

It takes a village

Time, the master regulator of work–life balance, is a rare commodity. Parenting further depletes its stock, so support systems are needed to help investigators navigate the early stages of parenthood and minimize the impact on scientific advancement and career progression.

It is a near-certain bet that all researchers will have, at one point or another, found themselves thinking “I just don’t have enough time.” Indeed for many, this may be a weekly, or even daily, thought, as the rate of growth in the to-do list outstrips that at which we cross tasks off as completed. There isn’t enough time to do all the experiments that need to be carried out to complete that paper, to read all the articles that should be read, to think about data already generated, to carefully plan future experiments, or to write detailed notes, protocols, papers and grants. This feeling is probably independent of how many hours one actually spends at work, and in most cases, the lack of time, both perceived and actual, extends from the workplace to affect researchers’ personal lives. A recent survey of *Nature* readers (K. Powell, *Nature* <http://doi.org/bswt>; 2016) found evidence to support the feeling of lack of time, with around 38% of participants reporting that they work on average more than 60 hours a week, leaving little time for anything else. Furthermore, 19% of the readers also considered the lack of work–life balance as the biggest challenge facing early career scientists (second only to 44% of readers who considered the fight for funding as the number one problem). As such, when considering career options, the prospect of a better work–life balance is becoming a key factor in the decisions made by early career researchers, and the process results in a substantial number leaving academia — the same survey found that 65% of the researchers have considered quitting research, and 15% actually quit.

These problems — the lack of time and work–life balance — are particularly relevant amongst those who plan to start a family, whether their partners are also researchers or otherwise working in a different sector. Working parents with young children are faced with certain challenges, no matter what their jobs entail. In the case of researchers, it’s not always easy to reconcile those long hours in the lab with dropping and picking up kids from school (you need more time!); and having children is expensive, meaning that job security becomes more important when you have dependents. Living on grants and fellowships that last a few years at a time can be hugely problematic when setting up a

home, especially with the prospect of having to move city or country in a couple of years.

Particularly for women, parenting brings additional time constraints, as in general, mothers still take on the majority of parenting responsibilities, including spending more time away from work on maternity leave. For researchers, this can impact current and future research projects and ultimately, career progression. Importantly, young investigators are more affected by these problems, and motherhood often coincides with the period when young female scientists are at a critical stage in their careers, trying to start independent research groups. Therefore, it is essential that individuals, institutions, funders and governments recognize the challenges associated with motherhood (and also fatherhood, and parenting more generally) and provide support to help researchers at this stage, enabling them to find the time they need, both to invest in their careers but also so they can better balance their workload and their personal lives.

At the individual level, empathy and mentoring can prove incredibly useful; learning about how others have previously navigated a similar path and what strategies helped them to better balance life as parents with work can make a big difference. Flexibility is key to help facilitate these adjustments; for example, rescheduling meeting times and office hours to avoid early starts and late finishes can have a huge impact, easing new parents into their changing routines.

Equally important is institutional support, from both research institutes and funding bodies, which can provide resources that buy researchers additional time. For example, King’s College London (KCL) allows new parents to apply to a Parenting Leave Fund that can be used to temporarily hire research technicians in order to ease the process of getting back to work upon completion of maternity, adoption or additional paternity leave, which can help to reignite and speed up specific research projects. KCL also sponsors a Carers’ Career Development Fund, which parents can use to cover costs associated with their partners and children travelling, easing the pains of attending seminars, conferences and networking events. Other institutions,

such as the European Molecular Biology Organization, go even further, providing childcare at some of the conferences and symposia they organize. Some fellowships, for example the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowships, include family-cost allowances. Perhaps even more importantly, several funding agencies extend their eligibility criteria for early career grants to minimize the impact of time spent on maternity or paternity leave, such as in the case of the European Research Council’s Starting Grants and Consolidator Grants. These examples highlight important mechanisms that provide additional time (and money) to parents at an important stage of their careers, but similar initiatives must become more widespread across research and funding institutions. Furthermore, the need for support isn’t exclusive to the parent, as absences from the lab, office or teaching class can lead to increased workloads for colleagues. Organizations need to be flexible in recruiting additional short-term help to prevent the work–life balance of others being dramatically affected as well.

At a higher level, governments and lawmakers can also improve the work–life balance, by facilitating access to maternity and paternity leave, and to childcare. One interesting possibility is to incentivize fathers to take a bigger share of the parental responsibility, for example, by providing better support for paternity leave or shared parental leave, which will help to promote greater gender equality, limit the number of highly skilled female scientists from leaving academia (when the preference would be to remain), and facilitate an earlier return to work by women, thereby limiting the impact on their career progression. In the UK, shared parental leave is available and indeed was recently taken by this very editor to provide support for their partner to give additional time to crunch away at those experiments, grants and papers.

As the end of the year approaches, make sure you enjoy some time off and tilt the seesaw away from the lab for a little while, remembering that a better work–life balance increases happiness and productivity and reduces stress, making for a far brighter start to 2017. □