The Inexact Science of Being a Parent Scientist

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Balancing work and family is challenging for any parent, but for the academic scientist the challenges can be even greater. In addition to worrying about factors that all parents consider, such as money, school districts, daycare, grandparents, those of us in academic science also need to contend with unusual work hours, the instability of scientific funding, lengthy training periods and frequently changing residencies. I recently polled a few Parent Scientists from different parts of the world for their perspective on how they make it work.

To be or not to be a Parent Scientist?

Prior to being a parent, I remember having extensive internal discussions with myself trying to determine whether I could be both a parent and a successful academic scientist. Therefore, I am always interested to hear the philosophies of other academic scientists on parenthood. Dr. Mick Milsom of the HI-STEM institute at the DKFZ in Heidelberg never had any doubt: “My wife and I knew that we wanted to have kids regardless of where our careers took us, and we ended up having three boys born in three different countries.” Dr. Simona Lodato of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute at Harvard University and her husband also planned on becoming parents irrespective of their careers: “As a couple of scientists that always wanted children, we did not plan to have our kids around our careers.” Dr. Lodato added: “from a practical perspective, it would have been impossible to [align] our career paths with the plan of building our family”. Dr. Kena Flores-Figueroa of the Oncological Research Unit at the Mexican Institute of Social Health however, was not as certain: “I thought I had decided not to have children until my "maternity gene" betrayed me. I just woke up one day wanting to have kids.” For those of you who might share similar experiences, I would recommend considering the advice of Dr. Flores-Figueroa who suggests first “to decide whether or not you want to be a parent, than to think what will happen to your career; because you can't predict that until it happens. You can be a great scientist with kids or without them.”

The uncommon schedule of the common scientist

Having children alters the way you plan your finances, daily life and work schedule. After polling numerous scientists, the aspect of the academic scientific life-style that is most commonly impacted by parenthood is time in lab. To negotiate parenting and lab schedule, Dr. Ayako Nakamura-Ishizu of the Cancer Science Institute at the National University of Singapore says: “I shifted my schedule earlier by about 2 hours. This was to avoid the morning traffic to take my kids to childcare and also be able to make some time in the evening to be with them.” Dr. Flores-Figueroa also shifted her hours and developed an

efficient, regimented schedule. Dr. Sofie Singbrant-Söderberg echoed the importance of scheduling efficiency, “Having children forces you to prioritize your time differently – not being able to spend (as many) late nights in the lab makes you very efficient.”

The ballad of the traveling scientist

One of the many great aspects of our industry is that we have the opportunity and are often encouraged to train in different cities, both domestic and international. However, leaving the comforts of home means passing up the supportive family network (e.g. grandparents) that is often of great assistance to new parents. Dr. Singbrant-Söderberg stresses that being an effective parent scientist “requires a supportive partner, both for male and female scientists.” Reinforcing this statement, Dr. Milsom expressed that his ability to have kids while completing his post-doctoral training “was only possible because my wife took a six year break from her teaching career to stay at home.”

Another good strategy for managing lab schedules and navigating the unpredictability of little ones is to find other academic scientists who share a similar situation. Dr. Nakamura-Ishizu suggests “For [unpredictable child-related events], I think it may be good if you work in a team where you have someone to cover for you”. Indeed, Dr. Lodato and one of her colleagues who was also a first time parent arranged to share a child caregiver, as well as cover each other during times of child-related emergencies. Dr. Singbrant-Söderberg also suggested that: “it is very important to have more female role models in science showing that it is possible to combine a scientific career with having a family”. Adding to that point, I personally found watching my PhD advisor and his wife, also an academic scientist, balance their careers and kids reassuring when I was considering parenthood.

The fiscal cliff of parenthood

A major concern of almost all new parents is how to cope with the child-related costs. In many countries, the primary financial hit comes from daily childcare. One strategy for alleviating this financial blow is to follow in the footsteps of Dr. Lodato: “sharing a caregiver was a great opportunity to save money and also a fantastic bonding experience for the kids and the [four parents]!” If you are interested in having children and working abroad there are countries that are more financially reasonable for new parents. Dr. Nakamura-Ishizu who relocated to Singapore for her post-doctoral training mentioned: “Singapore allows you to employ live-in helpers (nannies) at a low cost. You don't have to do household work and you can reallocate this time toward quality time with your children after you return home from work.” Dr. Singbrant-Söderberg points out that Sweden is another supportive country: “[Sweden has] a very generous parental leave system where the parents can share more than a year of paid leave. But more importantly, Sweden has a heavily subsidized childcare making it possible for a not so wealthy PhD student to pay for childcare.”

Coping with parental leave

A common concern for many parent scientists is the time out of lab during paternal leave. Dr. Singbrant-Söderberg recommends, “not to lose too much time in the lab. During my first parental leave I still came into the lab a few days per month to transplant and bleed mice and keep the projects going.” Dr. Singbrant-Söderberg also shared that “During my second period of parental leave I didn’t have any ongoing experiments, but instead used the time to write a manuscript and apply for funding”. Dr. Flores advises: “build a support network before you even think on having kids. You need to hire independent students and a good technician.”

In closing

This is by no means an all-encompassing analysis of all the considerations that come with being a parent scientist but hopefully it helps open the conversation – both internal and external. For those academic scientists who are debating whether or not to become a parent, I would extend the comments of Dr. Flores-Figueroa by saying that having children will impact your life as an academic scientist, so if you do want to be a Parent Scientist, try not to fret too much on aligning all the variables into a perfect orientation before doing so – because raising children is not an exact science. *View the original full article at the International Society for Experimental Hematology.*

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