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A Mentee’s Baby Registry: Supporting New Academic Parents in 2020

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The lack of childcare infrastructure in the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted many systemic problems faced by academic caregivers, and particularly new parents. This commentary uses the lessons from the pandemic to highlight the potential role of mentors in supporting caregiver responsibilities.

"I’m happy to help. Just let me know what you need." While well intended, this phrase is often overwhelming and discouraging to a parent with a newborn. If we knew what we needed, we would just be doing it. The most helpful friends are the ones who show up with a plan. They bring food and hold the baby while you have a meal. They sort and fold laundry unasked. They do not judge while you have a meal. They bring food and hold the baby while the parent struggles to soothe the screaming baby who is adjusting to learn the basics of feeding and sleeping.

Yet, there are no equivalent guidelines in academic relationships, particularly between mentors and mentees. The social norms of gifts and meals help but fall short of helping a mentee who is adapting to being a new parent while coping with the stress of ensuring career progress in a limited time clock. At home, there is little consequence to lagging behind on day-to-day chores during parental leave and social obligations can fall away. In work, research deadlines and deliverables remain a top priority for the professional advancement of the mentee, mentor, and grants programs. There is never an easy career stage at which to have a baby. Because the research process depends so critically on an individual’s unique intellectual contributions, it is challenging to identify suitable replacements or have research obligations lag. Mentorship can provide essential support to overcome these challenges, regardless of the parent’s career stage. Still, the specific needs are deeply personal and vary widely by individual and career stage. And so, even the most supportive of mentors are left with little choice but to ask the new parent “just let me know what you need.”

A pandemic is a strange time to be writing about parental leave. The COVID-19 shutdowns have exacerbated the stressors faced by academic parents and, in many ways, have highlighted ever-present inequities and systemic failures (Malisch et al., 2020). Women’s publication rates have plummeted (Andersen et al., 2020; Kibbe, 2020; Viglione, 2020). While drops in productivity during COVID-19 are gendered, maintaining research productivity in absence of childcare has been untenable for all caregivers and amplified for single parents and parents of children with special needs. Pooled arrangements to share costs in pandemic pods have their own unique challenges and further contribute to teacher shortages and societal inequities in access to education (Strauss, 2020). Childcare centers that had limited spots are now folding or raising tuition to account for the reduced class sizes needed to implement social distancing (for example, see https://www.naeyc.org/resources/blog/theres-no-going-back-child-care-after-covid-19). Parents able to seek in-home care to limit COVID-19 exposure compete in an exceptionally competitive market for nannies, who are woefully underprepared to combine infant care with the additional full-time care of older children and work requirements bordering on those of Victorian era British gurneys. Costs of group centers and in-home care are dramatically increasing over and above what were already unaffordable rates, confounded by personal salary reductions from institutional austerity measures. Add to these lack of infrastructures, young children are being forced to face abrupt changes to their routines, isolation, and fear that manifest through regression and poor behavior that require intense emotional support from caregivers (Figure 1). Many pandemic parents of young children are as lost and overwhelmed as they were when they were first adjusting to newborns. Universities, journals, and funding agencies could make a stand for universal reduction of academic expectations and judgement to adjust to the challenges we are all facing in the pandemic. Incentive structures could also change. For example, collegiality and service could be incentivized on par with research accomplishments. This would enable colleagues who are willing to dedicate time gained from lack of travel to both advance their research careers while supporting the workload of colleagues overburdened with caregiver responsibilities or health challenges from the pandemic. But in the absence of coordinated institutional responses, those most affected by the pandemic are left on their own. Lack of institutional support for caregivers of young children is not new and is frequently deprioritized. For example, while many academic institutions cover a large proportion of college tuition for their employees, few extend similar benefits to cover the comparable costs of childcare. The loss of all childcare infrastructure during the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the extent to which institutional support was always essential for academic success. The silver lining of additional family time and lack of travel has also had a positive benefit of re-evaluating activities that should be prioritized to promote work-life balance in the face of demanding research careers (Figure 2).
This is just the tip of the iceberg of lost productivity as parents balance the responsibilities of another academic year without consistent childcare infrastructure or access to in person schools. For new parents, the pandemic amplifies the isolation of caring for a newborn and further reduces access to childcare. Personally, the challenges of parental leave and caregiver responsibilities are at the forefront of my mind as I struggle to balance leadership responsibilities, my lab, virtual elementary school, and the late stages of my fourth pregnancy. In the past year, I have had my kids across diverse stages of my career, with my first when I was a postdoctoral fellow and the second as an assistant professor. Now as an associate professor, I have had both a miscarriage and a full-term pregnancy while balancing full time work responsibilities and pandemic parenting without childcare. I have also mentored lab members and junior faculty who have taken parental leave and are struggling with caregiver responsibilities during the pandemic.

