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Parenting and the Academic Library: Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities

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Courtney Stine, Sarah Frankel, and Anita Hall

Parenting and the Academic Library

Experiences, Challenges, and Opportunities

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. This issue's conversation revolves around parenting and how academic libraries must do more. The insights from the authors apply beyond parenting and are a great reminder that people make our academic libraries work.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Courtney Stine: As the head of a small library, I'm deeply involved in daily operations and work in a public-facing role. One of my biggest takeaways since becoming a parent is learning to say no, which can be uncomfortable in a service-oriented profession, especially since academic library workers are always justifying the impact of our work. This can mean no to instruction requests that conflict with your pumping schedule, no to presenting at an out-of-state conference, and no to serving on a committee that will require after-hours work. What have been your experiences navigating your work in academic libraries and parenting?

Sarah Frankel: That is a good question, Courtney. I've worked in academic libraries for 20 years but have only been a parent for half that time. I'm still learning how to navigate it as every stage of parenthood has been different. I have been fortunate that my supervisors are also parents and understand the need for flexibility, even when it is needed unexpectedly. Work-life balance has become more of a priority for me, particularly since 2020 when it was overwhelming to juggle the demands of work and parenting in the same physical space. This was felt by many parents at our institution, which led to the creation of an employee resource group for parents,¹ of which I am a founding member. Finding community is important and has been helpful to me as a working parent.

I also agree that learning how to say no is hard, but it does get easier. I value my job and the people I work with, but my family has to come first. As my kids get older, I may find myself with more time to do career-related things that I have had to put off since becoming a parent, so that is something to think about for the future.

Anita Hall: The example I always go back to is that I used to be the kind of person who would often choose to stay a little late and finish something so that it was off my plate. Now that I have a deadline for daycare pickup, that's not an option anymore.

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In terms of professional travel, I was fortunate with my first child being born at a time (2021) when nearly all conferences were virtual. I was able to attend and present at several conferences, but only “traveled” to one while pumping, which was just a single day and a short drive away. I’m expecting a second this summer and won’t have that luxury this time around. I’m hoping that I’ll be able to bring my partner and kids along if there are any major events I need to go to—and tack on a little vacation time as well since we certainly won’t be able to afford much else in the way of vacation once we’re paying for two kids in daycare.

This is currently my biggest challenge in parenting as an academic librarian—managing the low and stagnant pay. Since deciding to start a family (which was a long and expensive road for us), I’ve never seriously considered looking at positions outside of academia, because I assumed any increase in pay would be outweighed by less flexibility, time off, etc. But lots of academic library workers don’t have that flexibility, and even people like myself who could do our jobs almost entirely remotely often don’t get permission to do so. I feel like that calculation is changing.

Sarah: Looking at positions outside of academia was not on my radar. But with the pay disparities and rollback of remote/flexible work policies, it is hard not to wonder what it is like on the “other side.” If a company can somehow prove that they support “work-life balance” and give the flexibility needed for that, then I may consider moving away from academia. It is just hard to know if that truly exists in the corporate world.

Many academic library workers do not have positions that allow them flexibility anyway, I just happen to be in a role that could be done 100% remotely if I were to have that option. So I wonder, what is the motivation for staying in academic libraries with both low pay and lack of flexibility!

Courtney: Sarah, you’re so right that many factors go into academic library work and whether or not it’s “worth it” in terms of benefits and flexibility. What do you think academic libraries can do to better support parents and other caregivers?

Sarah: I think that for academic libraries to better support parents and caregivers, the institutions they are associated with have to make that change first. We need support and advocacy coming from the library administration too, not just the workers. Parents and caregivers need more flexible work schedules and remote work opportunities to balance the needs of both work and family, despite the expiration of policies created during the pandemic. For those who cannot work remotely or have a flexible schedule due to their specific roles, more paid leave time or a change in pay status to reflect the essentiality of their job may be helpful. Community and support from other parents and caregivers are game changers. There should be at least 12 weeks of paid parental leave available and clear communication of policies and resources. Lastly, stipends to offset the high costs of daycare and before/after school care since work schedules tend not to line up with school schedules.

Speaking to the precarity of the profession, I believe if these needs are implemented, it could help recruit and retain librarians and library workers, particularly as pay remains low. Speaking of the library profession, what do you all see as the biggest challenge(s) to launching a career in libraries and/or advancement in your career?

Courtney: It’s no secret that you have to be willing to move in order to secure opportunities in the library profession and that’s especially true for academic libraries.² My partner and I moved for my current position. However, now that we’re parents, it’s really difficult to be far away from our families. We have to travel and use vacation time to visit family

members and don't have the convenience of nearby support. Whether we continue to base our location around my career or prioritize being near our families, we're unsure what the future holds. Either way, it's a difficult decision.

