

## **2006-145: WHEN THE BIOLOGICAL CLOCK IS TICKING FASTER THAN THE TENURE CLOCK...**

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## **When the biological clock is ticking faster than the tenure clock...**

### ***Abstract***

The clocks are ticking, and you're getting antsy. You've delayed starting a family because you wanted to get settled into your academic position; however, that doesn't seem such a good idea now that you're approaching your mid-30's. What factors should you consider in making the decision to start your family? Once you've decided to take the plunge into family life, what are strategies you can use to strike a balance between your family and career? Here, personal experiences of several female engineering faculty members from the University of Iowa will be shared, along with tips from other resources. Topics include:

- (1) Negotiating with your supervisor [how will baby's arrival affect your contributions to the department/college?];
- (2) Preparing for the unexpected [what if you have to go on bed rest?];
- (3) Making decisions about childcare [who will watch baby while you lecture?].
- (4) Easing back into work [where is the lactation room?];
- (5) Facilitating success in both areas [where do you go for support?];

### ***Introduction***

I felt compelled to write this paper because I experienced a need to have a more open and expansive dialogue about the issues faced by women who desire to have a family and a faculty position in engineering. In the past, I have attended engineering conferences with sessions on work/life issues, only to be disappointed that they delved into the experiences of male professors with stay-at-home wives. Although the challenges of these male counterparts are real, they are vastly different from the ones I face as a female professor with a husband who works outside the home. I also thought that others could benefit from the networking we have developed at the University of Iowa, where four female engineering professors in two departments have had babies all within a couple years of each other. Thus, this paper is from the perspective of married, female engineering professors with child(ren), and I acknowledge that single, female professors with child(ren) have a whole different set of challenges. Secondly, this paper is not an exhaustive resource—I have chosen topics that the four of us have found most pressing. It is, however, meant to stimulate female faculty to share their experiences with one another in an effort to expand our network and its benefits. I truly do not wish other women to have to stumble through this process as some of us have. Thirdly, this paper addresses mainly practical issues in making the decision to start a family before tenure and presenting options that have been used by the four of us as we have sought to be true to ourselves, our families and our careers. This is not a “one size fits all” approach, and I encourage you to use this paper as a guide to develop a solution that works best for you and your situation. You will find that the keys to doing so successfully, which I have woven throughout this paper, are knowing your priorities (and goals) and acting upon them.

### ***Answering the Alarm***

The tenure clock is very intimidating. The research is showing that having children is more likely to “bump” women off the tenure track than their male counterparts.<sup>1-5</sup> In her article on this

issue, Cathy Ann Trower points out that “having both a family and an academic career is no simple matter [for women]. The tenure system in the United States was set up for male faculty, whose wives provided all the homemaking so that their husbands could devote their energies solely to academic career advancement.”<sup>1</sup> This inequity of the tenure system structure is often combined with the hostility of those who do not believe that women who have a family are dedicated to and serious about their academic career. Thus, some women would rather wait until after tenure to try starting a family to ensure that its impact on their careers is minimal. However, the biological clock is unrelenting. As we delay the time to family, health considerations such as fertility issues and high-risk pregnancies become more of a reality. Although modern medicine can help with some of these problems, it has yet to extend the period of time to menopause. In addition to these concerns, I began thinking practically: Will I have enough energy for childrearing as an older parent? Will I be able to enjoy grandchildren?

No one can decide for you what alarm clock you will answer. It is an individual choice, and ultimately you must live with the consequences of that choice. However, I would like to present some guiding principles that may help in making the decision one way or the other. First, assess your work situation. Are you progressing well towards tenure? Are your supervisor and colleagues friendly and supportive? Are your graduate students fairly self-sufficient and/or do they have access to a good mentoring network (post-doctoral scholars, graduate committees, *etc.*)? Answers of “yes” to these questions could smooth the transition to faculty parent. One of my female colleagues put it this way: “If I was on track for tenure, then I would have a baby before tenure. If I was not on track for tenure, then I would still have the baby before tenure. If I was somewhere in between, then I would wait until after tenure to have the baby.” Secondly, review your priorities. What is really important to you? I like how Mary McKinney, a Ph.D. Clinical Psychologist and Academic Coach, articulated it: “The time between beginning a doctoral career and getting tenure is too long to delay the pursuit of central ideals.”<sup>6</sup> This was the bottom line for me. When I asked myself the question “If it did not happen, what would you most regret not having?”, the answer was a child, not tenure. For my husband and me, a family is one of our central ideals.

