

Ginelle Baskin

Returning to librarianship after being a stay-at-home mom

Challenges, experiences, and lessons

Early on in my librarian career, I decided to put my career on hold for a period of nine years while I stayed at home with my children. Once my kids were school-age, I felt ready to return to work, but I knew that a lot had changed in librarianship while I was away. Not only did I feel overwhelmed at the prospect of restarting my career, but questions ran through my head like “What am I qualified to do?” and “How will I get started again?” I didn’t know if finding a librarian job was feasible after all those years away. I wondered if I should consider working in another field altogether. Finding my way back into librarianship was complicated. In this article, I will discuss how I pivoted to refocus my librarian career. I will dive into some of the challenges I faced then, as well as challenges I am still facing now mid-career. I will share my personal experiences as a working mom in a variety of different library settings, and I will share overall lessons learned along the way.

Challenges and experiences

One of the biggest challenges in my return to work was simply *finding a librarian job opening in my area*. I live in a rural area, and librarian job openings are scarce. If a public library posts a job, it is most often for a low-paying clerk position. School librarian jobs will occasionally pop up when someone retires, but, at that time, I did not have the certification required for those positions. That left academic libraries, which meant a lengthy commute and, yet again, these openings are few and far between, and they usually require specific experience that I did not have.

Due to these circumstances, I decided to pursue the path of school librarianship. It seemed like the most logical choice, even though it would require me to return to grad school to obtain the necessary certification. As it turns out, the librarian position came open that year at my children’s elementary school, and I was hired for the position. While it seemed like the perfect job for me at the time, in retrospect, I wished I had taken more time to thoughtfully consider what type of job I really wanted rather than jumping at the first opportunity that arose. I soon discovered that being a school librarian was not the right match for me, and I ended up leaving that job after only two years.

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Next, I found a job as a library technician at a small technical library. It was a stable job with decent pay, but it didn't light the fire in me that I hoped for in a job. So, after working there for a few years, I left that library and accepted a temporary appointment as a user services librarian back at the academic library where I worked before having kids. This is the position I am still currently working in today. Although it was scary to leave a stable, permanent job for a temporary appointment, I am happy that I did because my current position pays better, has more flexibility, and the work itself is more enjoyable. It has also given me more academic librarian experience that will hopefully help me secure a permanent position once my temporary contract is up. Admittedly, it hasn't been easy for me to find my niche in the library world after being away, but each job I've taken has given me a unique set of experiences and skills that I can bring with me to future jobs.

Another major challenge I faced when I returned to librarianship was *balancing family responsibilities with work*. This is something that I still wrestle with mid-career as well. Once you become a parent, you can't accept a job based solely on your own preferences anymore. You must consider how your work schedule will jive with your families' needs. You must consider practical things like who will pick up the kids from school, what to do when kids are sick, and what to do during those holiday and summer breaks.

Having worked in a variety of libraries at this point in my career, I must say that working in an academic library has been the most accommodating to my needs as working parent thus far. Not only does it offer the best compensation and benefits, but it also grants me the most flexibility with my daily schedule and the ability to work from home when the need arises. This flexibility is something that I value more and more as a working parent. Although I enjoyed having the summers off with my kids when I worked as a school librarian, the immense workload and daily stressors of that job outweighed that perk for me. As for working in a technical library, that atmosphere was calm and enjoyable, but the work hours were not flexible, and the salary was mediocre.

Another challenge I faced when I returned to work was *getting myself back up to speed in the field*. Obviously, a lot had changed in librarianship over that nine-year-period that I was away. Not only did I feel behind, but I also mistakenly felt like I needed to prove myself to co-workers. I was afraid they would view me as less knowledgeable or less professional because of my stay-at-home-mom stint. I eventually learned to let go of that chip on my shoulder, and, instead, I focused my energy on professional development opportunities. I also had to let go of the unrealistic expectation that I should be a full-fledged expert in everything in library science. There's simply not enough time in the day for that. Rather, I had to be more targeted in my approach to professional development and focus only on areas that specifically pertained to my current job duties or to areas that truly interested me.

Overall lessons

Now that I've been back working as a librarian for several years, I'd like to share a few of my overall lessons or takeaways from my experiences. Hopefully these will be beneficial to new librarians or perhaps to those returning to librarianship like I did.

- First, I learned that *your pathway to librarianship can be as unique as you are*. There is no one "right" way. Each librarian brings their own unique backgrounds, experiences, and skillsets to a job. Be proud of those past experiences because that is what makes you unique.

- Second, *don't accept a job solely out of fear*. The main reason I accepted the school librarian position at my children's school was because I was afraid it was the only library job I would find. I learned that something else *will* come along, and it might even be a better fit for you in the end. While there still may not be an abundance of librarian opportunities in my rural area, I have been pleasantly surprised at the variety of opportunities that have turned up.

- Third, *take advantage of trainings, workshops, and any learning opportunity that comes your way*. I love attending webinars and workshops because they help me stay on top of library trends and learn new skills. If you are willing to learn at all stages of your career, you will be more attractive to employers.

- Fourth, *don't be afraid to ask for help*. Sometimes I still feel embarrassed when I don't know something or don't have experience in a specific area, and I remind myself of the Helen Hayes quote, "Every expert was once a beginner." I've learned to reach out when I need help, and I've found that most librarians are eager to help each other and share their knowledge.

Conclusion

Returning to librarianship after being a stay-at-home-mom was not an easy task for me. I faced many challenges along the way, from finding the right job, to balancing my work life with my home life, to desperately trying to get caught back up in the field. Yet, despite these challenges, I persisted. While some may think that my time as a stay-at-home mom was detrimental to my career overall, I have never looked at it that way. Instead, I look back on that time with fondness, and I am grateful for those years with my children. I view it as a valuable time in my life that shaped who I am as person and who I am as a librarian. ♪