Reflecting on my experiences to advocate for institutional supports for pandemic parenting has brought clarity for the needs of academic parents during leave. Institutional responses to the challenges of caregiver responsibilities during the pandemic can establish precedents for long-lasting change to benefit academic parents and their periods of parental leave for a newborn. These benefits should extend to all parents to account for the active role of men and other non-birth partners in childcare. Care must also be taken to ensure equity in accommodations.

Beyond institutional resources, mentors can play a critical role in ensuring parents can access these resources and helping mentees learn to balance caregiver responsibilities. For the sake of clarity in this discussion, I’ll refer to those expecting new parental responsibilities as “mentees” and those who support them as “mentors,” although my own experience demonstrates that one can be both at the same time. Mentors can also play a unique role in supporting the challenges of the birth parent, nursing parent, and societal demands that disproportionately impact female-identifying parents. Just as no one person buys every gift from the baby registry, no one mentor can address all the challenges of parental leave. Likewise, an individual’s needs, resources, and ability for self-advocacy vary across career stages. Far too many of us can point to cases of unsupportive senior mentors or supervisors whose actions and comments made us question the ability to achieve work-life balance as academic parents. Empathetic mentors and resources to promote sensitivity are important. No matter how supportive the mentor, ultimately the parental and research needs are unique to the mentee. Having a list of concrete requests and options can help identify critical supports to regain work-life balance and who is best suited to help implement them. So, what actions can supportive mentors take for mentees, and what concrete options can mentees ask for?

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Adapting to Physical and Mental Health Complications

Unforeseen challenges such as finding childcare, parental health issues, postpartum depression, or the infant’s health issues can complicate these plans. Similarly, complications from infertility treatments, early pregnancy, and miscarriage may also require leave accommodations but are more difficult to obtain because many consider them taboo to discuss. Therefore, it’s also important for mentors to be flexible and communicate to mentees that these plans can and should change at any time before, during, or after the leave to account for these unanticipated challenges. Likewise, the pandemic has heightened mental health challenges for many.

Encouraging a culture shift that promotes open discussion and removes professional penalties on parents are essential to promoting healthy research environments. Creating a safe space for discussion in regular meetings and openly sharing mental health resources offered by universities can help promote a safe space for these discussions. It can help for the mentor to have more frequent check-ins with the mentee and monitor mood and personality shifts. Marked changes in research productivity can be a sign of other complications and should be considered as part of conversations aimed to reinvigorate research. While it is beyond the scope of the mentor to diagnose or treat postpartum mood disorders, they can provide a list of resources for mental health offerings at their institution. Providing these resources to the lab as part of routine onboarding documents can also address the widespread mental health challenges in academia that occur routinely, even in absence of a newborn. Mentors can also support their mentees’ reintroduction to the research environment after parental leave by mirroring guidelines accounting for mental health leave described by Dr. Arjun Raj (http://rajlaboratory.blogspot.com/2019/04/reintegrating-into-lab-following-mental.html).