### ***Negotiating with Your Supervisor***

Once baby is on its way, one of the first questions to answer is: When should I tell my supervisor that I am pregnant? Most of us waited until the second trimester, which is quite reasonable.<sup>7</sup> Some of us had difficulty getting and/or staying pregnant, so we did not want to get anyone in a tizzy unless it was a “sure” thing. However, in academia, where teaching schedules can be drawn up a year in advance, this did cause some stress as the assignments had to be renegotiated and rearranged among the faculty.

Before arranging a meeting with your supervisor to negotiate the terms of your maternity package, develop a plan.<sup>7</sup> Research and understand university and federal policies before entering into negotiations. Talk with other colleagues in the department, college, and university to find out what they received and/or negotiated (make sure that they are discreet—you do not want rumors to circulate before you have had a chance to share the news yourself). You may also be able to get ideas from colleagues at other institutions or from panels and presentations at various conferences.<sup>8</sup> Determine what is valued for the tenure decision (in my case, research)

and draw up your plan to maximize success in that area (*e.g.*, request reduced teaching and service loads). Once you have met with your supervisor and finalized a package, get the terms in writing.<sup>7</sup> This is important so that all parties clearly know what was agreed and so that you can reference this document later if needed.

Some more “standard” requests include a one-year extension to the tenure clock and a lighter teaching load. For the tenure clock extension, you might want to clarify how it will affect the perception of your tenure package: Will there be increased expectations for the number of external grants? Will the extension be clearly communicated to your recommenders so that they will not unfairly compare you to others who took less time? For the teaching load, you might want to clarify what semester you will receive the teaching reduction and to ensure that you will not be expected to “make up” the teaching in the following semester. For time off, you certainly can use the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA);<sup>9</sup> however, depending on your negotiations, you might not need to take this at all, especially if you have a summer baby. We are on nine-month contracts and are expected to generate summer support from our grants. If you are like me, you have worked many summer months without pay, so this could be a time to “cash in” those hours. Also, do not let anyone try to take away your summer support during this time. Even when you are on leave, you are expected to keep your research group running smoothly, and this is money that you have obtained through the grants you wrote. Probably one of the simplest requests is the reduction of service to the department and university, which is what I asked for after I returned and realized I had to get rid of some more responsibilities since there are only 24 hours in a day. If you are choosing to breastfeed, you will want to verify that there is a lactation room close to your office. If one is not readily available on campus, then you will have several months to petition for one. There are some helpful guidelines for this on the Medela website.<sup>10</sup> Of course, this list is only the tip of the iceberg, and your research may turn up ideas that are more suitable for you and your family.

In our college, we have no true policy on maternity leave other than the availability of FMLA and the one-year extension to the tenure clock. The main advantage of this is the flexibility to develop a plan based on our unique family situations, and we are thankful for the support of our dean and chairs to have choices. However, there are numerous drawbacks to this mode of operation. The uncertainty of the situation can be nerve-racking, especially for an untenured assistant professor. Secondly, it relies on having good relationships with our chair and colleagues. For example, if we do receive a semester off from teaching, we must depend on the kindness of our colleagues to pick up the course(s) we would have taught (the university does not provide compensation to hire a substitute). It also requires a mentor or coach to know what to request, especially if this is a first child. I know I did not realize how much taking off a semester of teaching would have helped me emotionally and physically after the birth of my child. Finally, some departments in the college may not be as progressive as others, so the maternity packages may vary widely, which could cause resentment by those whose chairs are not as generous.

One of the issues that you may face in receiving a maternity package is the discontent of other colleagues. Sometimes grumbling is unavoidable, but you should not let anyone make you feel guilty about the blessing that is about to enter your life! Your colleagues probably do not act that way when a faculty member chooses to take a sabbatical or if a colleague has had a heart attack.

