Science made me a better parent

I have found that parenthood is, in many ways, an extension of research: overcoming unknowns, learning constantly, and holding both a big responsibility and a great privilege. And neither science nor parenting is an individual endeavor. Whether you are giving a baby a bath or isolating mitochondria, teamwork is essential, and the list of collaborators can be quite long—including, in the case of parenting, partners, parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, and friends. As with the author list for a scientific paper, each of these players makes their own important contribution.

Advice from colleagues and mentors is also very important, although instead of conferences, parents have barbecues and get-togethers. These are usually not in distant and exotic places, but other than that, they are strikingly similar to scientific conferences: You get a chance to show your peers how your project—or baby—is progressing, exchange tips and experiences, and pave the way for future collaborations. And although learning about how others have handled similar situations or how they interpret certain signs is helpful, in the end, it is up to you to figure out how to solve each particular dilemma.

A slew of skills that I acquired while conducting my research—including being patient, learning how to do new things, and handling setbacks—are helping me more than I could have imagined in raising my baby. At a practical level, my experience learning new methodologies in the lab helped me unveil the secrets of diapering and bottle-feeding. The protocols are fairly simple and straightforward. The sterilization procedures are much more flexible than those used in the lab, and most of the items can be obtained over the counter. And I already knew how to open doors and work around the house with my hands full, because I often have to do it in the lab.

Of course, every time you start in a different field there is new vocabulary to learn (percentile, colostrum, meconium) and unfamiliar equipment to master—securing a car seat or folding a stroller can be more complicated than it seems. But that’s also part of the fun. As for the vast literature devoted to parenting, discriminating reliable sources from misinformation can be daunting. Luckily, having spent a good number of hours with the scientific literature, I have learned to read everything with a healthy dose of skepticism.

But, without any doubt, the most useful thing that I’ve learned in the lab is the ability to cope with failure. When the baby is finally asleep in my arms and I put her in the crib and, holding my breath, leave the room on tiptoes, it feels almost natural to hear, a second later, a growing moan that turns into desperate sobbing. Knowing how to tame my frustration, make the best out of difficult situations, and get back on my feet are the things that I’ve found most helpful. That, and the conviction that the sum of what I’ve learned from all those small defeats is a valuable asset.

There is a Spanish proverb that says, “Patience is the mother of science,” and I think that I now understand how those three concepts—patience, parenting, and science—became so intertwined in the first place. Whether you are starting a Ph.D. or becoming a parent, patience and perseverance will serve you well. The rest will come, after a few sleepless nights. ■

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