



ADVICE

The Baby-Before-Tenure Question

Balancing an academic career with the realities of a biological clock



David Cutler for The Chronicle Review

By Patricia Maurice | AUGUST 03, 2016

As a brand new emerita in a college of engineering, I'm keeping busy with advisory boards, editorships, and collaborative research while learning to play piano and cooking more gourmet meals than is probably good for me or my husband. Yet I also find myself contemplating how best to continue to serve the academic community.

My greatest concern is that since "retiring," there's one less senior woman in a discipline that seems to be chronically short of them. Nevertheless, young women — and young men, increasingly — continue to seek me out with questions about work-life balance, STEM careers, and parenthood, especially during the pretenure years. So this seems as good a time as any to attempt to answer one of our era's defining questions:

As a woman, how do you balance an academic career with the realities of a biological clock?

When I was an undergraduate, there weren't a lot of female faculty members around, so I didn't see much point in pursuing a Ph.D. Later, as a young hydrologist working for the U.S. Geological Survey near Princeton, N.J., I crossed paths with several remarkable female scientists, and eventually gained enough self-confidence to seek a doctoral degree. A few days after defending my dissertation at Stanford, I moved across country

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I had started a tenure-track faculty position. In the decade, I had developed an independent research program, married a fellow academic, become a stepmother, survived a problem pregnancy that resulted in a slightly preemie but perfect baby boy, obtained tenure, dragged my husband to another university, taken on a center directorship, and been promoted to professor. Then, while trying to do my best impression of a Super Mom, I wrote a textbook; took on various administrative roles and editorships; continued to evolve as a scholar; earned a black belt in Taekwondo; took up beekeeping; and in the blink of an eye found myself an empty nester and an emerita.

My life in academia has been a whirlwind and I'm not sure whom I drove crazier — myself or the people around me. That said, my career is a data point showing that it is possible to become a mother pretenure and to attain a reasonable semblance of academic success. The key lesson I learned along the way: In the great ratings scheme of life, you are the only reviewer who matters.

With that preamble, here are one woman's thoughts on motherhood and academe.

Realistically speaking, motherhood can be an impediment to tenure and other career milestones. Years ago, I was in a meeting with a senior administrator who cautioned that "many studies have shown that women who have babies are less likely to achieve tenure." He recommended that if an untenured female faculty member does have a baby, she shouldn't take a semester off from teaching or stop the tenure clock because doing so risks an uneven track record, weak external letters, and perceptions that she might not be fully committed to her career.

At the time, I found his comments infuriating. But over the years I've come to appreciate his unvarnished honesty. Yes indeed, some senior professors *still* grumble: "She could have published more papers or gotten better teaching evaluations or brought in another \$X in grants if only she hadn't let herself get side-tracked" — rather than saying, "Wow, look at how much she accomplished even though she had a baby — she has a proven ability to juggle and is a great role model for our students."

My advice: Take whatever leave **THE CHRONICLE** of Higher Education you can; else eventually, it will take a toll on your health and well-being. Excellent women are well worth a university's investment and long-term commitment. **LOG IN**

If you are a woman who is starting a junior-faculty position while facing a ticking biological clock, think hard about what you most want out of life. If your career is your absolute priority, then perhaps you should wait to start a family, or not have children. Your life is no one's business but your own. Many women have waited to start a family and have been more secure for the wait. Yet it's a simple fact: Women have biological clocks. So if you really want to have a baby, and your age is becoming a concern, don't be afraid to go for it.

Whatever you decide, enjoy every second of being a junior faculty member and worry be damned. Work hard, pursue the research you find most interesting, get a life, and when you're promoted, congratulate yourself for beating the odds. If you're denied promotion, you'll have no regrets. Either way, in any STEM field, you're likely to remain highly marketable.

If you're thinking of starting a family, ask yourself some questions. How supportive are my department chair and dean likely to be? Are there other mothers on the faculty? Is my partner likely to be fully engaged in parenting? Will I have a strong support network, including good day-care/nanny options? Will extended family help out? How good am I at juggling? How's my general health? Can I cut back on committee duties and other commitments?

As a new mother and assistant professor, it sure would have helped if my husband had occasionally changed a diaper or warmed a bottle. That said, I benefitted tremendously from teenage stepchildren who adored their baby brother and were eager babysitters. I had a great department chair and colleagues who were willing to drop everything and drive me to the hospital for pregnancy emergencies whenever my husband was out of range. While I would have appreciated some cooking or laundry skills, my husband offered unconditional love, endless free computer support, and a salary to fall back on if I ever decided to just stay home with my precious baby. Of course, there are plenty of

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Dads who do diapers, and some of my friends have husbands who are amazing stay-at-home dads. Whatever works for your family is *fine*. **LOG IN**

Understand that not all pregnancies go according to plan and that kids breed chaos.

The unexpected will happen. You may wind up on bed rest, have twins, or be faced with the challenges and joys of a special-needs child. Your toddler will infect you with the demon virus from hell the week before the most major award deadline of your career. Your brain will be so fried that you will completely forget what you're talking about in the middle of a lecture — a problem likely to recur until it blurs into bona fide senior moments.

Having kids will make you a better faculty member and a better person. You will learn patience and compassion. Answering mind-warping questions about the meaning of the universe will help you lecture more clearly. Your time-management skills will soar.

And when a student walks into your office with questions about juggling career and family, you will be able to answer from personal experience. That's a skill that doesn't show up on tenure questionnaires but is surely the equivalent of more than a few publications.

Being a faculty member can make you a better parent. Your children will have unparalleled opportunities to travel and do science-fair projects and see what strong women can accomplish. Yes, you will be up at 3 a.m. writing lectures or chasing funding. But you can attend your children's basketball games and spend afternoons volunteering at their school.

As a young woman, be thankful for having choices. Never forget that you are incredibly lucky to have been born in a place and time that allows you to pursue an education and contemplate becoming a professor with or without becoming a mother. Don't be afraid to be "a girl" in what has traditionally been "a man's world." As you become more senior, stick out your elbows and start changing the system. Make things better not just for young mothers but for young fathers, too.

Finally, always remember that if you have the freedom to choose, whether or not it includes having children and/or fulfilling your adviser's wildest dreams, you will be happy. The best administrators are supportive of parenthood because they know that happy faculty members are immensely creative, productive people who inspire future generations and transform the world. And isn't that what academe should be all about?

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By Kelly J. Baker

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