

## Family-Friendly Meetings

PMM5 Postscript™ Number 41

**Background Information:** Social and recreational opportunities can enhance a meeting. Andrew Schorr discusses various guest programs in Chapter 31, Guest Programs, Hospitality and Recreation, in *Professional Meeting Management*®, fifth edition. This chapter covers a gamut of guest programs and focuses on:

- The importance of providing hospitality and recreational events
- How a destination management company (DMC) can assist in guest programs
- How to develop plans for a hospitality suite
- How to compare and evaluate various child care options for meetings

**PMM5 Postscript Use:** For people who travel to meetings, being away represents a change in routine, falling behind on tasks at home or the office and time away from the family. Multiple-day meetings are a stress on all participants, not the least, parents. Many organizations like Starbucks and Coca-Cola recognize that including families at off-site meetings instills pride and loyalty while enhancing productivity (Leong, 2007). This PMM5 Postscript™ addresses childcare programs for meetings. The PMM5 Postscript™ also includes additional group discussion or research projects to supplement the PMM5 chapter.

**Learner Outcomes:** At the completion of this reading, you should be able to:

- Discuss family trends affecting meetings.
- List a minimum of six benefits to planning family-friendly meetings.
- Explain five necessary elements in on-site child care arrangements.
- Discuss three intangibles affecting the child-care experience.

**Related PMM5 Chapter:** Chapter 31, Guest Programs, Hospitality and Recreation  
Author: Andrew Schorr



## Traveling with Children

Professional parents are increasingly choosing to bring their families along on business travel. A survey conducted for the National Business Travel Association by the Travel Industry Association of America found that of the 210.5 million business trips taken in 2004, 10 percent involved adults with children in tow, with women more likely than men to take their children (Garfinkel, 2006). In response, arrangements for children — including on-site childcare and youth programs, parties and tours — are increasingly being recognized as an integral part of a successful meeting itinerary. Meeting planners across industries and geographies also agree that the trend in family-friendly meetings is on the rise (Leong, 2007).

The trend is likely to continue as meeting participants get younger. Judi Casey, director of the Sloan Work and Family Research network, is cited in an article entitled, A Family Affair. She states:

“Overall, we’ve seen a kind of blurring of work and family within the last ten years and probably even before that. There is some research that shows that younger workers are more family-centric and that family is just as important as work, where older workers are more work-centric. Now (younger workers) will be looking for opportunities that include their families” (Morell, 2007).

## Benefits to Parents and Children

Knowing that their children will be safe, secure, entertained and enriched by a well-run program encourages parents to bring them along to meetings. The benefits for the parent are obvious:

- Parents can turn their work time into family time.
- Busy parents are better able to balance their personal and professional lives.
- Parents travel for business guilt- and stress-free knowing their children are nearby and well cared for.
- The friendships children form during group programs create additional networking opportunities for their parents.
- Parents can share their travel experiences and their careers with the family.

For the children, the advantages are just as positive: spending more time with their parents, learning about their parents' job, exploring new places and making new friends.

## Benefits to Meetings, Meeting Managers and Their Organizations

But the great news is that the opportunities and benefits to the meeting and the meeting planner are also tremendous. A family-friendly meeting:

- Increases attendance by parents who otherwise could not, or would not want to, leave their children while they traveled
- Increases the probability that parents will stay the duration of the meeting and attend more events (they won't need to leave early to get back home to family or skip events to care for children)
- Promotes greater participant/membership diversity

- Allows for more relaxed and focused meeting participants knowing children are near
- Creates great appreciation and satisfaction (and good publicity for the host organization)
- Promotes employee/member bonding, as well as increased company/association loyalty and motivation
- Demonstrates the organization believes in family values
- Reduces liability issues that arise when attendees bring their children without adequate arrangements
- Increases membership and attendance
- Attracts younger members
- Offers a broader dimension to meetings and events
- Gives peace of mind and more focus to attendees
- Shows evidence that your organization is cutting edge
- Creates sponsorship opportunities

Many planners have found that by offering a well-run children's program, they can reduce the liability risk of having unattended children in the meeting venue. Just because no children's programming is offered doesn't necessarily mean a parent won't bring a child along to a meeting; having unchaperoned children roaming the halls or being forced to have unqualified staff take care of children during a meeting are recipes for liability disaster. A well-conceived, well-run children's program, on the other hand, is a recipe for success.

