

Meeting the needs of parents and carers within library services: responding to student voices at the University of East London

David Clover, Associate Director, Library and Learning Services, University of East London,
d.clover@uel.ac.uk

Challenges and barriers for student parents and carers

Alongside increased participation in higher education we have seen increased diversity amongst the student body. Despite this increased diversification of the student body it has been suggested that British universities are still organised to cater for students who are young and without caring responsibilities (Marandet and Wainwright, 2009) and university policies do not address the needs of students with children (Lyonette et al, 2015).

Research in the UK suggests that student parents (and student mothers in particular) face challenges in the higher education environment. The National Union of Students (2009) has described student parents as an at risk group in terms of retention. Lyonette et al (2015) note that the 'demands of juggling childcare and domestic work with studying, and in many cases with paid work, are particularly difficult for student mothers.' (p. 5) Marandet and Wainwright (2010) found that a perceived lack of students in a similar situation can lead to students feeling isolated and not belonging and Moreau and Kerner (2012) highlight that space policies often restrict the presence of children on campus, including creating barriers to use of the library.

Little research has been found which mentions the experience of student parents with library services. The National Union of Students has reported (2009) that 16% of student parents surveyed had received a library fine because of problems with childcare and that 39% had felt unable to access learning resources at their institution as much as they needed to, because of a lack of childcare or because of the high costs of travelling to their institution. Not being able to take children into libraries and computer rooms was a problem for 39% of respondents and this problem was exacerbated in school holidays when many parents don't have childcare funding.

At the University of East London more than a third of our students have dependents and a quarter of students are parents. Over the 2015-16 academic year we decided to investigate the views and experiences of students who were parents and/or carers of children in relation to library services. This investigation was linked to three key strategic aims

- enhancing and improving the student experience by
 - continuing to get to know our users better,
 - accessing student voice through a variety of approaches, reflective of the variety of our students and their different modes of study, and
 - reviewing services for particular groups of students;
- developing an inclusive service with a commitment to equality and diversity; and

- improving our physical spaces including refurbishment of our Docklands Library to better support independent student learning, skills development and group study.

We were conscious that initiatives such as 24/7 opening, automatic renewal of borrowed books, and allowing parents and carers to bring children into the library (under supervision) were beneficial to students, but wanted to explore in more depth how we could improve the experience of these students.

Capturing student voices

Initial plans to consult students through focus groups were abandoned in the realization that the students we aimed to reach were time poor and tended not to spend longer than necessary on campus. We decided to use a short paper based survey and have this distributed to students using the library and bringing in children. Response rates increased when this was actually attached to the declaration form parents and carers were required to complete when bringing in children. The survey was open from November 2015 to March 2016. Over 130 responses were received and were analysed.

The survey was deliberately kept short with a few brief fixed choice questions and three open ended questions aimed at exploring richer feedback. We wanted to know what activities parents and carers were doing in the library and asked the reason(s) for their visit. Respondents said they had come to the library to:

- Choose books 50.0%
- Talk to a member of staff 15.4%
- Use the PCs, printer or photocopiers 53.8%
- Revise for exams 25.4%
- Research 46.9%
- Other 13.1%

We were also interested in the duration of their visit. Our guidelines made reference to 'brief visits e.g. when collecting or returning items or printing a document'. Responses to the question 'How long do you usually spend in the library?' were

- Less than one hour 25.2%
- Between 1-2 hours 40.7%
- More than 2 hours 34.1%

We asked open ended questions focused on what students liked about visiting the library with their child; what they didn't like; and how we could improve our service for them.

There is a sense that the parents and carers are grateful that they can bring their children into the library so their studies are not interrupted due to childcare problems:

I have the opportunity of making the best use of my time which does not depend on childcare.

If there is school inset day or bank holiday when schools are closed, I have no choice but bring my kids in if I have to revise for exams or if I have important things to do in the library. I like the idea that you can take your kids in.

They mention that it is safe, convenient, accessible and quiet:

I don't worry about her safety as she is always with me.

It's safe and quiet.

Respondents also noted their views that is valuable for their children to be introduced to the library environment, not only to see their parents in an academic setting, but also to study together as a family

My child gets to see and be in an adult learning environment hopefully familiarising and inspiring desire for their own university education.

They can see and observe students studying and the vast array of books and generally see what university life is like.

He can see what Mummy does.

Some parents and carers noted barriers to using the library, and a feeling that the libraries were not 'child friendly'.

There is no designated area where it is safe to let children that are young out of the pram.

There seems to be no notice or signage that children are allowed (even when non-disruptive).

Some mentioned the long signing in process, and lack of computer access or other facilities or activities for children. Parents also noted concerns about their own children's behavior, and expressed discomfort because their children may disturb other students, one parent noting the 'glares from onlookers if the child makes the slightest noise'.

We welcomed suggestions and ideas for improving our service, for when respondents visited the library with their child. Overwhelmingly, parents requested a separate area, preferably with activities for children.

Have a dedicated kids' area or study area for students with their children, which can help keep them occupied in a safe and conducive environment.

Students expressed a desire for children to be able to log onto computers. Child sized chairs were also mentioned as was a changing room and suggestions of mini tablets, reading books and games.

Improving the student experience

We were interested to discover that students with children spent longer in the library than we had thought. We were pleased to note the values and perceived benefits for children arising from using the library with their parent or carer. The National Union of Students (2009) also found that when parents could take children into the library with them this was regarded as positively facilitating their study, and also seen as having a positive effect on their children. Overall we thought the feedback was both rich and useful.

Our customer services team assessed the feedback and suggestions. While we are aware some university libraries in the United States have created specific spaces for students and their children (Petit, 2014 and McCoy, 2013) this was not seen as practicable in the library spaces we managed, though we have noted that groups of parents do on occasion use group study spaces for this purpose.

We agreed to adapt the signing-in form and guidance and remove time limits for those using the library with children, and to include our willingness, during staffed hours and when possible, to fetch books for parents and carers. We have provided baby changing facilities on each site (available for both male and female parents/carers). With the support of our Equality and Diversity office we have created small collections of children's books on each site housed in child-friendly storage prominently displayed near service desks.

We are exploring options to offer half term activities, potentially in partnership with PGCE or early childhood studies students. While we are unable to provide log in access to networked computers we are also considering the feasibility of offering a short term loan activity pack, which may include a tablet and headphones preloaded with educational programmes and games, as well as colouring-in or other activity sheets.

In an institution with a relatively high number of mature students and of student parents we hope these initiatives will help parents feel more welcome within our library spaces and more able to make effective use of these, while balancing their access with the desire to avoid disruption to other students. The use of a targeted survey with open questions provided sufficient feedback to make concrete actions and for small but significant changes be made to the service to improve the student experience experienced by a specific group of users. As part of our continuing seeking improvements in our services, we will explore the needs of different segments of our student population, seeking out opportunities to develop new approaches that best meet their varying needs.

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