

Managing Parenthood and Your Research Career

by Ann Skoczenski, PhD, Program Manager, Center for Faculty Development

If you are a faculty member hoping to start a family soon, do you wonder how you will balance parenting responsibilities with your demanding career in academic medicine? If you already are a parent, have you wondered about ways to better manage your personal and professional life? The Managing Parenthood and Your Career Series is one way that the Center for Faculty Development helps faculty and trainees find ways to meet the challenges of balancing personal and professional responsibilities.

On April 11, 2014 the Office for Women's Careers and the Office for Research Career Development co-sponsored a panel discussion in this series called, "Managing Parenthood and Your Research Career." The panel was made up of four successful MGH research faculty: Beth Costine, PhD, Instructor in Neurosurgery; Sara Lazar, PhD, Assistant Professor in Psychiatry; Eve Valera, PhD, Assistant Professor in Psychiatry; and Elaine Yu, Assistant Professor in Medicine. Our panelists have children ranging in age from infants to teens, and a wide variety of personal experiences including single and married parents, the career stage at which they became parents, and those with extended family living near and far. All of these factors contributed to a rich discussion between the panelists and audience members. Here are some highlights from the discussion, which was guided by questions posed by the Office for Women's Careers and members of the audience.

How do you manage during times of intensive experiments and grant writing? All of the panelists agreed that the key to succeeding with critical work deadlines is to cultivate and use a "village" of child care helpers. Two panelists are single mothers, and they rely on a combination of family, friends and dedicated child care workers to help through intense work periods. The two with spouses emphasized the need to communicate often and early with each other and plan so that each spouse's intense work time and free time complement their partner's work needs. Most also relaxed their screen-time rules during intense work times.

What is the most useful professional activity to do during pregnancy to prepare for maternity leave? The panelists discussed how they attempted to complete time-intensive experiments that were critical to grant applications or publications during their pregnancies. They were mostly successful at this and they agreed that, if possible, one should try to submit a grant or major publication near the end of a pregnancy, so that the review process occurs during their maternity leave. While panelists had some success getting work done during maternity leaves, they all emphasized that one should not count on meeting any deadlines during this period.

What has been the biggest challenge at work since becoming a parent? The main theme discussed in answer to this question was the drastic change in the amount of time available for relaxed, informal conversations and networking after becoming a parent. The panelists were all acutely aware of fitting more work into less time spent at the lab, and trading daycare deadlines for chatting with colleagues. For some, social networking has filled this gap: from home during off-hours one can communicate with both local and long-distance colleagues through listserves, blogs and networking sites that are increasingly being used by scientists.

We appreciate the time that our panelists took out of their busy lives to share their experiences with the audience, and look forward to another vibrant Managing Parenthood and Your Career series in the 2014-15 academic year. If you are interested in suggesting a topic for the series or being a panelist, please email womens.careers@partners.org.

Additional information and resources:

“Improving Your Work-Life Balance” from ScienceCareers and the 2014 AAAS annual meeting:

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2014_02_17/car.edit.a1400045

Social networking for science careers:

http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2014_02_28/science.opms.r1400141

<http://www.ascb.org/ascbpost/index.php/ascbpost-home/item/113-using-social-media-for-scientists-who-swear-they-never-would>

<http://labroots.com/>

<https://twitter.com/MySciCareer>