DEAR LABBY

Coping with the Challenges of Being a Scientist and a Parent

DEAR LABBY: After a scientifically exciting, very productive, and intense postdoc, I got my dream job and am ready to hit the ground running. Since this also seemed like the right time for me to start a family, I am now faced with the challenge of juggling an independent academic position and the responsibilities and joys associated with a new baby.

My partner and I are new to parenting and new to our community and we don’t have family nearby.

Things are really going wonderfully in the lab and I am learning about the challenges of being a PI. Although my research is going really well, my latest results are in a new area for me and it’s very important to make collaborative connections outside my institution, since no one here is in this new field. Going to the ASCB|EMBO Meeting would be a perfect way for me to share my findings and find collaborators, but any additional expenses will break the bank and I can’t see how to get parental coverage either at the meeting or at home.

My grad school and postdoc mentors were really helpful for scientific and job advice, but they are less knowledgeable and therefore less forthcoming with advice about how to juggle the competing demands of work and family.

Thanks for any advice you can give me,

—Momma Doc

DEAR MOMMA DOC: First of all—congratulations on so many positive changes in your life. Yes, each of these poses different challenges, but there is help available for each.

As your question suggests, you’re now at a career stage where you could benefit from a diverse group of new mentors. Some mentors should be very local to help you learn the rules and the scientific resources of your new institution. These mentors may also be helpful in pointing you to parental resources like daycare centers, student babysitting services, and parental interest groups. Depending on the makeup of your department, you may have to broaden your network at your new institution to tap peers who are facing similar challenges, so look for opportunities at the welcome/orientation events you’re no doubt being invited to as you start your new position.

Some of the mentors in your new scientific network will be peer mentors who may be distant from your home institution, but such relationships can still be

Got Questions?
Labby has answers. ASCB’s popular columnist will select career-related questions for publication and thoughtful response in the ASCB Newsletter. Confidentiality guaranteed if requested. Write us at labby@ascb.org.
valuable. For example, check out the New PI Slack community at https://newpislack.wordpress.com. It’s made up of people who are also starting their own labs and are sharing information for new PIs covering general topics and grants, hacks/tools, personnel issues, resuscitation (to get support on those bad PI days), teaching, tenure, and work–life integration.

Labby agrees that presenting your science at the ASCB|EMBO Meeting and going to the relevant sessions would be an efficient way to find new scientific collaborators and mentors. How to do this now that you are a parent? The ASCB Women in Cell Biology Committee offers childcare grants so you can present your science at the meeting. The variety of expenses it can cover include extra babysitting at home while you are at the meeting, travel expenses for a caregiver to accompany you and baby to the meeting, travel expenses for a relative who will substitute for you at home—pretty much any justifiable expense related to childcare so that you can be freed up to network and learn and present your research.

And finally to deal with the challenges of being a scientist and a parent, this may be a good time to renegotiate with your partner about how to share the home responsibilities now that they include childcare. Some people describe weekly meetings of the “management team” to go over the week’s calendar and who is doing what. Others have a printed list of home/family tasks and each person signs up weekly or monthly for a specific role or task. There is a terrific webinar of scientist-parents sharing their highly diverse experiences in the work–life integration: https://bit.ly/33kSeqb.

You can be both a great scientist and a great parent. So full steam ahead!

—Labby

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The Newsletter Welcomes Letters to the Editor

Have thoughts you’d like to share with your colleagues? We’d be happy to consider your Letter to the Editor for publication in the ASCB Newsletter. Write to the Editor at mleader@ascb.org.