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Paying for Baby: Me or We?

In Catherine Brady's fine biography of Elizabeth Blackburn,¹ she tells us that Liz thought it "essential to have a child-care provider whom she trusted" after her son was born. Liz and her husband, like me and my husband decades earlier, spent serious money to assure that we could get on with our science and our spouses with their own professions while raising happy, healthy, and well-educated families.

Over the years, many young women in my and others' labs have come to talk with me about arranging childcare. Sometimes the woman was pregnant and looking ahead. Sometimes she already had a wonderful new baby. The talk was about many things, but we always got around to the challenge of paying for childcare. The issue was typically put to me in more or less the same way: "The problem is that this is going to cost half (or more) of my salary." That comment, and the pronoun "my," always troubled me because it revealed assumptions about much more than money.

I usually answered with more questions. "Why do you talk about 'your' salary? Doesn't the child have another parent to share the cost?" (Of course, I wouldn't respond that way if I knew that the other parent had no income or the questioner was a single mom.) New parents tend to be older these days than they were even 20 years ago and thus more likely to be collecting paychecks. The Whitehead Institute may not be typical, but the data that Harvey Lodish reported in the February 2008 Women in Cell Biology column² indicate that many postdocs (and, presumably, new assistant professors) at that institution have partners or spouses with earned incomes.

The basic problem with the question I heard repeatedly is the implication that the woman thinks of the child as her responsibility alone. And if that is what she assumes, the other parent will be inclined or feel pressured to go along. Sometimes that relieves the other parent of an unwanted responsibility; perhaps that is reflected in the fact that no new father ever came to ask the same question. But often it discourages the other parent from a role he, or sometimes she, really does want to play as an equal parent. The new mother who thinks that child-care costs are her own responsibility is more likely to wind up being the one to change all the diapers and stay up all night

with a fretful child. She will also likely be the one who takes the children to the pediatrician, or drives them to music lessons or soccer practice.

Serious hidden anxieties and internal conflicts can result for both parents. One may be overburdened and resentful of the effects on her career. The other may concentrate more and more on career and be resentful of the lost joys of intimate parenting. Most important, the children will miss the experience of different approaches to caring and thinking, and different ways of loving. Science too is at stake. Talented scientists don't grow on trees. Many of us complain about the hurdles that are put in the way of trained and ambitious women scientists by others. We should not be adding to the hurdles by our own actions.

Some of what I set out here is surely an extreme extension of a simple statement about the high cost of childcare. But words often reveal unrecognized frames of mind. We all learn to examine our data for unrecognized patterns and significance. We should do no less with our own thoughts and expressions. ■

—Maxine Singer

President Emerita, Carnegie Institution

References

- ¹Brady C. (2007). *Elizabeth Blackburn and the Story of Telomeres: Deciphering the Ends of DNA*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- ²Lodish HF. (2008). On Supporting Female Postdoctoral Fellows with Children. *ASCB Newsletter* 31(2), 13–14 (<http://www.ascb.org/files/0802wicb.pdf>).

Erratum

There was an editorial error in the Women in Cell Biology column in the January 2008 issue of the *ASCB Newsletter*. In the column "Improving the Climate for Women in Academia" by W. Sue Shafer, the third complete paragraph in the second column on p. 45 should have read:

One reform was an enhancement to the existing University of California systemwide policy under which the tenure clock automatically stops if a faculty member takes maternity leave. Now at UCSF the chancellor's office compensates departments for the first six weeks of this paid leave. An additional six weeks of leave is available without such compensation.