Respecting Boundaries and Fostering Flexible, Accomplishment-Driven Expectations

Pregnancy and childbirth are rife with unspoken health challenges that extend well beyond parental leave. The combined lack of sleep, lifestyle transitions, and identifying supports to enable work-life balance overwhelms many new caretakers. Often, many new parents prefer to leave research careers than to overcome these problems. Mentees need empathy, flexibility, boundaries, and two-way communication of expectations to thrive. Mentors should respect a mentee’s parental leave and pre-established expectations for work responsibilities. If they agreed to full-time parental leave, mentors should not expect email responses during that time period. Whenever mentees return to the lab, new parents benefit from flexible work hours and focus on deliverables that are established in collaboration with their mentors. Communication of and agreement to these professional responsibilities is essential to promoting academic success. To maintain productivity amidst the chaos and physical demands on new parents, mentors can also use these discussions to help mentees delegate responsibilities among other members of the lab and to subdivide projects into achievable subtasks. Positive reinforcement from the mentor for even small successes in these subtasks can have a profound impact.

Establishing Priorities and Goals

Although parental leave in the U.S. only lasts a few months (at best), it takes years for most new parents to restore their full productivity. Thankfully, not all tasks are equally critical to career advancement, and research programs span an entire career. Realistic and brutal prioritization is the only way to maintain productivity during the immediate adjustment to a new baby.

Mentors can help to guide and tailor goals to a mentee’s priorities to optimize productivity and career advancement. Formulating a plan of action requires the mentor to have a clear understanding of the mentee’s career goals, projects, and responsibilities. The mentor and mentee can collaborate to identify these goals through an individual development plan and then map responsibilities to that plan to prioritize tasks. Notably, mentees should be encouraged to de-emphasize many service requirements, administrative roles, reviews, collaborative efforts, and teaching requirements in the year following leave in favor of projects that will promote leadership roles, first or senior author publications, and PI roles on grants. Mentees should be encouraged to share the administrative or service requests they are receiving with their mentors, who can provide advice about which to pursue or even run interference to help minimize work that is inessential for career advancement.

Once priorities and goals are established, mentors can collaborate with mentees to subdivide large projects into smaller subtasks and establish deadlines that can provide additional, supportive accountability when returning to work. It’s critical to make these subtasks small and achievable as the complications of new parental responsibilities frequently render completing even one small goal per day a tremendous accomplishment.

Providing Resources to Delegate Workload to Maintain Research Productivity

While research and academia are driven by the innovation of the individual, specific goals and aspects of the research can be delegated to promote continued productivity. For example, in advance of a known leave, a mentee can train and direct additional dedicated technicians or junior mentees to help continue data collection throughout leave. The delegation and mentoring skills gained from this experience are lifelong skills required for career success.

Unfortunately, funding opportunities for additional personnel during parental leave are extremely limited, and not all mentors have sufficient funding resources to support a mentee in this way. New grant mechanisms to fund additional staff are essential to support these transition periods. However, even if they are available to individuals on parental leave, parents...
of young children often reduce their grant and paper submissions, leading to inequities in academic productivity (https://twitter.com/DrAnneCarpenter/status/1117581350440198144). To minimize periods of low productivity, mentors can actively help the mentee with writing and providing significant funded effort for the mentee on their own research grants. It’s important for the mentor to consider the career stage of the mentee when taking on these additional responsibilities. More junior mentees are often being trained in the writing process; providing opportunities to practice this craft is critical to career advancement whereas garnering independent funding may be less essential. More senior mentees rely on independent resources to support their research programs and may instead benefit from a helping hand to provide stable resources for their groups or even institutional supports from access to philanthropy and professional writers.

