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Families Belong

Supporting Student-Parents and Library Patrons with Family-Friendly Spaces

Student-parents are a growing constituent of university students. According to Anderson et al., the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) reported almost 18% of undergraduate students are raising children while enrolled.[1] There is a growing body of research examining how the needs of these students can be met on university campuses, including in academic libraries. The Illinois Board of Higher Education requires public universities collect student-parent data, made available in the Student Parent Data Collection (SPDC) Report; statewide, the number of student-parents hovers just under 3%.[2] Over the course of several years, librarians at Eastern Illinois University (EIU) Booth Library have seen this emerging need, backed by the SPDC data: In 2022–23, 325 (7.1%) of EIU students were parents.[3] We knew student-parents and caregivers were visiting Booth, but we did not know the potential impact of specialized spaces and amenities meeting the unique needs of caring for children while accomplishing academic tasks. What began as a modest endeavor blossomed when members of university administration learned about our project. With their buy-in, we gained additional funding that allowed the expansion of our initial plans into a "Family Hub." Unique to the library, EIU's Family Hub would serve the entire campus as a place where people could go care for their children while finding support for their academic endeavors.

Community Need

University students with children face distinct challenges and barriers when it comes to utilizing library services and accessing one-on-one research help from librarians. They are often balancing school, work, and their children and have specific needs allowing for more productive work sessions at the library. Research shows small offerings, such as lactation spaces, child-friendly furniture and toys, stroller accessibility, and educational activities, all help student-parents feel welcome at the library.[4]

This project began because of an interaction with a student-parent and her baby. The student used our curriculum materials center several times per week to complete computer-based assignments, all while pushing a stroller, soliciting friends to hold the baby, or bouncing the infant up and down. The computer terminal where the student worked was near an open stairwell, so she could not set the baby down to play for fear of her crawling toward the stairs. Because we did not have a safe, clean, infant-friendly place for her child, the student could not truly settle into her work. We began to wonder, *"How could we help this student and students like her?"*

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A small internal grant we wrote for $775 was funded through a university endowment, allowing the purchase of infant activity mats, screen-free audio players, activity packs for older children, and lactation room amenities. At the same time, EIU was starting to build affinity-based hubs around campus, supporting marginalized populations. Our provost felt this was an excellent match and invited us to develop a multispace hub at the library geared toward student-parents and the larger university community. The budget of $10,000 would include two lactation rooms and additional family-friendly study spaces, appropriate for parents trying to study and care for their children.

Project Management

Once the scope of the project shifted to a multispace plan, the need for a full project management team came into view. Members were selected based on their roles within library services and relationships with university constituents. The team included librarians, the dean of library services, and members of our library administrative office: our business manager, marketing director, and events and display coordinator. We knew project deliverables would include buildout, procurement, marketing, and stakeholder feedback, but we had not anticipated concepts like library policy and systems updates.

Family Hub logo.

The librarians began envisioning the necessary spaces. University leadership requested two lactation rooms, and the librarians settled on an enclosed family study room and an additional open family-friendly study area. Once spaces were selected, the librarians began working on naming the spaces; it was imperative to be inclusive so all users would feel a sense of belonging. We discussed potential names with the campus parent group and conferred with a women and gender studies faculty member. We also researched how international support groups like La Leche League International name such spaces.[5] In the end, we selected "Lactation & Infant Feeding Room" for two spaces, along with "Family-Friendly Study Space" and "Family Study Room," all composing "The Family Hub."

Our dean and business manager took the lead on timelines, buildout, budgeting, and communication with the facilities planning and management department. Adding a sink was imperative for families to have a positive experience; we identified a room that could share existing plumbing for a budget-friendly retrofit. Additionally, facilities needed to remove attached shelving, repaint, remove carpeting, and refinish the existing floors with tile so the spaces could be sanitized.

Librarians were charged with furnishing the spaces. When the project grew from a small lactation room with one chair to a multispace hub, we needed to secure double the items originally planned for (e.g., glider chairs, sound machines, rugs, mirror) and source items for the family study areas. Because many people would use the furnishings over several years, we chose commercial suppliers for durability. We purchased consumables (coloring packs, plastic baggies, and cold packs) and learning activities like audiobook players through online retailers.

Unanticipated Tasks

Two areas not anticipated were how policies and systems would need to be updated and library personnel would need to be trained. Working with our library policy committee,

we reviewed the Children in Library policy, finding it out of date compared to current Illinois law.[6] Once updated, this was shared widely in multiple personnel meetings and posted in all hub spaces. We also discussed which spaces would be part of our room reservation system and which would be open for public use. The decision was three spaces would be added to the current reservation system (both Lactation & Infant Feeding Rooms and the Family Study Room) while the Family-Friendly Study

Lactation & Infant Feeding Room with sink.

Space would be open on a first-come, first-served basis. The reservable rooms follow the same protocol as any other study space in the library, with one caveat: The lactation spaces are open to both the EIU community and the general public visiting campus. With thousands of visitors to campus each year, it was important to make sure campus partners like New Student and Family Programs, Events and Catering, and Enrollment Management could publicize that family-friendly spaces are available to campus visitors. Lastly, multiple activity pack items were added to the catalog for patron checkout for in-building use only.

The new spaces also meant library personnel needed training. We created a frequently asked questions page that was circulated via email and Microsoft Teams and discussed at the monthly all personnel meeting. Additionally, personnel were instructed on helping patrons without reservations and patrons who are not part of the university system. We also trained staff to show patrons to rooms on other floors, which spaces would remain locked when in use, and reminded personnel how to handle unattended children. Lastly, research, engagement, and scholarship librarians were asked to meet students in these spaces, if called upon, as signage in these areas welcomes student-parents to call the Research Help Desk for research assistance. Detailed training put library workers at ease and allowed all to take ownership of the new spaces.

