My children help my science

When I turned 28 years old, midway through my Ph.D., my biological clock went “BRRRRING!” My rational self thought, “Hmm, not a good time. Fact A: I love research and want a career in academia. Fact B: There are only two female faculty members in my department, and neither has children.” So, I put off having children, planning to secure a tenured position and publish at least a dozen papers before a “career interruption.” But biology couldn’t wait for my career. When I saw that thin blue line on a pregnancy test at age 34, I was overjoyed—and terrified about the career compromises I expected to face.

Motherhood did temporarily take me away from my research. But I’m now 7 years into my life as a scientist parent, and I have made a surprising discovery: My children actually help me be a better scientist. My first son, Murray, born at the end of my first postdoc, inspired me to publish. Until that point, my almost-complete Ph.D. manuscripts had languished on my laptop for nearly 3 years. The day-to-day urgency of my soil science fieldwork in the remote subtropics had distracted me from the central rule of the game: Publish or perish. Stepping away from research for a few months for maternity leave made me realize that if I wanted to continue in academia—which I did—I needed to get my work into the literature. To a new parent with few publications and no job to return to, being forced to leave science forever felt like a very real prospect. So, when I found a second postdoc and “returned to work”—a euphemism, really, given the demands of around-the-clock breastfeeding combined with relocating my new family overseas—I prioritized publishing.

The birth of my second son, Rory, during my third postdoc, led to a lifestyle change that has given me space and time for creative thinking. After the 26-hour feat of superhuman endurance it took to deliver him, I felt that my body was capable of anything. A few months later, I took up running. Now, 4 years on, the languid laps I take around the park a few times every week are some of my most valuable work time. My brain shifts gears, creative ideas flow, and solutions to intractable problems take shape as the landscape flows past. In other ways, too, my children bring creative-thinking time into my hectic, overachieving scientist’s schedule. Walking Murray to school, pushing Rory on the swing, and the enforced leisure of family holidays all make for prime scientific idea-generation time.

My kids have also introduced me to some tricks that help me at work. In Murray’s first year at school, for instance, his teacher taught him about the green cross. When he found it hard to concentrate, he could look at a green cross on the classroom wall, count to 10, and then turn his attention back to his teacher. A version of this simple technique helps me stay focused in daylong meetings and late afternoon conference sessions. When my mind drifts, I find something in the room to act as my green cross, and then I’m back to the topic at hand. Earlier this year, my partner and I made a date night out of attending an “Emotional Intelligence for Parents” workshop. It has been invaluable at home—and also at work. Learning about emotional intelligence has alerted me to the fact that different parts of my work are best suited to different moods. Scheduling my tasks to match the emotional rhythms of my day and adjusting my emotions when needed to match the task at hand have helped me be more productive and satisfied.

I don’t dispute that having children can hamper women’s careers in science and that gender bias is alive and well. But I hope that by sharing how my children improve my research practice, I can help change the culture of research institutions. Children are not just career interruptions, and parents can come back to work as more insightful and effective scientists.

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