

The journey of a scientist mother

I got pregnant at 38, not long after obtaining a permanent research position. Until that time, I had been a free and adventurous soul, working long hours and traveling frequently for my research on aquatic cyanobacteria. During the last 3 years of my Ph.D., I spent the summers in a lab in the United States, far from my home country of Argentina. I worked another full year in that U.S. lab during my postdoc. Along the way, I managed to find love, settle down, and start on the road to becoming a mother. My sister, who had a kid of her own, warned me that my priorities were about to change. She said that, when my child was born, it was possible that I would want to quit science and become a full-time mom. But I loved my work.

That was about 5 years ago. My daughter Julieta is now a cheerful kindergartner—and I am still doing science. To some extent, my sister was right. When Julieta was born, I quickly realized that she was the biggest adventure I had ever embarked on. But I was right, too. I did not want to give up my research. So, once my maternity leave was over, I had to figure out how to enjoy my two passions, motherhood and science, and embrace the pleasures and pains of their sometimes conflicting demands.

One of the biggest adjustments I needed to make was my approach to travel—though I didn't realize it right away. When my daughter was a year old, I won a grant that involved spending a month working in a lab in the Czech Republic.

I was very excited about the research I would be doing there, but I did not want to be separated from Julieta for that long, so I decided to bring her with me. I naïvely thought this trip would be similar to past ones, when I had traveled alone. This time, I planned for a babysitter to cover my working hours and thought that would take care of it.

But when I arrived, the babysitter turned out to be much less available than I expected. I had traveled so far to conduct my research, but instead I was spending much of my time taking care of my daughter. I was frustrated, and at the same time, I felt guilty that I wanted to work instead of be with my child. Soon, I broke down in front of my Czech colleague, who graciously helped me work out an alternative babysitting solution.

Even with the child care worked out, I faced other challenges. When traveling, I was used to working without paying attention to the clock. During this stay, however, I



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ended my workday much earlier than I was accustomed to so that I could go home to my daughter. At first, I wasn't sure I would be able to complete my work with this schedule. But I shouldn't have worried: I worked happily and productively during the day, and then I picked up my daughter so that we could stroll through the beautiful autumn colors. By the end of the trip, I had accomplished everything I had planned.

Even so, after this experience I knew that I needed to change the way I travel for work. I now choose my trips carefully and plan the logistics far in advance. I travel alone, for fewer days, less frequently, and to locations closer to home. I know that Julieta misses me when I'm gone, and I miss her,

too. But I am happy pursuing my goals, and I believe that a happy mother is a good mother.

Sometimes I miss the freedom I once had to leave for a trip at a moment's notice. Yet Julieta adds happiness, diversity, and complexity to my life, which helps me be more creative. I have learned to maximize the golden hours of focused work and to plan ahead while also being flexible. Having Julieta also forces me to stop working sometimes, which helps me avoid burnout. And I have learned that I can ask others for support, both in life and in work. So, despite all the challenges, I am happy to be a mom and a scientist, and I am enjoying the journey. ■

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