### **Not Just Meetings**

Options with children are also being incorporated into retreats and incentives. Eve Sotnak, with Carlson noted that for one client "25 to 30 percent chose a family option" (Barker, 2006). The working style and pace of many incentive winners requires that they spend time away from their families. When its time for the "reward" they are motivated by options that include family time.

### **Child-friendly Options**

Hotels, concierges, parents in the destination city or destination management companies can all serve as a referral source for child-care arrangements. Meeting managers will find the following options available:

- Referral list from hotel or destination for child care providers
- Pre-existing arrangements with organizations that provide childcare off-site
- Day camps on site
- Convention childcare programs arranged for that specific meeting

### More than Babysitting: Logistical Issues

There are a number of important factors necessary for a successful children's program. These include:

**Security** — Security is critical when it comes to children. Check-in and check-out procedures are very important and should be strictly enforced. Methods include matching signatures, wrist bands and photos of child and responsible parents.

**Registration** — How does the company keep track of the children in their program? Do they offer online registration?

**Staff-to-child ratios** — Check adult-to-child ratios. There should be a favorable child:adult ratio throughout the program. The National Association for the Education of Young Children proposes a child-to-staff ratio of 1:2 for infants, 1:3 for toddlers and 1:5 for children up to 12 years old. Additionally, the program and its provider must meet all federal and state standards — from staffing to physical requirements — at the meeting destination. (Jordon, 2007) All children should be highly and carefully supervised.

**Staff** — Ascertain the staff training and qualifications. For example, determine whether the staff is CPR certificated. Are staff members licensed? Do staff members have education degrees or experience in child care centers? Do they receive special training? What are the hiring practices of the company. Do they conduct references and criminal records checks?

**Insurance** — A minimum of \$3-5 million is needed in insurance coverage.

Meeting manager must research any firm under consideration for providing child-care options.

### More than Babysitting: Intangibles

Beyond these and other basic essentials, a successful children's program depends upon the less tangible factors of creativity, flexibility and customization. There is far more to children's programming than simple baby sitting, and no one solution can be applied to every situation. Programs must accommodate the specific needs of the children, taking into consideration their different ages, cultures and developmental stages.

**Programming** — Activities should be creative, educational, fun, and age-appropriate. There should be a variety of materials available — arts and crafts, dramatic play props, board games, books, etc. The childcare solution should be geared for the relevant age group. The needs of infants vary tremendously from teens.

**Customized service and planning** — For specific convention childcare solutions, the provider can customize the offering to the group, the environment, time of year or setting and budget. There may be opportunities to take advantage of local sites, activities, and educational (albeit interesting to children) offerings.

**Perceived quality** — The program must be perceived as high quality by the parents/participants. The childcare providers should be approachable, friendly and create confidence for the parents and the children.

## Summary

With proper planning, a meeting manager can create safe and enjoyable family-friendly meetings. Partnerships with hotels, off-site day care centers or children-smart event-planning companies will help a meeting manager navigate the logistics, security and programming challenges present with children on-site. Tremendous benefits exist for the parents, the children and the organization holding the meeting when a family-friendly program is well executed.

## Group Discussion or Projects

1. How should a meeting manager prepare attendees who plan to bring children?
2. What tips should a meeting manager provide to participants traveling with children about plane travel? Is this a necessary step for a meeting manager?
3. What legal issues must a meeting manager address when offering child care arrangements on-site at a meeting? Are there legal issues for other child care arrangements?
4. How can a meeting manager justify planning on-site childcare arrangements? How can a meeting manager ensure that the organization benefits from these arrangements?
5. Given the challenges with travel, do you think demand for childcare arrangements will increase or decrease in the future?

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