Understanding the Implications of Clock Extensions

Grants, fellowships, and tenure clocks all run on rigid timelines. Mentors can support mentees by helping to identify processes for time extensions for evaluation, including policies for overcoming time limitations to fellowships, tenure clocks, and periods of eligibility for grants (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-011.html and https://grants.nih.gov/grants/policy/nih-family-friendly-initiative.htm). While clock extensions are common accommodations for parental leave, rarely are there additional financial resources to cover that time. Moreover, freezing grants to extend financial resources for research beyond the leave period can create complications for staff employed by those grants. In effect, funded investigators who take parental leave are forced to complete the same body of scientific work in less time because of the lack of additional financial resources and restrictions on grant spending during leave. New supplement programs are emerging to overcome these reduced funding periods (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-055.htm) that should be greatly expanded to apply for medical leaves across career stages. Regardless, all of these accommodations force parents who take leave onto a slower path to promotion and tenure than colleagues who do not. Notably, additional forced salary reductions during leave effectively incentivize non-birth parents to continue their work practices even though their tenure clocks are extended, causing further disparities in promotion (https://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/notice-files/NOT-OD-20-011.html). Many are advocating for new evaluation criteria that adjust productivity for leave as criterion for promotion and grant renewals in place of clock extensions to allow parents to advance professionally on time, in spite of leave, to better help overcome inequities. To enable these policies, there is a growing movement to support annotated CVs that indicate periods of parental leave and opportunities passed up because of leave. Likewise, many mentors can play a role in letters of recommendation and word-of-mouth by attesting to the productivity of the mentee and their overall career trajectory in spite of leave. Mentors and mentees must walk a delicate balance in the wording of these attestations to address implicit bias.

Continuing to Provide Opportunities

Sponsorship of mentees for new opportunities is the primary responsibility of a mentor. While leave is undoubtedly important, opportunities will continue to arise during the leave and recovery period. There’s a delicate balance between sharing opportunities that may be of critical interest to a mentee and hiding a new opportunity that may prove overwhelming in light of other priorities. Opportunities that can wait until the individual’s return from leave should, and mentors can support this by keeping track of a running list for mentees. But, on occasion, critically important opportunities that have large future implications cannot wait. In that case, they should still be presented to the mentee in a timely manner. It’s important that both the mentor and mentee recognize this is an option, not a mandate, and work together to fit any new projects to the priorities and goals they devise. Declining the offer or having the mentor contribute significantly need to be posed as viable options for both parties. Decisions about being too overwhelmed or busy should ultimately be up to the mentee, and not given as reasons not to share opportunities that come along. A primary example is travel and meeting presentations. Mentors should not assume that a new-parent mentee wants to pass up these opportunities, especially since many meetings provide childcare options and support, particularly in the new-found flexibility to virtual talks during the pandemic.

Supporting Nursing

The physical demands of pregnancy start well before birth and end long after parental leave. Many new parents struggle with adjusting to the new expectations of work-life balance and physical demands of breastfeeding. When mentees return to the office, mentors can also help to identify resources on campus to help nursing parents and make it clear and overt that pumping is normal and expected. The existence of spaces to pump in close proximity to labs sends a message that the success of nursing parents is important to the mentor and the department and enables continued experimental work. If a building does not have this space, the mentor can help to advocate for appropriate and convenient accommodations. Likewise, scheduling times for pumping both in labs as well as during conferences and seminar travel should be handled as the norm and accounted for as seamlessly in scheduling as routine bathroom or meal breaks. Breaks should be standard between lab meetings to naturally enable time for pumping. There should be flexibility and accommodations for hands-free pumps in meetings, if that is the preference of the mentee. Flexibility and accommodations for working from home can also help to accommodate nursing.

Remembering We Are All Human

Many academics strive for perfection. But that goal is never attainable, and never is that more apparent than in the chaos of a new baby. Patience is absolutely essential for productivity and mental health. No matter how much they try, mentors will make mistakes at this delicate time. Unintended failures will feel more painful than in normal times and inadvertently come across as lack of support. It helps for mentees to remember that the mentor is also an imperfect human being and often project their own experience.

