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Deconstructing Blood Cell Research
Building the Hematology Community



Parenting in Academia Series I: Japan, UK, USA



- April 14, 2022



In order to be a successful scientist, independent of career stage, we have to invest a lot of time, energy, and soul into our projects. There are always numerous things to be done and multiple deadlines approaching. Most of us don't get the job done in 40 hours a week: the work load is just too high; the experiments are just too exciting. Regardless of the reasons – being a scientist is a highly demanding career path.

So, what about having a second full-time job? A job with nightshifts every day of the week, no annual or sick leave and a highly demanding boss? A job that demands your full energy, heart and soul. Sounds tough, right? But this is exactly what young parents in (and outside) science face. Having children can be an amazing adventure – but let's be honest: it is also the most challenging experience. At the same time, mothers and fathers alike, want to pursue their scientific careers, try to not lag behind and to get all of the experiments done, papers written and grants submitted. And of course, at the end of the day, want to spend time with families and be home to read bedtime stories to the children.

What helps the most in this stressful day-to-day life is to know that you are not alone. Multiple mothers and fathers around the globe have faced the same challenges, have had mental breakdowns and feelings of guilt. We want to make use of this fact and try to help and inspire each other. To raise more awareness for

the topic of balancing parenting with an academic career, we have interviewed parent scientists around the world and asked for their insights, tips and advice. We will publish this on simply blood as a series of 3 blog posts. Hopefully, some of their experiences are helpful in your everyday life or can be implemented at your institute.

This week we will start off with Dr. Dave Kent (University of York, UK) and Dr. Aiko Sada (Kumamoto University, Japan). Dr. Dave Kent tells us more about the challenges he faced as a young parenting group leader in the UK. Dr. Aiko Sada has worked as a parenting scientist, both, in the US and Japan and provides us with a great overview of both systems, including the pros and cons.

Are you a PhD student, Postdoc, junior group leader or PI and have kids? We also want to learn from all of you! Let us know of any helpful supportive measures implemented at your group or institute. Any key advice you want to share? Please use the comment function below. In addition: save the date and please join us for our approaching online discussion on Parenting in Academia taking place both **13 June** and **20 June** 2022 (click each to see in your time zone, more information coming soon!).

David Kent (PhD), University of York, UK

At which career stage were you when your child(ren) were born?

My children were born when I was in the first 3 years of being a group leader (the first was 6 months in and the second at 3 years)

Could you provide us with a brief overview of country-specific circumstances for parental leave and child care/child support?

The UK has a policy of up to 12 months of shared parental leave. The mother is meant to take the first 3 months, but after that it can be shared as the parents choose. The father also gets 2 weeks paternity that runs independently of this. The pay is full for 6 months and then becomes complicated based on employer(s) – often the final three months is unpaid leave.

Did you take parental leave and, if so, how long was it? What did you gain from this experience and what was the biggest challenge after returning to work?

Yes, I took 3.5 months for each child. I've written a whole series of articles about this which are summarized here: <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/the-black-hole/reflections-male-scientist-parental-leave/>

Probably the most important experience for me was “learning by doing” – I can now relate to people facing

similar struggles and/or balancing acts. Returning to work – the biggest challenge was not being able to just “stay a little later”. Children remove a substantial amount of flexibility that needs to be adjusted for – this has meant getting used to a window of pick up + baths + supper + bedtime in between work and “later work”. I try to avoid this too much, but it would be impossible to get everything done without some work in the evenings.

What are/were the 2-3 most supportive measures installed by your university/research institute that make/made your life as a working parent easier?

My university (Cambridge at the time) had in place a policy that allowed some of the extra weeks of leave taken by their employees to be paid. This in combination with my partner’s organization, meant that we had fully paid leave for 6 months and partially paid for 9 months.

I think it’s important to consider the finances because new parents face new costs and if it is more financially sensible for one parent to stay home over the other, this will be a factor in the decision. If women in those situations are paid less than men, this represents yet another driver of disadvantage for mothers.

Can you name 1-2 measures that would make your life as a working parent easier?

I think group leaders would benefit from administrative support (calendar management, task management, etc.) and technical support. For postdocs, the latter is probably the most urgent.

Any special piece of advice for young parents pursuing a scientific career?

