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Growing Pains

To write this article, the authors, members of the International Women in Supramolecular Chemistry (WISC) network surveyed colleagues who care for older children about the challenges of integrating that role with their academic careers.

Making, birthing, and parenting babies (and toddlers) is hard work. New parents are often reassured that the simultaneously relentless and rewarding ‘first week’, ‘first month’ and ‘first year’ are the most intense. But when the nappies and bottles (or boobs) are done the demands on working parents don’t stop– they just change. As children leave nurseries and become less physically dependent, the challenges and career impacts are often less visible. We, as part of the Parenting cluster in WISC [link] want to ask ‘Why?’. Parenting a teen takes as much energy as a toddler (albeit at different times of day). Why do we think about the impact of parenting in academia and science less as our children grow up? It can almost feel as though as soon as our babies aren’t babies anymore we should be working as though we don’t have children at all.

Debates, legislation, policies and interventions largely focus on parents with a new or very young child, for example the protection of maternal rights^{1,2} and parental leave.³ There are some policies that include the needs of older children, for example, UK parents do have a statutory right to request [flexible working](#) arrangements and take [up to 18 weeks](#) of [unpaid parental leave](#) until their child turns 18. They also [have a right to time off](#) for emergencies related to care of a dependent, for example. childcare falling through, illness, accidents, or getting into trouble at school. In other countries, [Italy for example](#), parents can take 10 months of partially paid leave before a child is 14. They get 80% of salary for the first 3 months (if the child is under 6), reducing to 30% though employers can choose to contribute more. Beyond this limit though parents are required to take unpaid compassionate leave to look after children.

The parents of school-age children (and older) we spoke to had a lot to say about their experiences and we quickly identified common patterns around mobility and support. Opportunities for advancement or to promote one’s work were lost when support systems weren’t in place. This lack of opportunities led to concerns that their careers couldn’t or wouldn’t progress as easily as those without caring responsibilities ultimately resulting in dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Support systems mean help. This help might include access to wrap-around-childcare (before and/or after school), the availability of nearby family or friends take on the school run, or someone to look after your child when you can’t. Balancing the day-to-day pressures of home and work is challenging without support. University teaching frequently starts earlier and ends later than the school run. Many after-school activities require someone to physically take children there. On top of that they still need feeding, homework support... and you never know, they or you might actually want to spend some time together before bedtime!:

51 *"Times when grants had hard deadlines that almost always coincided with*
52 *exam assembly/marking deadlines, along with other inescapable*
53 *responsibilities were the hardest. Children always seemed to fall ill and miss*
54 *school during these times. At the time, we were living abroad and thus had no*
55 *extended familial support"*

56
57 *"I had a very supportive line-manager and the very best colleagues. I did not*
58 *have to take leave, but with this support I was able to transfer some workload*
59 *to offset the pressures from home. I will forever be grateful to them for their*
60 *support during that time."*

61
62 A lack of support outside of school makes it much harder to accept opportunities that
63 help career progression. Invitations to give seminars, talks, or attend international
64 conferences often require travel and overnight stays. It might be possible to bring a
65 baby, but in England and Wales [parents are fined](#) if kids miss school:

66
67 *"I have turned down invitations to conferences and meetings especially*
68 *internationally and probably don't travel as much because of it."*

69
70 Academics are often expected to move for work and career progression.⁴ Mobility is
71 associated with stronger networks and higher citation rates.⁵ Some Fellowships
72 require moving from your PhD institution for eligibility. Living in a different city or
73 country from friends and family makes it harder to find a support system.
74 Compounding this, having a school-age child makes it harder to be mobile.^{6,7}
75 Otherwise exciting career moves come with a side of guilt:

76
77 *"I have heard of people turning down a better job offer or a move because*
78 *they want to be sure the kids' situation is optimal. Moving for us was definitely*
79 *a stress point and the kids were not happy about it — but we were in an*
80 *untenable situation in the previous institution."*

81
82 *"It was very painful for him to leave...and this time he was old enough to*
83 *understand what he was leaving behind...I have become much more aware*
84 *that he needs rooting, and stability in his friendships and school, and that my*
85 *work choices have a huge impact on him."*

86
87 *"Recently he asked a couple of times..." "mum can you find a job back in*
88 *Spain/Switzerland, so that we can all move back there?"*

89
90 Despite often toxic cultures of overwork, hyperproductivity⁸ and the challenges of
91 combining academic work and a family,⁹ parents shared many positive and joyful
92 experiences of seeing their children grow up (see Figure 1 and blog post): The
93 flexibility to attend every celebration assembly; autonomy; and the ability to give their
94 families unique experiences:

95
96 *"We lived in great places across Europe and had good times. I am glad we*
97 *took those opportunities"*

98
99 The toll on an academic or scientific career along with the financial, practical, and
100 emotional burdens of parenting may continue even when children are fully grown.¹⁰

Cost-of-living increases and economic downturns mean the [numbers of young adults living with their parents](#) or depending on them financially¹¹ are rising¹² while academic pay and job security [are not](#). This is of course exacerbated for anyone from a group historically underrepresented in science.^{13–15}

Funders and institutions need to support academics to [balance a family and a career](#). Adopting [inclusive policies](#) such as flexibility around teaching hours, meetings within core hours, and enabling hybrid/remote work and conference attendance would help everyone. We think they need to go further and rethink the [broken research ecosystem](#) along with the ways we measure ‘success’ and reward scientists completely.

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160 **Competing interests**

161 The authors declare no competing interests.

162
163 Figure 1: Parents' reflections on combining their child-raising responsibilities with
164 their research careers.
165