

Nurturing the Revolution

Tips for parent and child inclusive activism

I have been an activist since I was 16, that's 22 years. When I started writing this article I had only been a parent for 7 ½ weeks. I would say I know more about the former. Of course, that is only from experience.

I started campaigning in school, against animal testing and about littering and pollution. I wrote a play with a strong environmental message and convinced 4 other people to perform it with me in front of the school assembly. I started my school's environmental club which is still going today. I have protested against the World Economic forum, World Trade Organisation, against employment losses and educational cuts. I have campaigned for women's rights and against the nuclear industry, organized conferences and rallies, fundraisers and solidarity events.

When you think of activism – what do you think of? Probably some of the above. But who is an activist? What kind of picture do you have in your mind of an activist? Does a parent of young children fit the frame?

I remember the first time I was at an organizing meeting where a parent and child were in attendance. It was, predictably, a meeting for "International Women's Day" and I was a university student at the time. The child at the meeting was restless and appeared to lack an activity while it's mum participated in the meeting. A fellow student surprised me by lying down on the floor with the child and drawing together on pages torn from her notebook. With a sense of shame, I realized that I had witnessed an important act of solidarity and parenting support.

Parents and families are part of our communities and should be part of activism too. Many are already active in their community through child-focused groups, but people shouldn't have to cease activism more broadly when they become parents.

I think it is important to consider how activists and organising groups act in ways that are inclusive of parents and families (or not). There are a number of ways that campaigning can work to accommodate people's different lives, including working around

children and family issues. This is not an exhaustive list, just some observations of mine in the anarchist/activist world.

Parent and child-friendly meeting spaces

The first thing is the physical space for meetings or events. Is it accessible for prams? (This doubles for wheelchairs, so it is good to consider at all times). Is it safe? Could a child get out through a window or door? Remember they can move pretty fast for being so small! A good idea is to get down on your stomach or hands and knees and look around at a toddler's level for potential hazards – electric sockets, exposed cords or wires, unsecured bookshelves (a kid could pull down on themselves). Once you start looking, you may be surprised at how many potential dangers there are!

Next step is to try and eliminate them. If you find yourself thinking, "Why should I do this? Shouldn't their parent be looking after them?" Please erase that thought from your mind. Remember, in collectives, we take collective responsibility. Ever heard that saying, "It takes a village to raise a child"? Everyone is living in this village, activists and anarchists included.

Meeting time – avoiding the arsenic hour!

So that's the meeting or event space. What about meeting times – usually evenings. Otherwise known as bath, dinner and bed time. Otherwise known as the "arsenic hour" when kids can have a melt down. Routine is also really important for kids' development. While some infants or older kids may be able to bed down in a corner, and eat some packed snacks, this isn't always possible. It is also pretty distracting for the carer. Babysitters and child minding costs money. Can your group organise someone to mind the kids – in someone's home or at the venue? Can you offer a subsidy for parents to pay someone themselves?

Another solution is daytime meetings and events. Even on {ulp} weekends. Or how about email based discussion groups/ meetings or using technology including video conferencing such as Skype. With

practice, this can be incorporated into meeting structures as a permanent measure of inclusivity for people unable to attend meetings for a variety of reasons, including parents.

Don't assume people who are parenting WON'T come to your meeting/ action/ event. Instead, plan it as if they will. When they do, you will be prepared.

Converging inclusively

I've been to many occupations, convergences, and direct actions over the years but have found it is really different participating with a baby. My suggestions:

- Provide a booklet that includes the schedule of activities planned for the week, as well as a map of the local area including amenities such as food shops, op-shops, opening hours, ATMs, transport options, and locations of sites relevant to actions. The booklet should also include contact details of organisers, First Aid info and other relevant details.
- Have buddy systems so people support each other and share relevant information. Being a parent means not always being able to make every meeting, or missing meal times while settling a child, so it helps to have people looking out for you.
- Have a crew of volunteers assisting with kids activities (one of the funnest jobs at a convergence) and tasks like cooking and clean up of meals. Sign-up sheets can be posted in the common areas.
- Meet and greet. Asking for help from a community is a lot easier when you know people. Make time for name circles and introductory activities throughout an event (as people come and go).

People power includes parents and kids!

Nothing shows the breadth and depth of concern about an issue than a well-attended rally that includes families. Sometimes accessibility 'blind-spots' show up in the organisation of rallies. Here's a few things that can be done to include everyone and make things go well for everyone:

- Share information. It makes a big difference to know the plan for a rally, the route of a march and the expected duration. Include information in promotional material in the lead-up. When announcing instructions

at the rally make sure they can be heard by everyone. Book the appropriate PA system and if the cost is prohibitive fundraise for it, including with buckets at the event. People will understand and contribute.

- Plan an accessible march. Think through your route from the perspective of someone navigating the march in a wheelchair, on a bike, or pushing a pram. If your march involves going down stairs, check out where lifts or ramps are, share the information, and factor in the extra time that takes so people don't get left behind.
- Support people on the march. Have trained marshals assigned to different points along the march. Marshals can share information with each other and those participating, can pace the march (so folks don't get left behind), check in with people with special needs, block traffic (and negotiate with drivers) and look out for safety. Make sure marshals are visible with reflective vests or obvious armbands.
- Make it fun. Set up a kid's space at your rally with activities, like bubble-blowers or 'make-your-own-placards'. Activities don't need to be expensive or time consuming but send the message that parents and children are welcome. It also breeds the revolution by engaging kids politically and giving them positive associations with collective action!

Remember...

People's lives change when they become parents – in messy, magical, loving and smelly ways. It can make people MORE passionate and radical as they think of the world their children are now growing up in. Collectively, we can make activism accessible and relevant for people who are parenting, and their kids. After all, they are the future.

See also

Another great article from Liz Shield:
<http://plantothrive.net.au/2013/10/parenting-as-activism/>

Frida Berrigan's column on Waging Nonviolence:
<http://www.wagingnonviolence.org/column/little-insurrections>