

Data, Dinners, and Diapers: Traveling with a Baby to a Scientific Conference

Laura Kloepper

In April 2019, when I was in my fourth year in a tenure-track position and managing several grant projects, I gave birth to my first son, Nathaniel. My institution, Saint Mary's College (Notre Dame, IN), offered generous parental leave, which allowed me to take a teaching release through the following January. During my pregnancy, this sounded like a dream. Almost nine months off from work, but I could still maintain some income? Sign me up!

The first month after Nathaniel was born, I fully embraced my new maternal role and didn't even check my email, but after that month, I slowly began to struggle with my new identity. I knew I was incredibly fortunate to even be in a position to stay at home with my son but taking a complete absence from work began to feel isolating. Furthermore, I felt like I was halting my research trajectory. With my partner's support, we decided to find part-time childcare in the summer and fall so I could work with students on some projects, write some grants, and wrap up some manuscripts.

As an early-career scientist, I also knew the importance of attending scientific conferences during my leave. Due to the close timing around my due date, I missed several important conferences in April and May, including the Acoustical Society of America (ASA), so I wasn't willing to miss my fall scientific conferences as well. But as a mother who was committed to both breastfeeding and conferencing and as one part of a dual-career couple, this meant I had only had one option: strap on the baby in the carrier, pack the suitcase, hit the road (or sky), and hope for the best.

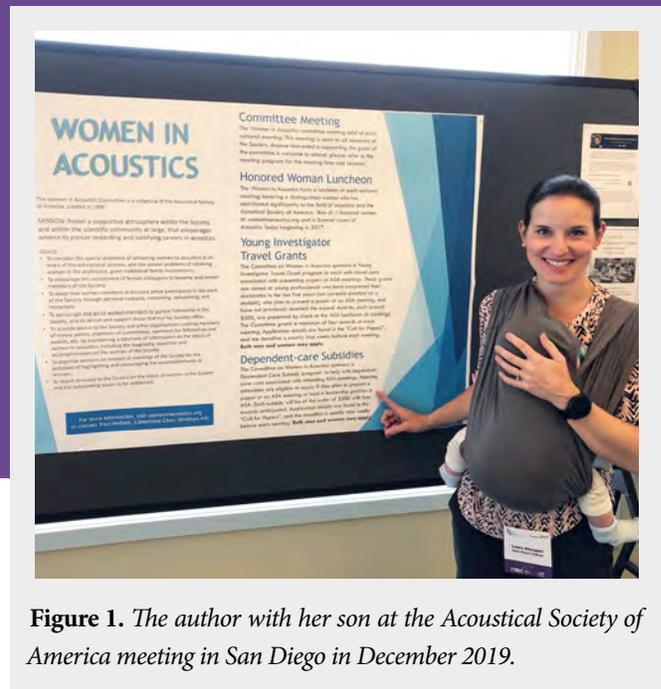


Figure 1. The author with her son at the Acoustical Society of America meeting in San Diego in December 2019.

My first conference was the North American Society for Bat Research that was held in Kalamazoo, MI, about 90 minutes away from my hometown of South Bend, IN. This was a good warm-up conference because it required a short car ride and just one night in a hotel. In advance of the conference, I reached out to some colleagues in leadership positions in the Society to ask if it would be appropriate to bring my baby. I got enthusiastic responses from all of them, including several offers to help assist with childcare.

As the conference week approached, I was a ball of nerves and completely exhausted. I had a teething six month old who was only sleeping for two hours at a time and was incredibly irritable. My partner had also been traveling the whole week, so I was handling the nighttime wake-ups. I told myself I just had to show up at the conference, deliver my talk, and have my one meeting and then I could leave. The conference ended up going about how I expected it to. It was a mix of meltdowns during meetings and coffee breaks and giggles and coos during poster sessions and business lunches. What did help was wearing my baby in a carrier so he snuggled against my chest the entire time. A colleague even convinced me to try to wear him during my talk, but we only made it to my hypothesis slide before he started to fuss and I passed him off to a colleague who had offered to stand by. But in the end,

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I considered the conference a success. I presented my research, had some important meetings, and got caught up-to-date on the latest research in my field.

My second conference was the ASA meeting in San Diego (CA). Even though this would be a five-day affair with a long plane ride, I was much more optimistic going into this conference. The ASA has always felt like home, and I was downright giddy to show off my son to all my ASA family (**Figure 1**). Furthermore, I was awarded the Women in Acoustics Dependent Care Subsidy (see acousticalsociety.org/grants-subsidies/), which allowed me to hire a babysitter through a licensed, bonded, and insured company the hotel concierge recommended, who would watch Nathaniel right in my hotel room when I had committee meetings and talks. I reached out to the company in advance of the meeting, and they helped match me with a sitter specific to my needs and who was available the whole week I was at the ASA. My sitter was a caring grandmother who treated Nathaniel as her own and sent me countless pictures and videos throughout the week. I felt completely comfortable with Nathaniel in her care. If I didn't have the financial support of the Dependent Care Subsidy and the help of the babysitter, I would not have made it to San Diego.

The ASA is always a busy conference for me, and this one was perhaps the busiest: one workshop, three talks, and two committee meetings. In advance of the conference, I again reached out to many colleagues. I knew trying to juggle all my ASA responsibilities would be challenging even with the help of the babysitter, and I wanted full disclosure that I would be bringing my child.

As expected, I got nothing but enthusiastic responses. Some colleagues met me at the airport to help with my mountain of baby luggage and transportation to the hotel. Others invited us to dinner and were more than eager to play “pass the baby” so I could eat a proper meal. I felt comfortable bringing Nathaniel with me to informal meetings or sessions when I didn't have childcare.

During the conference, the number of parents, including ASA members I had not previously met, who came up to me to share their own stories of bringing children to the ASA was so heartwarming. I particularly enjoyed my discussions on work-life harmony with members of the Women in Acoustics Committee (see

the *Sound Perspectives* essay in this issue of *Acoustics Today* by Tracianne B. Neilsen and Alison Stimpert). Most importantly, Nathaniel had a wonderful time. With the childcare, he was able to stay entertained and well rested, which ensured that he was in a good mood when I took him to events. As I walked the beach with Nathaniel the morning of my last day in San Diego, I reflected on how my time at the ASA allowed me to see that I could be both a scientist and a mom, the perfect transition to ending my maternity leave.

Throughout both of my conference experiences, the one thing that helped me the most was support. Whether it was formal support, such as the ASA Dependent Care Subsidy, or informal support from colleagues, knowing that I had someone willing to assist helped me ease my concerns of bringing my child to the conference. I am certainly not the first person to bring a baby to a conference nor will I be the last. So, to all of you parents who came before, thank you for helping set an example and sharing your stories and advice with us new parents. And to the parents-to-be, don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help. You've got an army of support ready to help you achieve that work-life harmony.

Contact Information

Laura Kloepper lkloepper@saintmarys.edu

Department of Biology
Saint Mary's College
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556, USA

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