

By Virginia Zarulli

A risk worth taking

The question was simple, clear, and brutal. A few days earlier, I had announced my third pregnancy during a department meeting. My female colleague—more senior than I am, with two young children—congratulated me. Then, apologizing for her bluntness, she asked a question that had been nagging at me for months: “How do you feel about having another child and your career? Aren’t you afraid of not making it this time?” Hearing it from someone else sharpened my fears. My answer was also simple, clear, and brutal: “Yes, I know this could potentially wipe me out of academia.”

Maybe I have been too daring. I already have a 7-year-old boy and a 5-and-a-half-year-old girl; why do I want more? Here I am, a young associate professor, having one more child when I should be focusing on establishing myself in my department and in the scientific community, and building up my CV and publication record to support my career progression and hopeful promotion to full professor. Will I make it? Will the experience I’ve gained with my other children help carry me through?

My husband and I have always wanted three children. I got pregnant with our first during my first year as a postdoc. My supervisor was very supportive but didn’t give me much guidance about planning for my leave. I spent most of that first postdoc year publishing work from my dissertation, so I had done very little to plan research directions for after my return. As a result, coming back was like starting from scratch. I felt aimless and lost. As a sleep-deprived, overwhelmed new mother, I had to reinvent myself and my position.

The second time around, still a postdoc, I was a bit more prepared. I returned to the lab with some research ideas, and my supervisor assigned me to a well-defined project. With little time and energy to spare, being able to focus on a specific plan made things easier. When my husband and I finally regained some hours of uninterrupted sleep, our motivation to have a third child faded—until it recently re-emerged.

And now? I know how hard it will be. And I know that no matter what I do, having this third child comes with trade-offs that may diminish my scholarly output and career progress. But by proactively planning for my leave, I hope to minimize the negative impact and ease the transition at least a little bit. My university allows staff on parental leave to maintain contact, if they desire, so they can keep up to date, and it offers a teaching-free period to parents returning



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after leave, which I think will help. For my part, I’ve tried to plant as many seeds as possible: starting collaborations; authoring manuscripts, hoping that some will be published during my leave; and taking responsibility for various projects that I will be able to pick back up once I return to work, with collaborators running them while I’m out. In fact, I worry I’ve gone too far, overloading my plate for these last weeks leading up to my leave and perhaps upon my return. Still, I hope I’ve done enough to set myself up for success.

I realize now how unprepared I was to navigate such an immense personal and professional transition, especially on my first leave. As any parent knows, it’s impossible to truly understand what having a child is like until it happens—which makes it awfully difficult to prepare for. I wish my institution had offered more resources and structured support, rather than leaving me to my own devices to plan for something so life-changing.

So, to the expectant and future parents, do your best to strategically plan for your leave to make your re-entry as smooth as possible. And to supervisors, department chairs, and administrators: It shouldn’t be the sole responsibility of expectant parents to lay all the groundwork. Help us find and set up opportunities that can be easily picked up once we’re back to work. Invite us to be involved in projects with timelines that match our planned leaves. Consider creating formal mechanisms to guide us in developing plans and strategies for before, during, and after leave. Perhaps if a culture like this becomes the norm, future researchers will be able to worry a little less that having the children they desire could cost them their careers. ■

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