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Building the Hematology Community



## Parenting in Academia II: Australia, Germany, UK



- April 21, 2022



This week we continue our journey around the world and aim to learn more about different cultures and how to reconcile a scientific career with having a family. Dr. Marieke Essers (German Cancer Research Center, Germany) and Dr. Edwin Hawkins (The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Australia) are interviewed in this week's edition and share some of their personal experiences. They both stress that there is no "right" time to start a family. If this is something you really envision for your life, it is something you should do. Of course, there will be major challenges ahead. But other people have done this before and most of them are accessible and happy to share their experiences.

A major struggle for parenting scientists is that short-term evaluations of their scientific career/achievements are commonplace, which can make for an unfair assessment if the applicant recently had a child resulting in reduced scientific output during that period. Dr. Edwin Hawkins stresses that in the future, we should aim for more joint research work and consider multi-disciplinary teams as the gold standard. This would lead to a focus on big scientific questions rather than the careers of individuals. Such changes, however, would also affect our current funding procedures which would have to be reviewed. But it offers a chance to parenting scientists to effectively contribute to the scientific progress in their field of research. Of course, these are changes that are not easily implemented and will require a change in the way we think about success in science.

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!).

**Marieke Essers (PhD), German Cancer Research Center (DKFZ), Germany**

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

*My children (2) were born when I just had started my independent junior research group.*

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

*In Germany there is 2 months maternity leave for the mum, followed by the possibility for paid parental leave for up to a year. Both mum or dad can take this, although usually mums take most of the leave. Childcare for babies under 6 months is not very common, most children start at the age of 1 year or later. In addition, a lot of childcare is only half days, so you have to look for places that offer full day childcare, these are usually rather expensive.*

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 4 months parental leave after each child was born to spend time with my child, recover and get used to life as a family and also enjoy these very special first months. The biggest challenges after that were: a.) finding daycare for such a young baby; b.) finding a balance between family and work, both physically and emotionally (I would say it does take up to a year to be in balance again, also with all the hormones dancing around in your body); c) dealing with the opinions of society of returning back to work when the baby is still so young. In Germany, still not many mums return to work after only a few months and there remains a very strong opinion about working mums.*

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?

*- The flexibility of working in home office, which has now been further pushed by the pandemic. Of course, this is not as easily done for every profession, but in science there is a lot of 'office' work with data*

analysis, reading and writing.

- The institute financially supports full day childcare positions at 2 childcares. Unfortunately, though this is by far not enough to support all scientists with children. As a junior group leader, it was easier to get this support than, for example, PhD students or postdocs

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

- More awareness of time restrictions when planning meetings: I am still very frequently asked to join meetings after 4 or 5pm, when I need to pick up my children from school, and then have to defend myself that I can't join.

- The pandemic has been and still is a terrific challenge for people with young families, with all the restrictions, school lockdowns etc. and I'm not sure whether there is enough understanding for this and if this will be taken into account regarding career evaluations.

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

It may sound a bit overwhelming of pursuing a scientific career and start a family, but you'll always find a way. There is no best point in your career to start a family, when you and your partner find it is the right time, then go for it. And do what feels right for you, not what other people feel is right.

**Edwin Hawkins (PhD), The Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research, Australia**

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

My twins were born when I was in my second postdoctoral placement in Cristina Lo Celso's laboratory. I was 34 when they were born. I interviewed for a lab head position in Australia during the pregnancy, so I was establishing the links to start the next phase of my career. We moved back to Australia when they were 6 months old. The flight was interesting.

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

In London, I did not access anything formal. This was largely because I had an enormous amount of support from my supervisor Prof. Cristina Lo Celso. We came up with a plan to support the pregnancy period which was extremely complicated with twins. I also required major back surgery during this time because I simply tried to do too much and aggravated an old sports injury. My boss Cristina had also

*noticed I was maybe doing too much and had encouraged me to slow down a little which I of course ignored thinking I was made of titanium. Now I actually am to some extent! Essentially, Cristina and I had great productive discussions on how I was going to manage this. I am sure this was stressful for her wondering when her postdoctoral fellow was going to be anywhere near full capacity, but she put me and my family first.*

*In Australia, I was establishing my own laboratory at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. Relocating and starting again had its own issues. However, the institute itself has a number of support measures discussed below.*

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 worked three days a week for 6 months. This had major challenges. Some were mental. How do you look after kids, a wife, yourself, and be competitive with science? It was a huge mental drain until I found something that worked and adjusted my expectations.*

*(1) We cut back lot of things in life that were not the number 1 priority for us. I arrived at work at 9 and left at 5. No excuses. No extra coffee breaks, no breaks that weren't 100% necessary. The result was I was far more efficient with my time and this is a consistent theme with having enough time as a scientist.*

*(2) Probably the most major decision, and BEST decision I made was finding a productive way to share the workload. In the end, Dr. Delfim Duarte, a clinician PhD student in the laboratory took a major role with me in the project. Delfim was the joint first author with me on this manuscript. We did everything together and I firmly believe without him we would not have been able to complete the project to the level that Cristina and I had first envisioned. Sharing that authorship with Delfim was the best thing that happened to me over the period of restructuring how to work with kids. With the current expectations from publishers on manuscript content, I can't more highly recommend some thought early in the project about how to structure larger teams with shared major authorship.*

*(3) Sleep. I was exhausted. I managed, but I don't know how and now 6 years on I am still tired. One day I will sleep again.*

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?

*(1) WEHI are very progressive in their parenting measures. The institute has financial support for parents via internal fellowships that cover approximately \$16,000 of child care support. This is not normal at Australian institutions. Financial strain of being a parent is often overlooked and this initiative significantly*

*relieved this pressure.*

*(2) WEHI recently built a childcare facility attached to the institute with approximately 90 places for kids. This has been a game changer for many parents, especially mothers still feeding.*

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

*(1) In academia we need to challenge how we work. The funding systems are built around identifying and supporting individuals largely. However, for great breakthrough science to be done in the future, we need to be funding genuine teams within research centers focused on big ideas rather than the careers of individuals. This means thinking about how to push researchers towards more productive team-based approaches and how to reward this approach. Long-term team-based approaches with people that like and support each other allows ebbs and flows in life to be reduced.*

*(2) Working from home has changed things a lot. I think it is much easier to claw back a little time.*

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

*There is never a bad time or a good time to have children. Every time in your life has its challenges. If you want kids, you will make it work and my advice is to start earlier rather than later.*

*Finally, being a parent in any job has similar stresses and problems. I encourage you to start discussing this with current supervisors earlier rather than later. It is so much easier to plan for a productive outcome when everybody involved has an idea of what will happen.*



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