Marketing

Strategic marketing of the Family Hub was critical; previous lactation spaces had little use by patrons due to a lack of signage and clear communication. Working with our library marketing director, we developed a marketing plan consisting of branding and identity, messaging for leadership, and outreach to library patron groups. Like the naming conventions, it was important the branding be inclusive; our marketing director and exhibits and events coordinator created a logo, in the university colors, symbolizing two adults with a child. The logo is used as signage to identify the four Family Hub spaces and acts as branding on promotional fliers, webpages, and social media posts.

With the logo in place to visually represent our work, developing messaging for university leadership was our next step. Talking points, including draft statements for faculty syllabi, university events, and visitor messaging, were delivered to key constituent teams to share around campus. Additionally, our marketing director worked with human resources and university marketing and communications to ensure promotional materials were included

in new hire packets and displayed at relevant event and that new spaces were identified on campus maps. Lastly, a specific plan for a social media rollout for the first month of classes was designed and implemented.

Outreach to library patron groups was crucial for spreading the word to students, faculty, staff, and the community at large. We identified multiple campus leadership units, setting up short in-person presentations at their regular meetings. These included the provost advisory group (all deans and directors), council of chairs, faculty senate, employee unions, and student government. The feedback from these teams was overwhelmingly positive. Although it took more time than email communication, the in-person presentations helped convey the need of working together to promote these new, essential spaces and services. Lastly, a ribbon-cutting celebration allowed the entire community to see the new Family Hub. In addition to university members, the Chamber of Commerce and other community partners attended. With more than seventy-five guests in attendance, word about these spaces spread through the campus newspaper, two local news outlets, and the university television and radio broadcast.

Marketing materials.

Results and Next Steps

We were pleased with inaugural usage during the fall 2024 semester: fifty-seven bookings for all our reservable spaces for a total of 4,260 minutes of use. Of these, twenty-six reservations were for the Family Study Room, and thirty-one were for the lactation rooms. We were excited that thirteen unique patrons returned to the Family Hub, with two patrons returning more than ten times each. Results showed that Wednesday was our busiest day of the week. The Family Hub activity kits were checked out five times.

Family study room.

As part of our evaluation plan, we created a brief survey for Family Hub users to complete. Three users responded, with two providing free-form feedback indicating that they loved the space but would be more comfortable if the lactation room locked behind them. We took this as an opportunity to change our procedures and retrain our personnel appropriately.

As we think about the future, we recognize marketing will be an ongoing process. We plan to advertise the Family Hub at our summer new student and faculty orientation programs and meet with our new human resources director to help raise awareness among our faculty and staff that the Family Hub is for them too.

Recommendations

For anyone seeking to make their library more family-friendly, here are three customizable ideas.

(1) Think about any small spaces that are underutilized in their current form, such as large closets, unused faculty study carrels, or vacant offices. We repurposed existing study rooms and faculty study carrels for our lactation rooms and Family Study Room. Also consider where your patrons with children tend to gravitate. Examine whether there are any amenities, such as soft seating, or activities you can add to the spaces to make them more comfortable, friendly, and safe for families.

(2) Lean into partnerships both within your organization and with family agencies in your community. Invite community partners, such as lactation professionals, birth to five programs, WIC, or hospital educators to advertise their programs for families in your library.

(3) Finally, do what you can. You do not need a large budget to make your library more friendly. Purchasing a purpose-built, parent-child study carrel was out of reach for our budget. We scoured educational furniture companies and saved money by creating our own Family-Friendly Study Space for people with small children using connective furniture panels and foam flooring. The computers added to study areas were repurposed from around the library, also saving costs.

Conclusion

Family-friendly spaces around academic libraries support patrons as they juggle the responsibilities of being a parent/caregiver and student. Acknowledging this need and making an effort eases the burden for these student-parents seeking to use our resources and expertise to succeed in their university coursework. The Family Hub at Booth Library, with new lactation/feeding rooms and study spaces for those with children, allows student-parents to feel they belong at the library, just like their traditional student counterparts. Through the generous support of Eastern Illinois University administration, we had the opportunity to take a small project and grow it into a multispace service point for the entire EIU community. We understand not all schools have the monetary resources to create these special spaces, but we have learned that a little goes a long way. As students, faculty, staff, and community members continue to learn about the facilities, our hope is the program will grow and attract more patrons who would not otherwise seek out the library as a hub of support for their academic work. ⇜

Notes

1. Theresa Anderson et al., "Who Are Undergraduates with Dependent Children? An Updated Overview of Student-Parent Characteristics Using 2020 Data," *Student-Parent Action through Research Knowledge (SPARK) Collaborative*, September 2024, https://studentparentaction.org/resources/who-are-undergraduates-with-dependent-children-2020.

2. "Student Parent Data Collection Act Annual Report | Institutional Research," *Eastern Illinois University*, accessed June 3, 2025, https://www.eiu.edu//ir/student-parent-data-collection-report.php.

3. "Student Parent Data Collection Act Annual Report," *Eastern Illinois University.*

4. Rachel E. Scott and Brannen Varner, "Exploring the Research and Library Needs of Student-Parents," *College & Research Libraries* 81, no. 4 (May 5, 2020): 598, doi:10.5860/crl.81.4.598.

5. "Policies and Standing Rules," *La Leche League International*, accessed June 5, 2025, https://llli.org/about/policies-standing-rules/.

6. "Public Act 90-0239 of the 90th General Assembly," accessed May 8, 2025, https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/publicacts/pubact90/acts/90-0239.html.