A pregnancy and birth should be handled no differently in its collegiality. In fact, in many ways, it is a boon to the department that they have so many months to build a plan of action for a “fact of life.” Recognize your worth as a mother, even if society does not perceive motherhood to be as prestigious as other endeavors.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the skills you brought to the table prior to motherhood, now you have others that are just as useful. In *The Mommy Brain*,<sup>12</sup> Katherine Ellison presents research studies and life anecdotes, showing how perception, efficiency, resiliency, motivation, and emotional intelligence are improved by this new role. Finally, corporations are realizing the importance of retaining their female workforce<sup>13</sup>—academic institutions should be leading the trend, not following it. There is a price to pay if diversity is truly valued.

### ***Preparing for the Unexpected***

This is a short paragraph because none of us is able to foresee the future, and we cannot plan for every contingency. However, I wanted to acknowledge that unexpected events related to pregnancies occur and to recommend formulating a “Plan B” if feasible. For example, bedrest could be a real possibility, given that an estimated 20% of women are prescribed bedrest at some point in their pregnancy.<sup>14</sup> When one of my female colleagues was put on bedrest, it was near the end of the semester. Fortunately, she was teaching a graduate-level class and had just assigned their final project so that she was not lecturing anymore. She conducted research meetings and office hours and continued to work on her laptop in a supine position for over a month. Due dates can be another tricky matter. One of my male colleagues generously offered to drive me to the hospital if my water broke at work since his parking spot is right next to our building (mine is a half mile away). Another male colleague agreed to submit an equipment order for me before the fiscal year end if I went into labor early. Premature birth and postnatal health issues of the mother and/or child can arise as well, as several of my female colleagues and I know firsthand. Both daughters of one female colleague were born prematurely. She had negotiated the fall semester off from teaching in each case, so the impact was minimized since they were both born in August. For me, tearing during childbirth made it difficult to stand or sit for several months afterwards. Thankfully, I was scheduled to team teach a course with another female colleague, and she led the majority of the classes until I was physically able to lecture.

### ***Making Decisions about Childcare***

For me, finding reliable, high-quality and accommodating childcare has been the one of the biggest frustrations and challenges of combining parenthood and professorship. However, I am not alone in this estimation. In a survey conducted by the Gender Equity Task Force at the University of Iowa this past fall, participants voiced that availability and accessibility of childcare were very important issues when striving to increase the number of women faculty where they are underrepresented and to improve the quality of life for all faculty members with family responsibilities. Because this can be such a huge stumbling block, it is important to start looking for appropriate childcare early. Waiting lists at daycare facilities can be a year or more long (especially for infants),<sup>15</sup> and it simply takes a lot of time to sift through the many childcare options and determine their suitability for your family as a whole. Your institution may provide services to help in this search. At the University of Iowa, Family Services, which is under Human Resources, lists links to local childcare referral programs and regional au pair

programs.<sup>16</sup> Although this is not an exhaustive list, here are some options you could consider for childcare:

- *Bring your baby to work (during the first six months).*<sup>8,13,17</sup> Although this may seem a little outrageous, it is doable and being done. In some cases (*e.g.*, if you have teaching responsibilities or a high-profile meeting), it may require hiring a sitter to watch the baby in your office.
- *Swing shifts with your husband.* One of my female colleagues, whose husband is also a faculty member, did this the first few months with their baby. Her teaching responsibilities were M/W/F, and her husband's were Tu/Th. She was able to telecommute on the days he was on campus.
- *Engage a family member or friend to watch your baby.* Another of my female colleagues is blessed with this situation since her husband has elected to stay home with their children.
- *Select an in-home or institutional daycare facility.* I would recommend choosing one that is nearby your office if at all possible to reduce travel time, facilitate visits during the day, ease handling emergencies, *etc.* On-site daycare is very appealing, but not readily available at most universities.
- *Hire a nanny or au pair.* This is especially nice since your child is able to stay in their own environment (*i.e.*, no waking sleeping baby to drive to daycare!). However, it might take some getting used to having another person in your home—especially if you have hired a live-in—and to dealing with the accounting issues (paychecks, taxes, benefits, *etc.*). Our family has seriously investigated this option because my husband travels 25% of the time, so this would alleviate some stress on me when he is away.

