

By Sasha Nikolaeva

A normal student parent

“I don't know if you'll be able to reach her,” the student said. I was in the first year of my master's program, preparing to be a teaching assistant by contacting students who had taken the course in previous years. This student had recommended that I connect with the graduate student who had taught the course when he took it, but now he was backtracking. “She was pregnant when she taught the class. She must be on leave now.” There was some curiosity in his voice, mixed with what I perceived as a hint of judgment. I should probably keep the fact that I am a single parent to myself, I thought.

I had my daughter several years before I had any thoughts of pursuing a scientific career. My marriage didn't work out, and I moved with my daughter from Russia to the United States. I started working at a tech company, where having a family did not feel out of the ordinary.

Once I entered the academic world, on the other hand, I found that speaking about my daughter with my colleagues and professors usually elicited surprise—or worse. When I finished my master's degree and decided to apply for a Ph.D., for example, a professor told me that pursuing a doctoral degree would be challenging in my “situation.”

In some ways, that professor was right. It is impossible to support myself and my daughter on the standard Ph.D. stipend. My university offers a student parent supplement, which helps, but I still struggle to pay the bills. I miss many social and professional development activities because I want to spend time with my daughter, and academic culture does not leave much room for personal time. Even if the events are scheduled at times when I can attend, going means that I have to work at night or on weekends to catch up.

Even so, I want to do science. Academic research shouldn't only be for people who have the privilege of time and money. So I'm pushing forward with my academic training.

I have also decided that, despite my discomfort and the potential for backlash, I need to make myself visible as a single parent and to advocate for change. I am not shy about telling people that sometimes I don't have money to pay rent. I started bringing my daughter to some social activities. I wrote an open letter to my department about the challenges that student parents face. I



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created a survey to gather more information about other student parents in the department. I think my efforts are making some headway. (And, to be fair, my department is much more family-friendly than some others.) Emails about social events are now more likely to include explicit statements that family members, including kids, are welcome. My department chair is always willing to discuss any problems I might be having. Members of my department's graduate student association emailed me recently to ask for input about how they could use university wellness funds to support student parents.

Yet I still worry that my efforts make me more visible as a parent than as a scientist. In August, a fellow Ph.D. student wished me a happy Mother's Day. He is from Costa Rica, where they celebrate mothers at the end of the summer, and he thought that I would appreciate the sentiment—which I did. But it didn't alleviate my concerns about the reputation I'm creating for myself. Studies show that academic mothers tend to be viewed as less serious, whereas fathers are seen as more grounded and more organized.

I figure that, for a while, I will have to accept the fact that my role as a mother may be more interesting to some of my colleagues than my research. But I hold on to the hope that one day, thanks to my efforts and those of many others, grad student parenthood won't seem remarkable at all. ■

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