

Parent-and-baby screenings are a growing trend, but pose some intriguing challenges for managers, reports **PATRICK McDONNELL**



Having a bawl

BABIES AND filmgoing were once mutually exclusive elements, but not any more. However, cinemas running screenings specifically for parents with babes-in-arms have allowed parents to see movies on the big screen rather than having to catch up on films on DVD.

Parent-and-baby screenings appears to be a phenomenon rapidly spreading around the world, with screenings now common in Australia, Canada, the and the US. They often have names like 'Reel Moms', 'For Crying Out Loud', 'Baby Box Office' and 'Mommy Matinees'.

In the UK the major circuits such as Odeon and Vue are increasingly moving into parent-and-baby screenings.

The Odeon group holds parent-and-baby screenings at a number of its venues across the UK including sites at Bournemouth, Epsom, Guildford, Kettering, Kingston, Salisbury, Sutton Coldfield, Wimbledon and Wrexham. An Odeon spokeswoman said: "They have been very successful so far and Odeon is looking at options to continue and extend the

screenings at more cinemas across the Odeon estate. At present there isn't a specific policy on parent-and-baby screenings, unlike other target groups such as our Senior Screen (which caters for senior citizens) or Movie Mob (which is aimed at pre-teenage children). Though if demand was such Odeon would endeavour to meet that need."

However, it has been the smaller more specialised exhibitors who have grasped the baby bottle firmly and organised scheduled screenings for parents and carers with babies.

The City Screen Picturehouse group, for example, take on the theme in its "Big Scream!" viewings that allow parents and babies up to one years old to see the latest releases. Mainline Pictures, meanwhile, runs "Baby Screen" events.

These screening are the latest variation on what was a relatively common phenomenon 50 years ago in the US — 'crying rooms'. These sound-proofed glass enclosures gave new parents a chance to see films with their babies whilst not disturbing other

members of the audience. The contemporary trend however means that rather than build a separate room, for a period an entire auditorium becomes a 'crying theatre'.

Offering parent-and-baby screening means negotiating an exemption from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) guidelines under the 2003 Licensing Act.

These guidelines are designed to limit exposure of certain films to audiences of or above a certain age. The age bands are:

- **Uc** A video classification and is particularly suitable for pre-school children
- **U** Universal is suitable for audiences aged four years and over
- **PG** Parental Guidance unaccompanied children of any age may watch — though a PG film should not disturb a child aged eight or older
- **12A** No-one younger than 12 may see a 12A film in a cinema unless accompanied by an adult
- **15** No-one younger than 15 may see a 15 film in a cinema
- **18** No-one younger than 18

may see an 18 film in a cinema

- **R18** To be shown only in specially licensed cinemas, or supplied only in licensed sex shops, and to persons of not less than 18 years

The guidelines state in Section 182 that: "Cinemas require a licence from the local authority in which they operate. The licence must include a condition requiring the admission of children (under-18) to any film to be restricted having regard to the recommendations of the BBFC. The licensing objectives are the prevention of crime and disorder, public safety, public nuisance and the protection of children from harm."

Anyone attempting to do otherwise without local authority exemption is in breach of the guidelines.

City Screen's marketing director Andrew Woodyatt says: "We always work with the local authority licensing department and generally show U, PG or 12A rated films. These can only be shown where the local council has agreed that this can happen."

Additionally City Screen



"Before I would never have dared to take my child to a regular screening because I would feel so intimidated — all those dirty looks and shushes. But now if he cries, everybody knows it's par for the course.

These screenings for parents and babies mean we can watch secure in the knowledge that we won't be disturbing anyone else, because everyone is in the same situation."

Doris Chang, mother of five-and a-half-month old Ryan, describing parent-and-baby screenings in the USA to In Focus, the National Association of Theatre Owners magazine

operates its Big Scream! viewings on a club rule basis, so people have to join beforehand, Woodyatt says.

City Screen provides bottle warmers, nappy changing facilities and buggy parking spaces. At City Screen's Brixton Ritzy membership is £1 and is valid till the baby's first birthday. Ticket prices are at a reduced rate of £4 — which also includes a free tea or coffee post film.

Mainline Pictures manages six cinemas with three in London. It runs its "Baby Screen" initiative at The Screen on the Hill in north London and The Screen in Winchester. These clubs charge a £3 membership fee — parents pay the ticket price while babies go free.

However, one screening at The Screen on the Hill did raise eyebrows when the 12A certified *Vera Drake* was shown to a Baby Screen audience. The film's plot centres around a 1950s abortionist who is eventually arrested for her back street operations.

A Mainline spokesman says: "The films are for the mothers,

not their babies."

The screenings take place in weekday afternoon downtime. Screen venues have a strict policy of admitting no unaccompanied adult and no babies over a year-old. The group is unable to provide changing facilities, and due to health and safety considerations buggies and pushchairs are not allowed in the auditorium. They advocate the use of collapsible buggies or harnesses.

This is echoed by City Screen's Andy Woodyatt: "These screenings serve a great social function allowing parents to see contemporary releases they would rarely get to see and providing parents a safe and pleasant environment, parents often spend an hour chatting in a relaxed atmosphere."

City Screen hold regular parent-and-baby screenings at all its sites, though attendances do vary, said Woodyatt. "We don't see it as a money-making venture but as a service to the local community to allow people to go to the cinema who would

otherwise be denied it," he says.

This echoes the baby policies in Mexico and the US, the "Cine-Ma" experience in Mexico's Cinemex cinemas include an illuminated white changing table which takes discrete pride of place in a corner of the auditorium.

In the US such has been the popularity of parent-and-baby screenings that the concept is developing further with special baby-friendly services such as stroller parking zones, play areas, lower sound volumes, in-theatre concession carts and brighter lighting. Some even dispense with showing ads or previews of coming attractions and show the feature only.

City Screen's Woodyatt says: "As to an advertising spot in the screening it would vary. If it was a one-off film specially booked for the screening it wouldn't have ads or trailers. If on the other hand it was a normal film screening save for the fact that it was a parent-and-baby screening it would carry ads and trailers that were appropriate to the feature BBFC's certification."