Pubs should be parent and child friendly

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Opinion

It was the loneliest I’d ever been. A few years ago, I took parental leave when our first-born was still a baby and found myself with days in front of me without work and, crucially, a social network to rely on. I tried various playgroups, activities and classes but I found myself encroaching on female spaces with not much to add to their conversations. I expected none of this when my partner and I worked out that I would at times be the primary carer of our children. And a time I thought would be full of purpose and adventure, turned into the opposite. That was until I went to the pub and a female bar manager, who was Italian, decided to support me and my fledgling family by creating a space that was inclusive. For her, running a pub for all was second nature because she viewed hospitality as not just a career but a mission to make lives better to all who stepped through the pub doors.  It also helped that, for some reason, both my children didn't make much noise when they were babies, but more than made up for it years later as my neighbours will attest. Soon my routine involved the pub and other parents joined in, leading me to remember this time fondly. Having experienced this in a so-called, wet-led pub, I do feel the narrative of children in pubs is all wrong as it seems to be focusing on this idea that we as a nation either have two options: create adventure playgrounds in pubs or ban children all together. But first, let’s deal with the elephant in the room. The reason I was the outlier, and continue to be, is women still do the most childcare (and housework), a situation exacerbated by systemic issues, such as low pay and paltry paternity leave. So if men are more likely to work and be paid more, then they’re more likely to rise to managerial positions and be the type of bloke who gets to change rules in a pub chain. And I might be wrong here, and I’m happy to be corrected, but Marston’s pubs installing a Woodie’s Sweet Factory sounds like a headline-grabbing marketing idea with little thought of the effects. Worst of all it stereotypes children and the way they should act. As mentioned, my kids are at the age where they are noisy but if I take them to the pub, they are well drilled on what I expect from them. I’d rather they left their playground antics at the playground because I want their fun to not be at the expense of others. But some children have different needs and I’m fortunate enough to not have to worry about unpredictable behaviour, noise or high energy levels. (Sidenote: the Red Lion desi pub in West Bromwich has a quiet room designed for families with children with additional needs). You could also say, rightly, I’m privileged to be able to visit pubs a lot because of my job. The other extreme is to ban children which is the worst option and I think this is where as a society we are wrongly choosing to go down the route of polarisation. We need pubs to be of mixed demographics, especially when it comes to ages. By celebrating families, the old meet the new and they might even start to learn from each other. But most of all there are women and men who desperately need spaces when they’re looking after their children to have a few moments to just be themselves. If I hadn’t been welcomed into the pub with the baby in the sling and not patronised then that loneliness would’ve maybe become unbearable. Instead, I look back fondly at the community I found and I want future generations to feel the same.