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"I don't think interviewing while obviously pregnant is advisable in the conservative, male-dominated disciplines of science and engineering. ..."

Why Students Need Professors' Perspective on Family Issues

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9 JANUARY 2004

"Don't ever have a baby. ... They are too much trouble," my mother told me. I deeply respected her opinions, and, because I was extremely serious about my career, decided as a high school student against having children. However, by the time I finished graduate school and got married, I was beginning to hear other opinions on the subject of parenting. As a postdoc, I was part of a female science faculty lunch group that included a couple of older women who had also decided not to have children. I recall them expressing concern and regret about growing older without children and grandchildren; their friends all seemed to enjoy such things, and they would never experience them. I made a rare decision to go against my mother's advice.

Having decided that I wanted to have a child, the next question was when to do it. I decided that the most logical time would be during my postdoctorate years. My ultimate career goal was to become a professor, and I knew I would lose some flexibility when I acquired the accompanying teaching responsibilities. On the other hand, I thoroughly enjoyed my research, so I planned to minimize the time I took off to give birth.

In January 1980, I had started working in the lab of Nobel Laureate H. C. Brown at Purdue. Although I was fairly certain Dr. Brown would be delighted for me to continue working during my pregnancy, I wasn't so sure about the rest of the department. At that time

women--regardless of their occupation--often quit work as soon as it was known they were pregnant. Even some women didn't support pregnant women working.

In addition, I was in a lab with 16 highly competitive postdocs who worked 70 hours a week. Equipment was in short supply, and whenever a person went on vacation, their drawers and cabinets had to be padlocked in order to keep the equipment from being "borrowed" by others in the lab. I wasn't going to have my bench padlocked, because I wasn't leaving. So I was somewhat concerned about retaining my equipment if my co-workers got the impression that I wouldn't be using it much in the future.

To avoid all the possible problems, I decided to hide the fact that I was pregnant for as long as possible and acquired an assortment of large thin jackets to hide my changing figure. . By the time the second week of December rolled around and I was well into my third trimester, Dr. Brown still hadn't asked me anything about my plans, so I decided to write him a memo. In it I told him that I was scheduled to have a baby in the second half of January and that I planned to take a week off.

After a day or so, Dr. Brown called me into his office. He told me he had no idea I was pregnant, and had only thought I was putting on a little weight. He also said I should determine how much time I was entitled to take off and take all of it. I replied that I didn't want to take off very long because I enjoyed my research so much, but he insisted that I at least determine what my benefits were. This was characteristic of his way of doing things: always obtain all the information that is readily available before making an important decision.

It was obvious that Dr. Brown intended to leave it completely up to me to determine whether or not to take maternity leave. He was the most open-minded person I interacted with during that time period, and today I think that if all men behaved as he did then, we would have no problems encouraging pregnant women and new mothers to stay in science.

At the benefits office, I was told the standard maternity leave time was six months. I guess my sense of horror was obvious on my face because the secretary immediately followed up with, "You don't have to take all of it. Most women don't." I told her, "I don't intend to take any of it." And she replied, "Well, you're going to have to take some of it, because if you take one day, you'll have to complete leave paperwork." There was a 15-page application for up to six months and a half-page application for up to two weeks. I submitted the latter.

To make things even more hectic, months earlier I had started applying for a job. A university representative called to schedule an interview during December. I told him February would be much more convenient, but he insisted on December, so, 8-months pregnant, I went. I thought that the department interviewing me would recognize my dedication and energy; I thought they would realize that if I were able to maintain a research program and job search while pregnant, I would be able to do much more after delivery. This was a mistake, because my pregnancy proved a complete distraction for them during the interview. Even today, I don't think interviewing while obviously pregnant is advisable in the conservative, male-dominated disciplines of science and engineering.

My husband and I had decided to split caring for our baby until he was eligible for day care. In advance, we found a day care center that specialized in small babies, but they did not accept babies younger than about 2 weeks. We were comfortable with our son being in the company of children his own age, and we each did the "litmus test" for day care centers--dropping in unannounced to check out the environment (see box).

Our son, Christopher Nelson Brammer, was born Thursday night at 8 p.m. January 21, 1983. That morning, after my water broke, I went in to the lab to tell everyone I was going to the hospital and to ensure that there was nothing that needed my attention before I left. The next week, I stayed home with Christopher during the mornings and his father stayed home with him during the afternoons. The following week, the day care center accepted him; I recall them remarking that he was the first baby left there with the stub of its umbilical cord still attached.

Over time, I gained great confidence in his day care "nannies." The three women who

cared for the 12 babies kept in the house obviously loved the children. My son was always smiling when I dropped him off--and when I arrived to pick him up. (Actually, this is another litmus test, especially for older children; I wouldn't leave my child anyplace unless he was absolutely thrilled about being left there.) The babies always seemed to be so happy, and my son seemed to enjoy playing with them. I was pleased that he was socializing with some little playmates, rather than only with adults all day long.

My husband and I tried to compensate for leaving our child in day care by keeping him with us at all other times. We took him with us when we went out to eat, when we went shopping, and when we went to the movies; he was quiet and caused no trouble. When I went to the lab on weekends, I put him in a playpen in the middle of the room. After I took a faculty position at the University of Oklahoma, I got a refrigerator for my office for milk, juice, and baby food. He went with me when I had to work in the office at night or on weekends. When he had a fever and couldn't go to day care, he slept on blankets and a foam mattress on my office floor. When he was older and I went to professional meetings to speak, I took him with me, and he watched as I gave my presentations. As a result, we are very close, and he is

The Day Care Litmus Test

I have learned from personal experience that dropping in to prospective day care centers can be more valuable than personal recommendations. If you're in the hunt for good daytime care for your child, you can do it several times, each time coming up with "just one more brief question". While there, take careful note of the surroundings. Are the babies always all standing in cribs crying, as if in jail, or do they get to play on the floor and explore the room? Are the children clean or do they have dried food on their shirts at 3pm? Do the children (toddlers and older) get to go out for walks or to a playground, or are they kept indoors all day every day? Do they go on "field trips" to the library, museum, or park? Are the children and the staff smiling? Also, pay attention to the odor of the building and of your child's room the very first time you enter; you'll want your child to spend the day in an environment that smells clean and fresh.

now a chemical engineering major.

I thought then and still think that it was a good choice for me to have my child during my postdoc years. However, I know from friends around the country that having a baby doesn't always work out so well for female professors. Moreover, each woman has different goals and will have different experiences, so each woman needs to make the parenting decisions that are right for her. In addition, no one can predict exactly the type of environment she will eventually work in or what problems or barriers she will encounter and have to solve in the future. So, although I'm pleased with the way things have worked out for my family, my story is just one example.

Each woman should seek out a large number of role models, so she will have a range of ideas, perspectives, and support from which to draw. The best time to begin the work of establishing this network is well in advance, so that when a female scientist is deciding later on what she wants or needs to do, she will have contacts in place. For example, before taking a position at a university, a female job candidate might contact any female faculty members who have left that university and female faculty members at nearby universities in order to learn more about their environments.

By having the contacts in place in advance, gathering such information will be easy; without the contacts, the candidate would have to resort to making cold calls to female faculty members where she was interviewing, and this would probably yield very little worthwhile information. Hopefully, through this networking, female students can become better prepared to face their career obstacles--not just those related to parenting--and surmount them successfully.