

PURSuing a Career IN SCIENCE WITH KIDS

While it has been said that there is no 'good' time to have children when in science, the prospect can seem particularly daunting when you are a student or an Early Career Researcher (ECR) looking to establish yourself. Besides the life-changing event itself, juggling a PhD or a postdoctoral position with a new child is a formidable challenge. The ethos of 'publish or perish' is pervasive, and the idea of possibly reducing your capacity to commit to your career is a significant consideration. In a recent *Nature* spotlight, it was suggested that under-representation of women in science might be due to attrition at early stages of their careers to raise a family (1). Becoming a new parent can result in sleep deprivation, increased sick days and loss of free time, all of which can impact your research career. So why do we do it? Because it is worth it!

In this edition of SDS-PAGE, we have the perspectives of new parents in different stages of their research careers. They share with us the challenges of becoming a parent whilst pursuing a career, and provide some great advice. We hope that this instalment sparks discussions amongst our readers regarding what is perhaps one of the most rewarding, but also challenging, aspects of a career in research.

Perspectives from a PhD Student

Amy Baxter (La Trobe University, Victoria)

As a mature age student, Amy began her PhD with the knowledge that she wanted to start a family. Despite the daunting task of focussing on a doctorate and having a young child, Amy has excelled. After taking seven months maternity leave during her PhD, Amy returned to La Trobe University to complete her doctorate and has recently published a co-first author paper in *eLife* (2). Having a good support system is very important, and Amy received encouragement from her supervisor as well as family and friends. Balancing the demands of a PhD and being a parent can be challenging, and a supportive environment is crucial to being able to cope with the pressure of your new role as parent and student.

"The university was very accommodating when I returned from maternity leave in terms of finding a private space for me to express milk and take time out to feed my daughter during the day. I was also lucky enough to get a spot for my daughter at La Trobe Children's Centre, which allowed me to feed her during the day when she was still young."

Time management is extremely important in your PhD, and understanding how to manage the demands of your project with your new responsibilities as a parent is vital to maintaining work-life balance. This takes time to master, it is important to be realistic about your expectations and you should not expect to be an expert immediately. You need to allow for interruptions to your schedule as these will certainly happen. While the option of flexible hours may help, you do not want to be at the lab in the middle of the night when you could be getting much needed sleep.

"I guess my time management skills have improved a bit since having a baby while I am in the lab, but overall I have much less time for research. I know it won't be like this forever, but at this point I rarely do any work when I am at home and always leave by 5pm to pick my daughter up from child care."

Amy has found that the lack of time motivates her to get more done in a shorter space of time; however she notes that sleep deprivation is still a big issue. She manages this by taking time for herself by having a day off every couple of months when she feels it gets too overwhelming. It is extremely important to ensure you manage your stress levels and not allow the pressure to overwhelm you. You may find it helpful to discuss these issues with your supervisor or a mentor. Remember, you should always ask for help when you need it. Additional support could come from family, friends or councillors available at your place of work.

While Amy has taken on the challenging task of balancing a PhD and starting a family, she would not change a thing.

"Everyone has their own situation. You can't really plan your life too much, you never know what's going to happen so I would just say if you want to have a baby, don't let anything stop you, but it definitely helps to have good family and friend support."



Amy Baxter with her daughter, Maggie.

Perspectives from Two Early Career Researchers

Catherine Palmer (La Trobe University, Victoria) and Aaron McGrath (University of California, San Diego)

Catherine and Aaron are ECRs who both recently became parents. Catherine had a daughter, named Ivy, and is currently on maternity leave from a postdoctoral position at La Trobe University. Aaron also had a daughter, named Matilda, who as a seven-month-old relocated with her parents to the US for Dad's postdoc position. Catherine writes:

"While sitting here trying to collect my thoughts on what it is like to be a new parent, my daughter is smiling at me as she plays with her toy, and the only thing I can think is that it is amazing."

There are certainly a number of things you may want to think about when starting a family, regardless of your career choice: including financial stability, career interruption and timing. As an ECR, the interruption to your research is usually a primary concern and may make you feel as if you need to return to work soon after having a child. However, you may be able to minimise the impact on your work whilst still spending precious time with your newborn. Starting work on a project that involves a number of people can help ensure your research continues while you are on parental leave; maximising your potential to publish. Additionally, you may want to consider alternative ways to maintain a presence in the scientific community while you are on leave, such as mentoring a student or contributing to a blog or editorial in a publication. And remember: an interruption to your work is taken into consideration when applying for grants and/or fellowships. Of course, the most important thing is to not expect too much from yourself and take time away from work when you need it.

Compared to the corporate sector, many academic institutions have excellent maternity leave programs. In addition, upon returning to work, research can be conducted within flexible working hours. Probably one of the greatest concerns about having a family early in your career is a loss of time day to day. There is no disputing the fact that the free time you once had will change for the worse! But learning to manage your new schedule is a skill that you will quickly acquire writes Catherine:

"If you are initially returning to work part-time after having a baby, it is important to be realistic about what you can achieve in a smaller time frame. I hear many people say that they take on a lot in their part-time roles and then struggle with their work-life balance. Make sure you keep an open dialogue with your employer to manage expectations."

So what issues are specific to new ECR Dads? Similar to new Mums, the lives of new fathers change dramatically overnight, and with that comes extra responsibility and perhaps the realisation that science is not just a passion, but your hopeful source of income for many years to come! Use this time to start planning ahead to achieve stability in your career. What do you hope to achieve by the time your child starts school? Is now a good time to travel overseas for that dream postdoc position? Is science even something that you can see yourself doing in the foreseeable future? Many of these questions will be buzzing around your head. The most important thing to remember is that anything that you wanted to achieve before becoming a parent is just as achievable now. Another point to keep in mind is that you will never have this time with your young family back again, and you don't want to miss anything. Learning to manage your time in the lab effectively is now more important than ever and setting strict hours is a great place to start. Such skills will be valuable when you take on other responsibilities later in your career, such as starting a lab of your own and managing staff.

While having children may seem like a huge hurdle early in your career as a scientist, it is definitely worth it. In fact, a recent study found that having fewer children than wanted as a result of a science career was an indicator for reduced job satisfaction (3). Who would have thought: scientific proof that having kids is likely to improve your career in science!

References

1. Shen, H. (2013) *Nature* **495**, 22-24
2. Poon, I., Baxter, A.A., Lay, F.T., et al. (2014) *eLife* **3**, e01808
3. Ecklund, E.H., and Lincoln, A.E. (2011) *PLoS One* **6**, e22590



Catherine Palmer with her daughter, Ivy.



Aaron McGrath with his daughter, Matilda.

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