

Jesse Carliner and Kyla Everall

Time of one's own

Piloting free childminding at the University of Toronto Libraries

In March 2018, the University of Toronto (UT) Libraries opened its first family study space, which was very well received.¹ In the years since the family study space opened, there has been a growth in research about student parents and how academic libraries can best serve them.² In response to an increased awareness about the student parent population and their needs, the libraries piloted programming for student parents during the 2019-20 academic year, including free childminding sessions. We will discuss how we developed and launched the service, areas for improvement, and other considerations for libraries planning a similar program. Although in-person programming is currently paused at UT due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we anticipate further growth in services for student parents once we can resume regular operations.

The University of Toronto

Historically, support for student parents has been primarily the concern of UT's Family Care Office. Recently other divisions at the university have become involved in learning more about the student parent population and how to better support them and have been advocating to make the university more family friendly. In particular, UT's Innovation Hub,³ part of the university's Student Life division, has taken the lead on research to learn more about the student parent population and has made recommendations based on this research for how the university can better support student parents. Innovation Hub's 2018-19 study identified four key themes of concern for UT student parents: "finding belonging, navigating systems, emotional pressure, and practical needs."⁴

Supporting student parents in the library

Accessing affordable, on-demand childcare is one of the greatest challenges facing student parents.⁵ Student parents often struggle to find enough time to focus on their studies without distraction. Childcare in Toronto is the most expensive in Canada,⁶ and, even for student parents who can access it, regular daycare is not an option for students who need additional time to work on their schoolwork on weekends and evenings. Hiring a sitter for even a few hours of study in the library is a luxury that most student parents cannot afford. In order to provide student parents with some time to focus on their studies, a team of staff from the library and Family Care Office submitted a proposal to the chief librarian to fund a free childminding pilot to be held in the Family Study Space. The programming had two primary goals: to support student parents by addressing some of their practical needs and to promote awareness of the Family Study Space among new and returning students.

Proposing a childminding service

To get approval and funding from the library administration to pilot temporary childminding, we needed to make a compelling argument for the benefits of the program, explain how

Jesse Carliner is communications and user services librarian, email: jesse.carliner@utoronto.ca, and Kyla Everall is user services librarian, email: kyla.everall@utoronto.ca, at the University of Toronto Libraries

© 2021 Jesse Carliner and Kyla Everall

we would implement it, and address liability concerns. We made the case that free temporary childminding for students with children would have a significant positive impact on an underserved population at the university by addressing the three main obstacles to success that student parents experience: financial pressures, time management, and childcare. The childminding pilot would also align with the library's strategic plan to provide innovative services and strengthen our relationships with the communities we serve. Free childcare in the library would allow students time to work on assignments and access to library print collections, services, and spaces, increasing equity of access for students with childcare responsibilities.

At the time of our proposal, we could find no examples of academic libraries offering childcare to student parents.

To address liability concerns, we worked closely with our partners at the Family Care Office who operate an on-campus childcare center. The childcare center has a liability waiver form that we adapted for childminding in the library. We also had the university's Department of Risk Management and Insurance review our proposal and the adapted liability waiver form, and they assured us that they had no concerns about our proposal. In developing the proposal, we worked with the director of the Family Care Office to ensure that we would be operating in accordance with the Ontario provincial regulations for an unlicensed childcare setting. Childcare regulations for our institution in Ontario are under the jurisdiction of the provincial government. Regulations may be different in other, cities, provinces, or countries.

To address other liability concerns and provincial regulations, the staff operating the service would be professional childminders. The operations of the pilot childminding service required an existing pool of licensed and vetted childcare providers. As library staff, we did not have the capacity to provide this service ourselves nor do we feel qualified to hire and vet childminding staff to provide the service.

The four key points to justify our proposal were:

- The partnership with the Family Care Office—we would be guided by their expertise and have access to a pool of casual, part-time childminders from the university's Early Learning Centre.

- We had clearance from the university's Department of Risk Management and Insurance.

- A suitable space was already available in the library.

- The strong positive reception of the Robarts Library Family Study Space following its launch had demonstrated a need for student parent support.

Based on our proposal, the chief librarian approved the childminding pilot and provided grant funding to hire the childminders, the cost of which would be invoiced to the library by the Family Care Office.

Creating the service

In creating this service, the first thing that we considered was timing. We had funding for four 4-hour sessions. We decided to pilot the program on consecutive weekends in the fall semester of 2019, both Saturday and Sunday afternoon from 1 to 5 p.m. We chose two weekends near the end of the term, when most essays and other significant assignments are due and when parents were likely to benefit from improved access to the library to work on their assignments.

The Family Care Office recruited the childminders from their pool of casual childcare workers and helped with the development of policies and procedures. We adapted one of their daycare waiver forms for the context of the library program, requesting parental contact information, information about the child (including allergies, medications, etc.), an emergency contact, and a statement of informed consent. The Family Care Office also helped us determine the number of children that could attend based on space size, child age, and number of childcare providers that were going to be present based on Ontario provincial regulations. For our pilot, we limited capacity to ten children, and, of those, only one could be between the ages of 6 months and 2.5 years, one could be 2.5 to 3

years old, and the rest could be between 3 and 12 years old.

The childminding sessions were hosted in the library's Family Study Space, a self-contained room already furnished with toys, books, and child-sized furniture. Although the room was already well equipped for children, we did a walkthrough with the lead childminder in advance so that she could get a sense of the space, let us know what additional equipment would be needed, and plan to bring some of her own extra supplies.