Forgiveness for mistakes made by both parties while navigating the frustration of the process is also essential. It’s also important to recognize a mentor’s limits.
Different people have different strengths, and often a team of mentors is better suited to provide a diverse set of needs to mentees throughout their career. The friend who is an amazing cook and provides meals may not be the same friend a parent calls in tears at the next 2 a.m. feeding. Likewise, one mentor may be better suited to strategic planning of career goals and another identifying resources to support health challenges that arise from pregnancy. Moreover, a mentor serving as a boss may be biased toward their own productivity, making it challenging for that person to help establish appropriate work-life boundaries for a mentee. Peer mentors can also be invaluable resources and online groups such as Grad Student Slack (https://gradstudentslack.wordpress.com), Future PI Slack (https://twitter.com/futurepi_slack), or New PI Slack (https://newpislack.wordpress.com) provide valuable cross-institutional networks for peer support. Regardless of how a mentee formulates priorities and boundaries, it is important that they involve mentors serving in a supervisory role to ensure that both parties have a clear understanding of how accommodations and leave will be balanced with expectations for continued funding and career advancement.

Leveraging the Personal Support Resources Offered by your University, Local Community, and National Academic Societies

Universities, granting agencies, and professional societies can play a critical role in providing resources to help support parental leave. Many needs to promote scientific advancement of parents have been clearly defined through the NSF Career-Life Balance Initiative (https://www.nsf.gov/career-life-balance/) but remain underfunded. The process of identifying the resources that are in place and navigating leave can be overwhelming for new parents. Mentors can help by pointing mentees to these resources, including, notably, the institution’s leave policies, childcare benefits, nursing resources, mental health and postpartum depression programs, family health insurance benefits, bridge funding, and clock extensions. They can also help reduce the isolation and grow peer networks but connecting the mentee with others new parents at similar career stages, professional development workshops, and online peer mentoring groups.

Adviding for Resources to Overcome Financial Burdens of Caregivers

It’s important to note that parents who take parental leave are often forced to take a considerable salary reduction, and these financial penalties are confounded by the additional costs of childcare, placing a considerable financial burden on new parents. These costs are amplified with additional childcare costs accrued during the travel required for academic advancement. Mentors can help identify programs for childcare supports and whether it is possible to allow for reimbursements of travel-based childcare needs from discretionary funds. Institutional programs to reimburse these childcare costs as well as additional programs to support backup care can further optimize resources and time for research productivity. If we want to see equitable academic environments, we as leaders in the field must continue to advocate for and advance personal, financial, and professional resources to enable effective balance between parenthood and research.

Adapting Lessons from the Pandemic to Promote Work-Life Balance

The widespread adaptation to working from home because of the COVID pandemic may have some silver linings. Because of the pandemic, for example, professional societies and conferences have adapted to virtual seminars. Continuing these virtual opportunities and offering options of pre-recorded talks after we recover from the pandemic could render declined speaking and networking opportunities due to caregiver responsibilities a thing of the past. Conference organizers can help reinforce these norms by extending virtual options that account for caregiver needs directly on speaker invitations and reiterating their enthusiasm for pre-recorded talks for speakers who initially decline to attend because of leave, cost, or caregiving responsibilities.

More broadly, all caregivers have been impacted by the pandemic. In the new work-from-home reality, all parents have been forced to take on additional responsibilities posing new opportunities to reduce gender bias in caregiver responsibilities. As the pandemic lifts, the flexibility to work from home that we have grown accustomed to could also enable a gradual re-entry to research in place of the difficult, rapid transitions in traditional parental leave arrangements. This flexibility could overcome the stress and lost productivity of, for example, from pumping in shared spaces, allow for better adjustment to separation from a newborn to improve mental health, and ease mentees back into the demands of research more humanely. Many mentors have learned that it is important to express support for interruptions in virtual meetings with the trappings of home life in work-from-home accommodations during COVID-19, while being sensitive to privacy concerns. It is my hope that the institutional conversations forced by loss of childcare infrastructure for the pandemic will give rise to long-term enhancements in resources to support equity in academic advancement and better promote work-life balance.

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