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Building the Hematology Community



Parenting in Academia III: Japan, Sweden, USA



- April 28, 2022



In the last two weeks, we gained a lot of advice and suggestions from parenting scientists from all around the world. Some of the proposed changes will need time to be implemented as well as financial support to cover, for example on-site childcare. However, some changes can be made more easily such as not scheduling official institute meetings after 5 pm.

This week we will hear from Dr. Shannon McKinney-Freeman (St. Jude Children's research Hospital, USA) and Dr. Kenichi Miharada (Kumamoto University, Japan). They share their experience on how to progress as a scientist, while also spending time with your family. They focus on the financial challenges and the availability of daycare.

One major take-home message from our journey around the world is, that the country-specific circumstances for parental leave and child care/child support are very different. Let's try to learn from each other and implement as many beneficial measures as possible at our institutes to make scientific careers more family-friendly. In addition, it is important that everyone who wants to have children or is a parenting scientist tries to make the best out of the country-specific circumstances they face. Within the options that are open to you, do what feels right.

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).

Shannon McKinney-Freeman (PhD), St. Jude Children's research Hospital, USA

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

My two daughters were born during my postdoc and my two sons were born during the first 5 years of my faculty position.

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

In the US, childcare is a bit ad hoc, as is parental leave. Unfortunately, childcare is also very expensive. I was able to take 12 weeks of leave for each child, but this was a personal choice and I had to use up my sick time and vacation time to take those leaves. As a postdoc in Boston, with a partner who was also a postdoc, we could not afford full time childcare for our girls. So, we only sent them to daycare 4 days a week – the fifth day my husband and I would work a staggered schedule. Even then, their combined childcare was more than my husband's entire salary! We were only able to afford my second daughter because I got a K01, which significantly increased my salary. We joke that we should have named her 'Kay', as she would not exist without that grant (we named her Lilly).

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 chose to take 12 weeks of leave for each child. The most important thing I learned by the 3rd child is that you should not plan to do anything but take care of your baby during your leave. As driven scientists, we tend to always be setting productivity goals for ourselves (e.g., I can work on that manuscript during my leave or catch up on reading or analyze data). However, taking care of a new baby is a full-time job and exhausting, especially if you already have children. You end up not accomplishing any of those work-related goals and this leaves you feeling like you are constantly failing, when you should really just be enjoying your new baby. So, I tell young women to do nothing but focus on the baby during their leaves. Science can wait a few months, but this may be the only time in your career when you can give this new person your full attention all the time. The hardest thing about returning to work, especially after baby #1, was leaving the baby!

Honestly, I have been a parent/scientist so long now (16 years) that I am having a hard time remembering what was challenging in terms of actually doing Science – probably learning how to be more organized with the day.

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?

Both of my bosses (George Daley during my postdoc and Brian Sorrentino as a new faculty member) were very supportive of me taking as much time as I wanted for each of my pregnancies. They also never made me feel like somehow having these kiddos was going to get in the way of doing Science or moving my career forward. Having this support from my direct mentors was very important. An important 'institutional' support was NIH's policy that allows you to extend your status as an early-stage investigator by as much parental leave as you took. It was extremely easy to apply and get approved for this. For me, it meant a full extra year as an 'early stage' investigator, which was helpful for that first R01.

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

Subsidized childcare, especially as a postdoctoral fellow. On-site childcare would also have been amazing.

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

I have noticed that some folks, especially women, seem to delay starting families because they are waiting for the 'right time'. In my opinion, there is no perfect time. You can always think of something important career-wise coming down the road, whether it's the next paper, or job search, or grant application or whatever. I think that if you know that this is something you want, then you just do it. You will make it work.

Also, if you are fortunate enough to be in a position where you can hire people to help you (e.g., mowing the lawn), then you should. This will free up time on the weekends for you to spend with your kids, rather than taking care of the yard (unless this is something you love to do!). Given our busy professional lives, you won't regret spending this money in the long run.

Kenichi Miharada (PhD), Kumamoto University, Japan

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

I was in my second postdoc in Sweden (around 2011) when my first child was born.

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

Sweden is a great country for having and raising children due to the availability and high quality of day care centers/schools, etc. Moreover, the child allowance is paid until the child turns 16 years old. Furthermore, parental leave is usually well paid and can be requested for up to 480 days in total.

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?

Both me and my wife were eligible to take parental leave (paid) which could be transferred between the two of us. I personally didn't use any paternity leave though. Parental leave can be saved up and utilized until the child turns eight years old. The total time of parental leave amounts to 480 days of which 240 days are entitled to the mother and 240 days are entitled to the father. Optionally, one can forgo parental leave and instead receive only remuneration.

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 day care infrastructure (availability) varies between regions within Sweden, but is overall very good. Basically, there is no risk to end up without a day care center. In addition, day care is almost free (only a small minimum amount needs to be covered by the parents). Also, the after-school center (when my child started going to school) provided great activities and offered many hours of care-taking for working parents (the number of hours depended on the working hours of the parents). Having an emergency contact person (one of the administrative staff at Lund University) gave us a lot of additional security, since we knew that we could receive help, e.g., to make a phone call (we were not fluent in Swedish) and convey messages from us to another party or vice versa.

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

Child care is one of the most important priorities for everyone at my previous work place. Therefore, no stress when I (or my wife) had to leave due to some emergency situation with our child. Since everybody seemed to share this kind of mindset, it made the overall environment very comfortable. A common understanding of parenthood and raising a family within the group/department is essential for harmonious work relationships among colleagues.

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

Entering maternity/paternity leave when one is about to submit a manuscript happens every now and then and it is extremely important how this is handled within the research group. E.g., when one of my former postdocs was about to start her maternity leave, it was a shared understanding that other members would do their best to support the development of her study.

The duration of grants/contracts might not always be overlapping for couples who are both active in research, therefore being aware of time-sensitive “vacuums” that could ensue after/during taking parental leave is something to consider when doing family planning in order to avoid financially uncomfortable situations.

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?

Neither me nor my wife had particular obstacles/challenges that we felt were difficult to overcome when returning to work. The same goes for my colleagues at that time.

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

Relocation took place at a much later time when both children were past the nursery school age. If this possibility exists, choosing the timing of relocation back to one’s home country or another country can make a big difference for the child. E.g., it might make more sense to relocate before the child starts going to elementary school.



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