

“Say goodbye to sleep”: perspectives on building a family and a career at the same time



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For many ecologists, early career development coincides with raising young children. This juxtaposition usually creates challenges, including the sleep-deprivation referenced by one of my colleagues in the title quotation. In contrast to previous decades, today these challenges are of concern to both male and female scientists. Though gender is still implicated in some of the difficulties of simultaneously building a family and a career (eg Primack and Stacy 1997; NSF 2003), the current diversity in family structures, work cultures, and individual backgrounds ultimately results in a unique experience for each ecologist. Here, I summarize some common perspectives expressed by ecologists with children, in the hope that they will be useful to graduate students considering parenthood. To read and share more perspectives, join the Science and Families online discussion group (<http://tech.groups.yahoo.com/group/scienceandfamilies/>; Kurle 2007).

A strong support network – which is key to maintaining a balance between family and career responsibilities – acts as a critical buffer against the cascade of consequences that is often initiated by a break in routine (eg attending a conference, tending to a sick child). Such a network requires at least three things. First, seek a work environment in which the family lives of coworkers are visible and validated. It is essential to have an advisor or supervisor who is supportive of one’s parenting duties, and colleagues with children can share advice, a sympathetic ear, and childcare. As a litmus test, evaluate the repercussions of leaving a faculty meeting with the announcement, “I have my Brownie troop meeting”, as one professor summoned the courage to do years ago. Would making a similar statement be considered ordinary or would it be frowned upon in your work environment? Second, acquire at least part-time assistance at home (eg babysitter, cleaning service). The backing of a full-time homemaker – whether a spouse, nanny, or housekeeper – is invaluable, but is not always an option for families these days. Many ecologists acknowledge the numerous ways in which their spouse or partner provides indispensable support (eg Primack and Stacy 1997), as well as the advantages of living near extended family. Third, sufficient funds to pay for quality childcare and adequate housing are essential for having the peace of mind you will need to concentrate on your research. Graduate students in ecology are likely to be funded for several years on an assistantship or fellow-

ship (Perkins 2006), making parenthood financially feasible – given careful budgeting – at the earliest stage of an ecology career.

There is no ideal time along the career trajectory to have children. When asked about the best time to have children, one ecologist answered, “When you are retired!” Given the importance of a support network, think about when you expect to have the strongest support for having children, and weigh this against the reality of your biological clock. Also, reflect on how the trade-off between flexibility and money (ie a flexible daily work schedule is often accompanied by a lower salary) will change during the course of your career. Flexibility is especially important if you want to spend a large portion of your day with your children, and money is especially important if you want to use full-time daycare. Be aware that both flexibility and salary are limited for teaching assistants. Every situation is different, but many ecologists agree that particularly good times to have children are late in graduate school, while financially supported to write a thesis, or while working in a post-doc position.

Most ecologists end up working in government or academia (Perkins 2006), in positions that tend to be compatible with parenthood, albeit in different ways. Positions in government tend to have excellent benefits, working hours that are well-matched to daycare hours, and flexible rules about the timing of career advancement. In academia, extremely long hours are required and pressure to achieve tenure is strong, but there is considerable time flexibility – notably during summers and holidays.

Field research can create both challenges and opportunities for parents, depending on the circumstances. When field sites are far away, inhospitably rugged, or riddled with potentially harmful plants or animals, getting field work accomplished with children in tow is difficult at best. On the other hand, bringing children to relatively safe, nearby field sites or field stations can be a wonderful experience for the whole family (Figure 1). As one ecologist described it, “You get your research done, and the kids are having a blast in the woods”. Infants and school-aged children are better suited to field excursions than are children who are mobile, but not yet safe on their own. Along with others that I spoke with, I have found, however, that bringing an infant into the field requires much more organization, time, energy, and gear than would otherwise be required.

Given the challenges – not the least of which is sleep-deprivation – why would any ecologist consider trying to build a family and a career at the same time? Leaving aside the laughter and learning that all children bring into their



Figure 1. Ecological research can provide opportunities for families to spend time together outside, while collecting data. Here, my infant son and I take a break from field work.

parents' lives, becoming a parent can greatly benefit the career of an ecologist. Ecologist-parents have found that children provide stress relief and a sense of perspective that keeps work pressures under control. Productivity can also improve after having children, as parents learn how to prioritize, manage time efficiently, and remain focused when time is available for working. This is not to say that

there will not be difficult days (and nights). But several successful ecologists told me that parenthood has been instrumental in helping them achieve a balance in quality time spent between personal and professional activities – a balance that many of us seek.

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Faculty response



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As a new faculty member with a baby and a 9-year-old, I sympathize with the anecdotes and struggles described above. During the 9 years between our two children, my husband and I attempted to identify the perfect time to have another child while on an academic career track. The biological clock is also a valid concern, as the path to academia is often lengthy, given the years needed to obtain an MS, a PhD, and then a postdoctoral position. We thought our decision to have a second child during my post-doc was ideal, because we expected this phase to last 2–3 years; however, things took an unexpected turn when I interviewed for, and was offered, a position within 6 months of starting the post-doc. The “dream” job had to be accepted, albeit with a slightly extended start date, and it was undoubtedly a surprise when I appeared with a 2-month-old baby.

This relates to Sara's first point, regarding the importance of finding a family-friendly work environment. When interviewing for a graduate or faculty position, be sure to ask questions about departmental support for families. Do potential advisors have children? Will they

be sympathetic about a sick child? Have faculty members had positive experiences with bringing their children to work? Answers to these questions will help with the decision as to whether a department meshes with your goals and values. I also concur with the second key item, regarding assistance at home being invaluable. My husband is an at-home dad, who provides critical support, escorting our daughter to school, bringing lunch and a nursing baby to campus, and juggling household tasks. The last item Sara mentions – money – is not necessarily so critical. With our first child, we decided the benefits of having one of us at home were worth sacrificing a second salary for, and so we lived on my graduate stipends.

Advisors should not dismiss potential students with families. You may find they are even more focused, productive, and efficient. Support students who may be struggling in their decision to start a family; let them know you are willing to be realistic and flexible, but be sure to clearly communicate your expectations. Realize that you are a role model, influencing expectations of acceptability and normality (eg bring your baby with you if nursing, bring your children to departmental events).

Finally, I emphatically agree that parenthood is important to achieving a personal and professional balance. Having a family promotes a healthy perspective on what is important and counteracts disappointments that are constantly encountered in academia (eg grant and manuscript rejections). Have children! Enjoy them and give them your undivided attention every day, as they are more precious than anything else in life.