Once the decision for a childcare provider has been made, there are yet further issues to be ironed out. For example, backup childcare must be determined in the event that the childcare provider or child becomes sick. In addition, be prepared for changes in the childcare arrangement itself. I started my daughter out in the home of a family friend. She was the only “client” besides the woman’s own children. This was a wonderful situation until my friend decided that she wanted to play a greater role in her children’s education and could no longer watch my daughter. We spent the summer in flux, shuffling our child from friend to friend and even hiring a “mother’s helper” for a couple of weeks since my husband telecommutes from home. We pursued several nannies during this time, but could not compete with the dual six-figure income of the doctors in the area. We were on waiting lists for institutional daycares and interviewed several in-home daycare providers, and we eventually placed our child in the in-home daycare of another friend, where she is one of three children.

### ***Easing Back into Work***

Before giving birth, the four of us had visions of being able to pick right up where we had left off before going to the hospital to have our babies. We severely underestimated the time for recovery and the time to transition back to work! The physical trauma to the body (even for births without major complications), the hormone swings, the adjustment to parenthood and its accompanying sleep deprivation, and the rewiring of the brain (literally!<sup>12</sup>) can simply be overwhelming at first. Therefore, give yourself as much time as you can to heal, to find a new balance, to delight in being a mother, and to (re)discover your interests. In fact, although we all

enjoy our careers, there was a period of time for each of us during which we really had to push ourselves to care about work because we were so overcome by our new responsibilities as mothers, many of which we really liked. This feeling did pass eventually, but it was disconcerting to us when we are normally such focused, motivated and career-minded individuals. Before gearing up to go back full time, you might consider telecommuting for several weeks, working just a few days a week in the office, and/or attending selected faculty and group meetings (by phone or in person) to get up to speed without exhausting your energy reserves.<sup>7,17</sup>

Once you are back to work, assess your activities wisely. Which should be discontinued to make room for your new responsibilities as a parent? Although it is difficult to bow out at times, especially if we enjoy the activity, the reality is that we only have a limited amount of time, energy and resources. Saying “no” to an activity today does not necessarily mean that you will never be able to do it again. Your priorities have changed, and your activities should reflect it. Do not let other people force their priorities upon you or allow yourself to get overloaded! Colleagues may need to be reminded of your increased responsibilities. Some of my male colleagues did not understand why I could not attend evening or weekend meetings (times I spend with my family and getting “life” done) because they have wives who take care of the children, meals, laundry, *etc.* Make sure you schedule time for being a parent and do not feel guilty about doing so. I block out my pumping breaks on my calendar so that they have as much importance as any other meeting during my day (and I am less likely to get caught up in my other activities and forget to do it). Do not deny your mother feelings. Call or visit your child’s daycare as you feel necessary.<sup>7,17</sup> Until she was about a year old, I spent my lunch hour with my daughter. It was therapeutic for me to feed and play with her, especially since I felt badly that she was away from me for the vast majority of the day (and, of course, she enjoyed seeing her mommy more often).

Conferences and other travel responsibilities can play a large role in attaining the visibility and networking needed for tenure letters and grant funding; however, all four of us agreed that travel should go by the wayside for the first 6-12 months of baby’s life. Refusing to travel is a difficult decision, but in the end, it will greatly reduce stress for you and your family. Do not be afraid to let others know why you will not (cannot) travel—playing the “baby card” as one female colleague put it. Most reasonable people will understand, and they may offer other ways that you can still participate (conference calling into the session, supporting a graduate student to present, paying for on-site childcare, *etc.*) or postpone their invitation to a time when you will be able to travel. Once you do lift the self-imposed travel ban, be selective about the conferences you attend and the length of your stay to minimize the disruption to your family. Here are some solutions to the travel dilemma that the four of us have used:

- *Leave baby home with daddy.* As long as he has enough milk or formula, the two of them should be set. I would probably recommend this option for only very short trips when you have an infant, especially if you are still breastfeeding.
- *Enlist a “nanny” to attend with you.* This is the option I have used most often, so my daughter is very well-traveled. My husband has come along for a family pseudo-vacation, and I have paid for my sister, mother, and mother-in-law to accompany me at other times. For one of my female colleagues, her husband prefers this scenario too. He would rather

come and watch their child at the conference location because he can usually find some interesting activities for the two of them while she is attending sessions. In addition, their family can then be together at mealtimes and in the evenings.

