Austria is far ahead of the United States in providing options for both women and men to take time off from work for birth and child care. First there is Mutterschutz, a mandatory paid maternity leave and job protection period of 8 weeks before and 8 weeks after the birth of a child. Then there is Elternkarenz, up to 36 months of financial support with allowances of as much as 80% of your monthly wage. Parents frequently opt for 14 months, with the father taking 2 months.

Other European countries offer similar benefits. Dutch employment law, for example, entitles working women to 16 weeks of paid zwangerschapsverlof, men to 2 days of paid vaderschapsverlof, and both parents to 6 months of additional unpaid leave with job protection. In the United Kingdom, statutory maternity pay (SMP) is granted for up to 39 weeks, and employers often supplement these benefits with occupational maternity pay. Under the SMP program, fathers can receive 2 weeks of paid leave, with an additional 26 weeks if the mother returns to work. Specific restrictions vary, but non-E.U. nationals can qualify as long as they have an employment contract and an appropriate visa. A science Ph.D. makes it easier to secure the required credentials.

According to a Pew Research Center report covering 38 countries around the world, the United States is the only one that does not mandate paid leave for new mothers. States brought us back sooner than expected. Still, my husband was able to experience caring for our son full time while I worked; they bonded in a way that is hardly possible for working fathers in the United States, where paid paternity leave is rare. Being the primary caregiver for 3 months allowed my husband time to find his own way of parenting while I got back to work.

I wanted to stay connected during my leave, so I worked remotely when I could and often brought my son to lab meetings, which my colleagues were kind enough to schedule around naps. My immediate team of male colleagues did not seem to mind the infant intrusion—it helped that he was a calm baby—and meetings were productive. This flexibility, and the absence of pressure to return to work, allowed ample time to connect with my son as I learned to be a mom. Work was secondary when it needed to be.

In the United States, the pool of qualified postdocs has grown and postdocs have gotten longer. There’s now a greater likelihood than ever that training will overlap with starting a family. The decision when and where to have children is personal and depends on many factors; there’s something to be said, for example, for having your mother nearby. But in deciding where to train, postdocs should consider the whole experience of working and living, not just time spent in the lab. Add to the mix Europe’s ample opportunities for professional enrichment, and the parental-leave advantages that Europe can offer postdocs are worth considering.

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A European postdoc for the family
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Editor's Summary

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