several options, including a babysitter service and asking friends around the conference to babysit.

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 they had a babysitting service that was available. But it did not have any reservations. The children were 3-month-olds. I arrived there without the children. The hotel was the best babysitter they had at the time. After the baby arrived, they simply didn't know what to do with the children. It is sometimes possible to find a babysitter for the days off. They are not always available. It is sometimes possible to arrange for childcare in an unfamiliar, distant place. If you can locate a babysitter, do you have enough confidence in leaving a child with a caregiver you have never met?

We need creative solutions, and I would just have to miss the conference.

The bottom line is that I am 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, I don’t know what I would do if I had to miss the conference.

Childcare, or the lack thereof, is an issue for all of us. It is certainly true that there are women who are single parents or primary caregivers for their children, and who face these problems. And there are women whose personal situations allow 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. It is certainly true that there are women who are single parents or primary caregivers for their children, and who face these problems. And there are women whose personal situations allow 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. 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Elaine Weyuker is a professor of computer science at the University of British Columbia.