- *Find childcare on site.* This could mean trading babysitting with another faculty member so that you can both attend sessions. (As an aside, although I have babysat for my female graduate student, I have never asked her to return in kind. I do not think that this would be appropriate in an advisor-student relationship.) When there has been a conference in a city where I have friends, they have been willing to watch my child. Some hotels also have babysitting services on retainer; however, I have not used them to date.

I would like to add one final note about conference attendance. If you are still breastfeeding and you do not have easy access to your hotel room during the day, do not pump in a bathroom stall! Visit the administrative offices at the convention center or conference hotel and request a private room to pump. They will be happy to oblige, and you will be much more comfortable.

### ***Facilitating Success in Both Areas***

Mary McKinney has observed several attributes in professors who have successfully obtained tenure after becoming mothers:<sup>6</sup>

- Exceptionally supportive partners.
- Stable self-confidence in their talents and abilities.
- Good organizational skills, an ability to concentrate despite distractions, and striking persistence.
- Uncommon amounts of energy and the ability to cope with sleep deprivation.

The four of us echo the importance of a local support network to successful negotiation of the tenure track. Our husbands have been pivotal in reducing our stress levels by supporting our goals and by shouldering a more equalized share of the household and childrearing responsibilities. We have helped ourselves by letting them help us, which is sometimes difficult to do when we are bucking against the gender roles dictated by societal norms. Other sources of support for us have been our families, female colleagues, friends, and our churches. For me, the distance of our families has been a large stress factor. We miss out on a lot of the everyday help (babysitting, meals, *etc.*) that others with nearby families receive. Thus, I have begun to cultivate a surrogate family through my church. When my husband was out of town and I was sick with the stomach flu, one of my church friends sensed the despair in my voice and drove over to spend the night to care for my child and me.

Another key to success is to keep your ego in check. We have all come to the realization that we cannot do it all. When I first started as an assistant professor, I read *The Door in the Dream*,<sup>18</sup> which overviews the life paths of women who have been inducted into the National Academy of Sciences. The pattern that I saw in their collective stories is that you have the choice of doing only a couple of things well at a time. For example, those who valued family cut out other activities beyond that and their research. Thus, we need to be realistic about our limitations and develop strategies to maximize our impact. Several of us obtain household help by hiring someone else to clean our homes. Do not feel guilty about paying money to make things easier

for yourself. Take credit for managing rather than doing (just like you do in the research lab). Sometimes I find it tempting to want to hold onto these household chores—partly because I am still influenced by society’s presumption of a woman’s role in the family and partly because I like having tasks in which I can experience closure. However, I have forced myself to get over these hang-ups for my sanity’s sake. Another female colleague practices this concept in the lab. She hires a work-study student to do photocopying, data management and other secretarial jobs to free herself up from the menial tasks of research. Sometimes it may be necessary to let it slide. I have always been very conscientious about deadlines, but sometimes it is just not possible for me to meet them now. I have started operating on one of two principles for tasks that are not high on my priority list: ask for an extension or wait until they ask for it again. Finally, you just might have to give it up (for now). I enjoy quilting, and I was becoming increasingly frustrated that I could not pursue it after my child was born—I had to choose between quilting and spending time with her (the two activities did not successfully coexist). One of my friends told me to be patient—there will be a time when I can quilt again (maybe even my daughter will like to do it with me at some point), but there will not be another time to enjoy her while she is a baby.