People around you have done this before – ask advice. Figure out what works for you and don’t expect too much of yourself. Some things will change and you won’t necessarily be able to accomplish as much as before, but that does not mean you are any less good at your job nor does it mean that people will not support you. The one other thing I would say is that it is important to remember that it’s not only kids that can alter your work/life balance and that those without kids can easily have as many (or more) stresses in their lives.

Aiko Sada (PhD), Kumamoto University, Japan

At which career stage were you when your child(ren) were born?

At the time my daughter was born, I was working at Cornell University (US) and had just submitted my paper, while also looking for a job in Japan. I was in my first postdoc, (fourth year of a five-year postdoc).

Could you provide us with a brief overview of country-specific circumstances for parental leave and child-care/child support?

In Japan women usually take a long maternity leave, while in the U.S. it's typically about 3 months before we can return to work. In Japan, the time to start nursery school is often set in April (which sometimes is not convenient). In contrast the US has a more flexible system for starting day care/nursery school. In the U.S., they have a system where mothers can pump and bring frozen breast milk to the daycare.

Did you take parental leave and, if so, how long was it? What did you gain from this experience and what was the biggest challenge after returning to work?

I took five weeks of maternity leave, which I don't think is ideal (should be at least 3 months). I had to get up in the middle of the night to take care of the baby, and I also had to spend 30 minutes every 2-3 hours pumping during the day while I was at work, so I was not able to work much when I return. I became more patient.

What are/were the 2-3 most supportive measures installed by your university/research institute that make/made your life as a working parent easier?

As for Cornell University, there were parenting classes (free of charge) and daycare at the university. There was also a room for breastfeeding and pumping in every building on campus. In Japan, the daycare centers mostly provide formula and prepare the milk by themselves. In contrast, in the US, moms can deliver pumped breast milk. Above all, there are many doctoral students, postdocs, and faculty who have experienced childbirth and parenting, so they provide great support.

Can you name 1-2 measures that would make your life as a working parent easier?

Partner, outsourcing of household chores, money for that, availability of daycare.

Any special piece of advice for young parents pursuing a scientific career?

The time when you have to spend a lot of time with children is about 5 years, but think of it as a short period in a long career and enjoy it. Of course, as a university and research community, we need to support researchers in the long run, not drive them away when their research activity drops due to parenting.

What were the most difficult challenges from family planning to the point of resuming work after your parental leave was over? How did this affect your short- and long-term career goals?

When we have a small child, our time is limited and energy is reduced, so we cannot concentrate on our research. As a result, many people's performance will probably decline for 5 years or so. Having a family is invaluable to my life, but it makes it difficult for me to focus on my research. I don't know how it will affect my career in the long run, but I'm trying to do the best I can right now. As a scientific community, we need to think about how to evaluate highly talented researchers irrespective of a temporary decline in performance or to support them on a long-term basis, and Japan has yet to do so.

Did you have to relocate at any point after your child/children was/were born due to a new job position?

Since my child was born, I have moved twice, from the US to Japan and from Tsukuba to Kumamoto (within Japan). I think it is a big problem that the positions of young researchers are unstable and that this often coincides with the time of raising children.



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ISEH 2025 Society Award Winners

- [March 11, 2025](#)

On behalf of the Awards Committee, ISEH would like to congratulate the recipients of the 2025 ISEH Society Awards which will be presented at the ISEH 54th Annual Scientific Meeting . Donald Metcalf

Award Winner - Constanze Bonifer The recipient of the 2025 Donald Metcalf Award is Dr. Constanze ...

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Message from the President: 2021 Society Updates

- *March 25, 2021*

Dear Friends and Colleagues, I write this message reflecting upon what was an unprecedented time for hematology and hematology researchers. Looking back on last year, I am truly amazed by how our Society reacted to our member's experiences with lab shutdowns, socioeconomic upheaval in reaction ...

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Lab Spotlight: Vanuytsel Lab

- *November 14, 2024*

Each month, Simply Blood spotlights a lab contributing to the fields of hematology, immunology, stem cell research, cell and gene therapies, and more. Get to know groups doing cutting edge research from around the world! This month, we are featuring the Vanuytsel Lab which is based out of the Center for ...

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