Anita: I'm in the opposite situation as you Courtney, I moved around a lot to get started in academic librarianship and am now lucky to be near family—but I was about 7 years into my career before that was feasible. When I think back to how difficult it was to travel for interviews and be willing to move for opportunities pre-parenthood, it's hard to imagine how I would have managed it with kids. It definitely contributed to me waiting longer than I would have liked to start trying to build a family.

Having relatives nearby isn't a magical solution—we aren't able to rely on any of ours for regular childcare, and affording childcare is incredibly difficult on our salaries. However, it has made a big difference for things like sick days or unexpected daycare closures. Which brings me to something that I know has been a particular challenge for you, Sarah, now that your kids are older—childcare and school schedules often don't line up with the academic calendar. Having regular childcare or kids in school still leaves lots of gaps. How do you manage those gaps as an academic library worker?

Sarah: I am fortunate to be in the same city as my parents and in-laws. However, remaining here long-term is also a choice that comes with drawbacks, such as not being able to pursue a career that would require relocation. My husband and I have relied on our parents for childcare from the beginning. When my oldest was born, I was still in a very low-paying job at the library and we could not afford daycare without going completely broke—and that was 11 years ago! I honestly don't know how people do it and I recognize my immense privilege.

This past year, our winter break did not line up with the public school's break for the first time and that has always been the issue with fall and spring breaks (which library workers do not get time off for). For me, the only options in these situations are requesting permission to work remotely, taking leave, or asking family for help. My particular role and established trust as a long-time employee gives me flexibility, but I still have to advocate for myself.

Courtney: Thanks to both of you for bringing attention to how much our personal circumstances can impact our work. What about our roles as faculty (Anita and myself) and staff (Sarah)? U of L offers the same amount of paid parental leave for both faculty and staff,³ which is not always the case.⁴ However, the amount of annual leave varies and only classified staff accrue sick leave. Do you think there is a difference in the treatment of academic library faculty and staff as parents?

Sarah: I don't know that I have seen much difference between the treatment of faculty and staff as parents in academic libraries. I'm guessing it varies by department or supervisor. However, in the Parenting Network, we have had a hard time reaching faculty outside of the libraries. Most of our membership tends to be staff and I can't help but wonder if that says something.

Anita: Yes, teaching faculty at our institution certainly have their own challenges balancing their responsibilities with caregiving, but they typically don't have the same schedule restrictions or expectations of in-person, student-facing work. And of course, not all academic librarians have faculty status either! In fact, the really wide variation in structures at academic libraries makes it pretty tough to generalize. When I worked in a unionized environment, for example, there was much more parity between librarians and paraprofessionals in general

and I think that overall the union was very beneficial for work-life balance and quality of life—but there was way less flexibility.

Courtney: As frustrating as it can be to balance the demands of academic library work with parenting, I am grateful for the many opportunities to connect with other parents on campus. We are all involved in two groups at U of L: an advocacy group for gender equity and the Parenting Network (employee resource group that strives to influence university policy to better support caregivers). This has aligned with my desire to make the university a better place for all students and employees.

Anita: I have had such a great experience being involved with these campus groups and making connections with other parents at the university, and yet in some ways I really chafe at how much parenting has become a part of my work identity. I've always cared a lot about labor and workforce issues for library workers, and I like to think that I would be passionate about the issues we face as parents even if I weren't one myself. Unfortunately, it just feels unavoidable, since these issues impact everyone's work so significantly. As much as possible I try to frame questions/concerns about the challenges of working parents in broader terms because they impact lots of non-parents as well—from people with elder care and other caregiving responsibilities to those with accessibility concerns, making our workplaces more flexible, accommodating, and understanding is a benefit to everyone.

Sarah: I agree that it feels good to be a part of trying to make this a better place for all. I talk about the benefits of remote and flexible work a lot and as someone who was diagnosed with ADHD as an adult, I sometimes fear that people are going to get tired of hearing me talk about my ADHD too! Even though both being a parent and having ADHD are huge parts of my identity and require me to advocate for accommodations to be successful. I am happy to serve on advocacy groups and I cherish the connections I have with other parents at the university. I am thankful to have you two as colleagues as well! ✨

Notes

1. "Parenting Network," University of Louisville, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://louisville.edu/employeesuccess/parentingnetwork>
2. Annie Pho and Dustin Fife, "The Cost of Librarianship: Relocating for Work and Finding Community," *College & Research Libraries News* 84, no. 6 (2023): <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.84.6.191>.
3. "Policy Parental Leave," University of Louisville, last updated August 24, 2022, <https://louisville.edu/policies/policies-and-procedures/pageholder/pol-parental-leave>.
4. "Time Away with Family Medical Leave," Human Resources, University of Kentucky, accessed March 12, 2024, <https://hr.uky.edu/work-life-and-well-being/working-parents/parental-leave>.