

Family matters

Like most fathers, I have fond memories of my two daughters' births, their first steps and their childhood years. But I also regret all the missed opportunities: to be more involved in their education, to be around during the trivial and routine, and to support them during the high and low points of their lives. In hindsight, the 21 years I have been a father have passed in a flash.

Unfortunately, the joys of parenthood often coincide with a time when a scientist's career clamours for attention and commitment. Publications must be written and polished, and experiments must be repeated to ensure that the work is watertight in the face of reviewers' scrutiny. Running a gel or starting a lengthy experiment late in the afternoon inevitably clashes with nine-to-five working hours, which are the exception for most scientists. In essence, scientists often put work before family and spend less time with their children than they would like. This is surely true of many other jobs, but science is the world I know. It is also a world in which a career cannot be postponed and where success is easily monitored by productivity and the quality of work. Because scientists must keep producing papers, the work never really stops.

Parenting is a task and a joy that, in an ideal world, is shared by both partners. In reality, this is seldom the case and I do not claim that it was so for me. The shift of responsibility for the children to the other partner happens when career, ambition and the need to make a living take priority. Of course, the financial security that comes with a permanent position is a benefit for the whole family. And putting family first at the expense of research inevitably has consequences: failure to earn first authorship on a paper; difficulties in obtaining funding,

a permanent job or a promotion; and eventually, failure to embark on a career that satisfies abilities and interests. For many scientists, the sacrifices that come with succeeding professionally are easier to accept than the sacrifices that partners make when they put family first and lose out on their career.

Still, in today's society, the task of caring for children and the burden of domestic chores fall disproportionately on women. They cannot escape the biological reality of having to carry the baby and provide care during the first few months, but it means that many women do not return to research, which is an enormous waste of potential. Of course, there are families who are able to combine family life and a research career for both parents, but they are still the exception.

This inevitably leads to an under-representation of women at nearly all levels in our profession beyond the graduate degree, not only because they drop out but also because they are not able to advance as quickly as their male colleagues. Preliminary statistical analysis of data from the EMBO Fellowship schemes has provided us with some insight. The percentage of women with children who apply for post-doctoral fellowships is much lower than the equivalent figure for male applicants. This points to some social distortions: mothers are less likely to apply for an EMBO Fellowship that, until recently, required movement to another country, and this may ultimately limit their career choices. Or they postpone having children, which again leads to delicate timing decisions. The impact of family life on men's careers is less well known, so it was very surprising to find that the success rate of both mothers and fathers is lower when compared with childless applicants. Better statistics are needed,

but it would appear that children make us less competitive. This may be the case: parents are more often tired, less focused and less able to spend additional hours in the lab to plan experiments, analyse results or simply talk science to colleagues. Whatever the reason, we need a better understanding of how family life affects work in the laboratory and our careers in general.

Even later in life, when involvement in committees and review panels becomes part of a scientist's work, the lower priority given to family is still evident. Meetings that could easily take place any weekday are often held on weekends, when we could be with our family. Although I am sensitive to this fact, I am also guilty of arranging meetings during weekends when no other dates are suitable or when costs demand it. Some scientists obviously do not want the additional chores of the job to interfere with their research work or teaching duties and prefer the weekend meetings. Sometimes, however, it seems that those who prefer the weekend shift are the ones whose children have already moved on.

The Irish singer Val Doonican's wonderfully maudlin song 'The Special Years' described his daughter's life "from little girl to wife", which "you remember all of your life". These special years passed in a blur for many of my generation. But now we are in positions where we make important decisions about young scientists' future career prospects—parents or not. We should therefore be more aware of the particular problems young families face and help them to both 'get a life' and succeed scientifically, so that they can one day look back with a feeling of fulfilment in every aspect of their lives.

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