

Addressing the Major Challenge for Women in Academia: “It’s Proximate Childcare, Stupid!”¹



It is an honor to contribute to this series about women in academia, and to highlight the great importance of proximate childcare to the careers of women scientists.

Childcare in India and the U.S.

I obtained my primary medical education at Christian Medical College, Vellore, an institution started in 1901 by Ida Scudder. The first female medical graduate of Cornell University, Scudder built a medical college for women in India, and allowed men to enter only in 1947. Most faculty and department chairs of this top-ranked school were (and still are) women with children. Therefore, I always assumed that women with children could be equally successful in academia.

I then emigrated to the U.S. seeking research training and found the situation to be different—and it has not improved substantially over the last 30 years. The Indian situation is different for many reasons, including better family and social support systems. Regardless, a major obstacle to the careers of women in U.S. academia is the lack of reliable, safe, and proximate childcare,² as previous writers of this column have already noted.^{3,4} Indeed, I believe that most other measures are of limited value unless one deals with this big elephant in the room.

Women with Children Are Effective Scientists

Reading the earlier column about women’s fertility dropping even before they complete their postdocs,⁵ and recalling my own spouse’s experience, it was clear that childbearing becomes even more challenging when a woman is trying to establish an independent career. In thinking about these issues, I realized that

in the 25 years I have run my own lab, several women have borne children before or during their time in our group. These women were at least as effective as the others, despite the extra time they devoted to caring for one or more children. They manifested a strong degree of focus, with no time to waste on other things and less tolerance for making mistakes. Harvey Lodish came to similar conclusions in his earlier column in this series.⁴ To ensure that Harvey and I were not the odd ones out, my assistant conducted an anonymous straw poll of a dozen male faculty of my vintage who had also run an independent research lab for more than 20 years. A clear majority reported that women with children had been, on average, more focused, more productive, and less likely to make mistakes.

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Imagine what things might be like if women with children did not face logistical issues. In a letter that I coauthored with several women who had borne children,² we suggested that issues such as the tenure clock, better mentorship, increased diversity, and altered working hours sidestep the single major impediment to academic success for women with children. Simply put: A mother who cannot be within reasonable walking distance of her infant or toddler is at a major disadvantage.

How can we continue to bewail the paucity of women entering higher levels of academia, when those who wish to bear children are not provided with this all-important support, allowing breast feeding, active participation in the child’s nurture, and availability in emergencies?

Why Not Provide Proximate Child-Care Facilities?

Society takes great pains to support those with various conventional disabilities via

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many mechanisms (some mandated by law). Although raising children is hardly a disability, its impact on a career that requires long and unpredictable hours is comparable. Thus, besides all the efforts mentioned previously,^{3,4,6} why not provide proximate child-care facilities? A simple model is that such facilities be run as co-ops by parents interested in the facility, with general administrative support and oversight by the institution, which can also seek appropriate legal shielding if necessary.² Indeed, rather than building centralized facilities, institutions could build or renovate existing smaller spaces onsite.

Lest I be taken to task about it: a word about the male partner. There is no question that he can and should contribute a great deal of help, both financially and practically.⁷ But the biological reality is that women bear children and, especially in the early years, the mother usually bears the brunt of the child rearing. Politically correct statements about shared responsibility cannot change that.

Of course, no one is suggesting that such major changes can be instituted overnight or that the process will be easy. But there could be a plan to be phased in over a reasonable period of time. Giving female students, postdocs, and faculty the option of using a proximate, safe child-care facility would result in a stronger

presence of women in academia—a situation that Ida Scudder herself would have been proud of. ■

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Footnotes and References

¹Adapted from Bill Clinton's campaign slogan "It's the economy, stupid!" As with that slogan, the title is not meant to be derogatory to those pursuing other approaches; rather, it emphasizes that the child-care issue, to my mind, trumps all others.

²Lewis AL, Altheide TK, Varki A, Arden K, and Varki NM. (2005). Combining Parenting and a Science Career. *Science* 307, 1720–1721.

³Goodenough U. (2007). Postponement of Parenthood: Implications for Women Scientists. *ASCB Newsletter* 30(12), 22–23 (www.ascb.org/files/0712wicb.pdf).

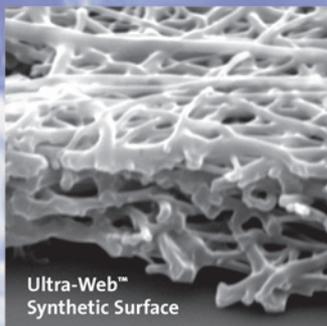
⁴Lodish HF. (2008). On Supporting Female Postdoctoral Fellows with Children. *ASCB Newsletter* 31(2), 13–14 (www.ascb.org/files/0802wicb.pdf).

⁵Moley KH. (2007). Postponement of Parenthood—The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. *ASCB Newsletter* 30(11), 25–27 (www.ascb.org/files/0711wicb.pdf).

⁶Shafer WS. (2008). Improving the Climate for Women in Academia. *ASCB Newsletter* 31(1), 45–46 (www.ascb.org/files/0801wicb.pdf).

⁷Singer M. (2008). Paying for Baby: Me or We? *ASCB Newsletter* 31(3), 12 (www.ascb.org/files/0803wicb.pdf).

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