We can also gain inspiration from the experience and life lessons of others. One of my female colleagues really enjoys reading *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (<http://chronicle.com/>). It contains essay and articles written by faculty on academic life, and it provides a forum for discussion of these issues. Another resource is MentorNet (<http://www.mentornet.net/>). It pairs untenured faculty with mentors for email-based mentoring relationships and facilitates web-based discussion groups for anyone interested in topics such as work/life balance. There are also books that provide advice on integrating (juggling?) the various aspects of life, such as:

- *The Family Track: Keeping Your Faculties While You Mentor, Nurture, Teach, and Serve*, Edited by C. Coiner and D. H. George, University of Illinois Press (1998).
- Sheila Wellington and Betty Spence, *Be Your Own Mentor: Strategies from Top Women on the Secrets of Success*, Random House (2001).
- Roger Merrill, Rebecca R. Merrill, *Life Matters—Creating a Dynamic Balance of Work, Family, Time, and Money*, McGraw-Hill (2003).

By sharing our experiences with each other and learning from one another, we can help one another succeed. There is no need to reinvent the wheel, and there is no need to feel isolated in navigating this road to combine family and career.

In addition to the success strategies that we can develop for ourselves, we must recognize that institutions have a major role to play in the successful combination of family and career. In 2003, Mary Ann Mason, Dean of the Graduate Division at the University of California Berkeley, issued the following proposal as a result of her study supported by the Sloan foundation:<sup>19</sup>

- Allow faculty members with “substantial familial caregiving responsibilities” to work part time on the tenure track.
- Create “re-entry postdoctoral fellowships” that would encourage Ph.D. recipients, who have taken time out of the academic work force to care for children, to return to academe.

- Encourage administrators to overlook any gaps a prospective faculty member may have in his or her résumé due to child-rearing responsibilities.
- Make high-quality child care available for the infants and preschoolers of tenured and tenure-track professors, particularly the newly hired.
- Establish child-care programs to which faculty parents can bring school-age children during school breaks, including the summer.
- Help the spouses and partners of new professors find employment.

These suggestions are above and beyond the stopping of the tenure clock for up to two years and one-semester paid leave from teaching that her university currently offers for tenure-track professors with significant childcare responsibilities. Time will tell if her “Faculty Family-Friendly Edge” package will take root in our universities, but we can continue to bring the issues to the attention of our respective administrations.

As the four of us sat around the table discussing this paper, we came up with our own wish list for cultivating family-friendly atmospheres at our institution. We all firmly agree that there should not be so many policies “written in stone” that it removes the ability to negotiate for options that are more appropriate for the individual’s own situation. We would advocate a menu of possibilities from which to select since some families have needs that others do not. This request for flexibility<sup>20</sup> and more creativity in offering options<sup>21</sup> is representative of our generation’s desire to mold our jobs to our family needs.<sup>13</sup> However, we do think that making some policies automatic (namely, a one-year tenure clock extension and a semester off from teaching) would make sense so that women do not have to ask for them. This could begin to change the perception of these dispensations from exceptions to expectations. Currently, many women are afraid to take advantage of these options because they think it will hurt their tenure chances.<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, childcare availability and access, especially emergency childcare, also rose to the top of the list. Small gestures like scheduling meetings and events during the working day (*i.e.*, between 9 am and 5 pm) to accommodate daycare schedules and providing more convenient parking for pregnant and nursing mothers were also mentioned. More global issues included training all faculty (not just supervisors) on family-related policies, providing resources for the department to support a semester off from teaching for childcare responsibilities, and hiring grant writers to help with proposal writing activities.

### ***Conclusions***

There is no denying that it is hard to be a professor and a mom; however, it is not impossible, and it can be (should be!) enjoyable. You will need to make some adjustments in expectations (yours and others) and shift responsibilities as necessary in order to facilitate the success of combining these roles. Plan ahead as much as possible to reduce stress, and obtain a broad spectrum of advice and support on the issues you will face (and are facing). Remember your situation is not a cardboard cutout of someone else’s. You must pick and choose the strategies that will be most helpful for you and that will be true to your priorities. My hope is that this paper will give you a good starting point for opening this dialogue and in aiding your search for ideas. Finally, do not try to do everything—Supermom is truly an urban legend!

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