

## MEMBER Gifts

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## DEAR Labby



Dear Labby,

I am currently doing really exciting research on the molecular basis of metastasis in a leading laboratory in one of the premier graduate programs in biomedical sciences. I have always planned a career in academic cell biology. You can imagine how deeply depressed I was by the report of statements by the President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers, that suggest that as a woman, I may lack the male-linked genes that are necessary for advancing as a scientist. This adds to the previous bad news that the number of tenure slots that Harvard has offered to women has decreased in the last five years. Is this happening all over the country? Am I foolish to plan on a tenure track academic career? Will I be doomed if I have a child? Is there a strategically “best time” to have a child?

—*Distressed and Disillusioned*

Dear Distressed,

You have already passed the major stumbling blocks that keep girls from becoming scientists. With your excellent education, experience and determination, you have every chance of realizing a successful academic career.

In response to President Summers’ comments, the following observation may be helpful: “In this day and age, to believe that men and women differ in their basic competence for math and science is as insidious as believing that some people are better suited to be slaves and other masters.”<sup>1</sup>

There are Federal science programs which attempt to capture the tremendous resources represented by our half of the population. For example, the NSF provides competitive funds to help academic institutions attract more women and advance their careers, including the development of programs that are family-friendly in order to level this playing field<sup>2</sup>. This in turn has upped the ante for all academic institutions who want to recruit the best faculty. One illustration: the Biology Department at CalTech is approaching 25% women faculty on the tenure track.

Similarly, the NIH provides competitive supplements to scientists who have paused their careers for family, and are eager to return to a productive life in science.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding children, recent research has shown that women with children are more likely to leave academia, but if they stay, their career progress is similar to that of women who do not have children. As far as the best time to have a child: some advise grad school or during your post-doctoral fellowship because of flexible hours and fewer deadlines, and because fertility is at its peak. At the other extreme, some say go full steam ahead and have children after you get tenure. In practice, all parents with demanding careers will tell you that it’s never easy to have children, but that it’s always worthwhile when you do.<sup>4, 5</sup>

—*Labby*

### References

- <sup>1</sup>Mahzarin Banaji, *The Harvard Crimson* <http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=505367>
- <sup>2</sup>NSF ADVANCE Awards <http://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2001/nsf0169/nsf0169.htm>
- <sup>3</sup>NIH Re-Entry Program <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/pa-files/PA-04-126.html>
- <sup>4</sup>Ursula Goodenough, *ASCB Newsletter* WICB Column: On Being a Scientist and a Parent, <http://www.ascb.org/news/vol27no11/wicb.pdf>
- <sup>5</sup>Liz Gavis and Fred Hughson, *ASCB Newsletter* WICB Column: Dual(ing) Academic Careers, [http://www.ascb.org/news/vol26no6/ie/june-03\\_24.html](http://www.ascb.org/news/vol26no6/ie/june-03_24.html) ■

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