

NAASO Newsletter
Student Column- Tips from Professionals

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Careers and Children – Survival Tips

I have often likened scientific career development to an obstacle course, where trainees must run, leap, and climb their way towards success. Along this course, the biggest hurdle of all is parenthood. Yes, those little bundles of burbling joy, all wrapped up in pink and blue blankets, can trip up even the most promising fellow. The baby hurdle is so daunting because we receive no formal training in how to get over it. As part of our graduate/post-doctoral studies, we are taught experimental techniques, research project design, seminar skills, and writing styles for manuscripts and grant proposals. But I've yet to hear of a course that provides training to balance the demands of a family and a scientific career. So in this column, I'll provide my very biased opinions on this topic. I make no claims to being "correct" in any of these assumptions. My sole qualification on the topic is that I am an active scientist with the National Institutes of Health, and have simultaneously raised two relatively happy, relatively non-delinquent daughters, and I have juggled both of these demands without the aide of Prozac or shock therapy. Many of my comments may be more applicable to women than men, since I am writing from personal experience and I am female.

Mate Selection is Important

Mating of two extremes may be beneficial for gene mapping studies, but it isn't always the best choice for child rearing. Select a mate who is supportive of your career choice and understands that a career as a scientist is not a 9-5 job. Choose someone who understands that you may need to move several times as your career advances. Women, avoid mates who believe that fatherhood ends at conception.

The Baby Gap

If you want to know the birth dates of the children of a female scientist, look at her *c.v.* More often than not, there are tell-tale gaps in her publication record that don't signify lack of production, but rather reproduction. When is the best time to have a baby gap? For most scientists, there is never a good time to slow your career and commit to a year without sleep. My only advice would be to avoid having a due date that coincides with either your PhD defense or your tenure seminar. Other than that, I think it remains debatable whether to have your

children in the early stages of your training when you have more energy and, scientifically, you are only responsible for yourself, but are typically dead broke, or at a later stage when you have a faculty position and are more financially stable, but have a lab full of people depending on your daily guidance and research grant money.

Find Mary Poppins

Your little bambino has arrived and you love it more than you thought possible. But your maternity leave has come to a screeching halt. The only thing more difficult than zipping up your old pair of jeans, is the thought of leaving your baby with someone else. Many trainees opt to adjust their work schedules so that they can both work full-time and parent full-time. In my opinion, this will almost assuredly move your career from fast track to off track. It is possible to work in a lab at night or in the wee hours of the morning when your spouse is home, but a lot more than research happens between the hours of 9 to 5. You will miss all of the benefits that come from informal discussions and networking with your mentor, co-workers and visiting scientists. You will be out of the loop and forgotten.

At the same time, while you're at work, you must be absolutely confident that your child is in a good, safe and loving environment. If you leave your child every day, only to sit at work and worry and fret about their well-being, you've defeated your purpose. Finding a good day care facility or babysitter takes time- have a plan in place before the baby is born. Get referrals from friends, co-workers, neighbors, and teachers at local schools. Only consider day cares or homes where you are allowed to "pop-in" at any time unexpectedly. If you pick up your child and he proudly displays his crayoned picture of cult art, you may want to look into the situation more carefully. Once you've found a good provider, fight the urge to be jealous of her. You are teammates, not competitors.

Dine Together

Many, many studies have shown that families that eat dinner together, stay together. A nightly ritual of passing serving dishes, heaped with food, around a table all but guarantees that your kids will grow up to become good, upstanding (albeit moderately obese) citizens. So, make a commitment to leave work every day to be home for dinner. Even if your child is still at the stage where he's inserting green beans into his nasal cavity and dripping milk from his sippy cup onto the dog's head, know that by sitting together and sharing this experience you are saving him from a lifetime of drugs and violent crime.

Attention Please

In the evenings and weekends, give your family your full attention. Sell the television, unplug the telephone, and tell your friends you can see them in 18 years. Don't fool yourself into believing that being in the same room counts as "quality time."

Attend your children's school functions and activities. You may need to miss work for a few hours to watch your child be a tree in the school play, or give a 1-minute presentation on Betsy Ross for her class. You may need to leave work by 4 pm every Thursday to watch your son sit on the bench, waiting to be called to play in the Junior High Football game. But these are the fun parts of parenting, and shouldn't be missed.

God gave us immune systems for a reason

As a graduate student, I was given one bit of advice from my mentor's wife. She said, "For a woman in science, a housekeeper isn't a luxury, it's a necessity." I took her advice to heart, but unfortunately I was a graduate student (she was a cardiologist) and I was unable to find someone willing to clean my house for 25 cents a week. So I did the next best thing. I didn't clean. Sixteen years later, my children still remember the times we went to the park, but my kitchen floor doesn't remember the times it was scrubbed.

(note- although your floor won't remember, your mother-in-law will. Ignore it.)

The best of both worlds

Combining children and a scientific career isn't for sissies. There will be times when you feel like you are miserably failing at both. Realize that those emotions often stem from sleep deprivation. Get some sleep and start again in the morning. It really can be the best of both worlds.