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## Dr. Mommy asks “What was I thinking?”

### My Vexation:

In the summer before my second year as a tenure track faculty member I did the unthinkable – I got pregnant. It wasn't an accident either. Some might ask why I didn't plan this earlier in my career. The answer is, I don't know. I guess I was worried about all the other things – research, money, time, moving, being employed, etc. – that always seemed more important. Others might ask why I didn't wait another year or two when I was more established. I'm not sure what to tell them either, except I just couldn't wait any longer. Age is creeping up on me and other medical issues made having a baby a now or never situation. I was always a little jealous and angry of my male colleagues who seemed able to have a family life and career. I finally



just decided I didn't care anymore and I would deal with the consequences as they came. All things considered, I don't have much to complain about. I have fantastic colleagues who supported me throughout my pregnancy and during my leave. I also recognize that other women are not so fortunate.

I told my department chair when I was about 4 months along, before I began to show, and well before the start of the fall semester. My baby was due over the winter semester break so I planned to work through the fall semester, but we would need to plan for the spring semester. At this point I learned something interesting: my department chair had never been in the situation of working with a pregnant faculty member. Neither had the Dean nor had Human Resources. No one knew the policy, and the faculty policy manual was vague and self-contradictory. Everyone seemed to know that I had some rights through the Family Medical Leave Act but no one seemed to know what that meant in terms of leave and pay. Experiences of other mothers across campus were extremely varied. Some had used sabbatical time, some had banked teaching hours beforehand, and some had quit shortly after the birth. I even heard of one woman who took an entire year of leave. The University needs to reform their family leave policies to eliminate the confusion and to protect the rights of parents. There needs to be less concern over the fairness of the policy and more of recognition that having a family is, for some people, a vital part of having a healthy balanced life. Faculty with satisfying personal lives will be better educators and employees.

I was fortunate, however, that my department was supportive. With a combination of creative scheduling and collegial coverage, I was able to stay home with my new baby for about 8 weeks without losing pay and was still given credit for my courses. I also worked hard before the baby was born to set up the materials (syllabi, exams, lecture notes) for my courses and during the semester I communicated with my colleagues from home.

Now that the baby is here, however, I face the real challenge. How do I manage it all? Can I effectively teach with less time for preparation and less energy for creativity? Will I ever do lab work again? Much of my laboratory work involves training undergraduate students. This is a time consuming process because these students are learning new skills, they make many mistakes and require almost constant supervision. Plus, I have research projects that I work on myself and writing projects with tight deadlines. Before the baby I would work with students during the day and do most of my course preparation at night. Now I don't have that luxury. The baby requires almost every free moment while I'm at home. I devote any extra time to sleep. Over time these issues will resolve, but will it be too late for my career? Finally, what can I do that would create a more supportive atmosphere for families on this campus?

### My Venture:

Although my experience will continue to be a challenge for years, I believe it has also provided some opportunities that will improve my teaching. I have been forced to reevaluate my priorities, am learning to use my time more efficiently, and I am motivated to promote family friendly policies at the University.

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Venture #1: Being a mom is good for my students

Even though my students sometimes asked invasive questions (“Will you find out the sex?” “What will you name him?” “Will you breastfeed?” “Will you have an epidural?” “Will you return to work?”), I believe my pregnancy benefited my students. I was a better teacher because I had an experience most of my students could relate to. Many of my students were parents or had close friends or relatives that they had observed during pregnancy. It made me more approachable too, more of a real person.

Maybe it is just my imagination, but I think my pregnancy and my current life as a mom sets a good example for my students. I believe it is possible (difficult, but possible) to have balance between parenting and professionalism. I think I am a good role model for my students. A woman can be well educated, have a professional career, and be a mommy. My goal is to continue including my personal experiences in my classes where appropriate.

Venture #2: Mommies make good scientists and teachers (and so do daddies)

At least this is my hypothesis. Men successfully navigate lives with both work and family so women should succeed as well. However, research of faculty at major R1 universities show that only 44% of tenured women have children compared to 70% of tenured men (Wilson, 2003). It appears that children help men attain tenure, but limit women. One reason may be that universities are recruiting female scientists but are not supporting families enough to encourage women to stay. Having a family-leave policy to meet the requirements of the Family Medical Leave Act is not enough.

It makes sense for Universities to support academic parents. Universities thrive on the quality of their faculty, especially universities that treasure high quality teaching. Women bring a different perspective to science, and this diversity of viewpoints will be increasingly valuable as science becomes more interdisciplinary. As more women enter the sciences there will be increasing demands on universities to support families. Men too, are expecting to be more involved with their families and to have a more balanced lifestyle. The things that universities can do to support parents would be a small investment in retaining and maintaining high quality faculty members.

Venture #3: What should be done?

I believe that a university setting is an ideal setting for parent-scholars. Faculty receive flexibility that is unparalleled in other industries; we have some ability to set our schedule and, on a nine-month contract, the summer off. In return great things are expected – excellent teaching, scholarly activities, and plenty of service. The issue for young women in the sciences appears to be due to perceptions. Women often perceive they must choose between a faculty position and a family. Unfortunately, women still struggle against the misconceptions about their abilities to meet their responsibilities. Finding ways to remove these misconceptions should be priority number one.

Universities do need to establish family leave policies that eliminate confusion and to protect parental rights. However, the policies should remain fairly flexible. What works well in my department may not work well in another. Parents and other faculty who need to take family medical leave should be recognized as professionals who can be trusted to find ways to meet their responsibilities. Departments should be willing to address the needs of their faculty through collegial coverage or other means. The policy should be publicized and shared with potential hires during interviews.

Another family-friendly suggestion I would have enjoyed is on campus infant daycare. Physically I was ready and able to return to work about 4 weeks after my baby was born. I was not mentally ready to leave my baby with a stranger. On campus infant daycare that I could have visited between classes would have significantly eased my transition back to work. It would also promote breastfeeding which helps the psychological and physical wellbeing of both the mother and baby.

Parents also have a responsibility in creating a family-friendly university. Parents need to research the leave policies and negotiate for family needs (e.g. flexible schedules, extended tenure timelines). If the policy is unacceptable or if the college is unwilling to negotiate they should look for work elsewhere (Kajitani, 2006). Parents also need to advocate for policies and programs to help them meet their roles as faculty and parents.