Promoting and marketing the service

To promote the service as widely as possible while also raising the visibility of, and advocacy for, this population, we engaged in a wide range of communication activities. We announced the new service in the university's newsletter to faculty and staff, which also includes graduate students who are teaching assistants. We also promoted the service through print posters. The Family Care Office promoted the service through their communications channels. The university's communications office published a news article on their website about the service, and there was also interest from the media, who wanted to learn more about the service and the reasons for offering it. We also used social media to promote the service and received a great deal of interest both from within and outside the university community. Our marketing approach proved to be effective, and there was overwhelming interest from student parents who wanted to participate in the program.

Managing the service

Managing the service was the most challenging aspect of the childminding pilot project. We had no prior experience running childcare programming, so even with the guidance of the Family Care Office, we had a significant learning curve. The first challenge was managing registration. We anticipated that interest would far outstrip availability and we wanted to distribute the spots in an equitable manner. To achieve this, we decided that each family would only be able to register for one session, to ensure the greatest number of families could participate.

Registration needed to be managed manually, due to the number of factors to consider. Families could only sign up for one session each, each session could only accommodate a certain number of children of each age range, and registrants often had questions about how the sessions would be run. Parents were asked to email the library to register. We managed registration and waitlists using spreadsheets. We developed email templates for registration confirmation and reminders, which included important instructions and the waiver form. Registration closed on the Friday of each weekend. The service was unable to accommodate drop-ins, even in the event of same-day cancellations, to minimize potential complications for the childminders.

On the day of each session, a member of the planning team was on-site to meet the childminders, provide them with any additional equipment and supplies, the list of registrants, a sign-in sheet for parents to use when they dropped off their kids, and a general set of extra hands to help at the start of the service. As an unlicensed childcare program under provincial regulations, parents were required to stay on-site in the library while their children were with the childminders. The parents were required to be available by phone in case of emergency or other issues arising, including the need to administer medication or acute separation anxiety. As the parents dropped off their children they signed in, dropped off their waiver, and checked in with the childminders. Because the childminders were only hired for four hours, the parents were required to return 15-to-20 minutes before the end of the session to make sure the room was tidied up and that the session concluded on time.

Outcomes and lessons learned

All four sessions offered were fully booked and had a waitlist. The participants were extremely happy to have the opportunity to use this service, and many provided feedback that they wished this would be offered throughout the term. The parents expressed a desire for a more varied schedule, including weekday evenings or weekend mornings. We learned a lot from

this first-term childminding pilot and had planned to offer it again in spring 2020. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library closed in March, and we did not have time to implement changes to the program.

Based on our experience, here are some considerations and suggestions for libraries considering a similar pilot:

- Although only two childminders were legally required in Ontario, it was challenging for them to keep ten kids of varied ages entertained in a relatively small room for four hours, especially if there was a very young child present. Consider hiring an additional child minder or raising the minimum age requirement for participating children.
- Acquire more books, crafts, games, and other activities than you think you'll need.
- Consider how to accommodate children with special needs, learning disabilities, or who require medication, and clearly communicate these accommodations in advance.
- Clearly communicate expectations with parents about snacks, drinks, as well as diapers for the younger children.
- Find ways to streamline or collaborate with programming partners to share the work of administering registration, as managing program registration manually is labor intensive.

Conclusion

We envision that a free childminding program for student parents could grow into a regular program and could include funding partnerships with UT's School of Graduate Studies, Graduate Student Union, Family Care Office, and other interested campus partners. As the largest university in Canada with the largest research library system, offering regular programming for student parents demonstrates a commitment to inclusivity and advocacy for this underserved population, while hopefully encouraging this trend at university libraries across Canada and the United States.

Notes

1. Jesse Carliner and Kyla Overall, "Playtime at Robarts Library: Opening a Family-Friendly

Study Space at the University of Toronto," *C&RL News* 80, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.80.2.100>.

2. Tyler C. Graff, Robert D. Ridge, and Holt Zaugg, "A Space for Every Student: Assessing the Utility of a Family Friendly Study Room in a University Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 59, no. 6 (August 18, 2019): 629–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1626650>; Anne Cooper Moore, Rebecca Croxton, and Lindsey Sprague, "Breaking Down Barriers for Student Parents and Caregivers with Family-Friendly Library Spaces," *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 3 (November 19, 2019): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1685823>; Rachel E. Scott and Brannen Varner, "Exploring the Research and Library Needs of Student-Parents," *C&RL* 81, no. 4 (May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.4.598>.

3. "The Innovation Hub," The Innovation Hub, accessed November 17, 2020, <http://blogs.studentlife.utoronto.ca/innovationhub/>.

4. Jesse Carliner and Kyla Overall, "Playtime at Robarts Library: Opening a Family-Friendly Study Space at the University of Toronto," *C&RL News* 80, no. 2 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.80.2.100>.

5. Tyler C. Graff, Robert D. Ridge, and Holt Zaugg, "A Space for Every Student: Assessing the Utility of a Family Friendly Study Room in a University Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 59, no. 6 (August 18, 2019): 629–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1626650>; Anne Cooper Moore, Rebecca Croxton, and Lindsey Sprague, "Breaking Down Barriers for Student Parents and Caregivers with Family-Friendly Library Spaces," *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 3 (November 19, 2019): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2019.1685823>; Rachel E. Scott and Brannen Varner, "Exploring the Research and Library Needs of Student-Parents," *C&RL* 81, no. 4 (May 2020), <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.4.598>.

6. "The Innovation Hub," The Innovation Hub, accessed November 17, 2020, <http://blogs.studentlife.utoronto.ca/innovationhub/>. *zz*