

naturejobs

**THE CAREERS
MAGAZINE FOR
SCIENTISTS**

It seemed like a curveball question. The *Naturejobs*-sponsored panel at the EuroScience Open Forum in Munich last week had been discussing scientific opportunities outside academia for about two hours when an audience member asked whether female scientists should have children early in their career, or wait until after they are well established. The query seemed left-field enough, given the topic being debated, but the gender of the questioner surprised both the audience and the panellists: he was male.

Perhaps the issue arose because four of the seven panel members were women — and some of them had mentioned having children when they introduced their talk. A couple of the male panellists followed their lead, noting that family issues affect women disproportionately — after all, there are plenty of data to show that compared with men, women's scientific careers are more hindered by starting a family. So the issue ought to be considered by scientists of both sexes.

In response to the question, the panellists concurred that timing child-bearing with defending your dissertation seems logical; but they emphasized that cold-blooded rationale isn't the best consideration for such decisions. Several spoke of how they managed to advance their careers even though they had started a family. One woman went part-time after having her baby and has now increased her hours to 80% of her full-time post. The set-up has worked well, she said, although there is the slight issue that her academic husband works in another country. Another female panellist has her own patent-law business and so can build flexibility into her own schedule.

The ultimate solution to dealing with the issue of when to have children requires supportive partners and institutions, but the decision is ultimately down to the individual. Just as it's hard to plot the entire course of one's career at the beginning of graduate school, it's equally hard to lay out one's entire family plan: marriage and honeymoon between grant cycles; children timed to appear right after tenure; and death — but only after one's had time to properly enjoy one's Nobel.

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