



## TURNING POINT

# Mayim Bialik

*Perhaps best known for her role as Blossom on the 1990s television programme of the same name, Mayim Bialik took the unusual step of turning away from television after the show ended to study science at university. Then, as she was about to earn her PhD in neuroscience from the University of California, Los Angeles, Bialik became a mother. Although Bialik did get her PhD, parenthood ended her pursuit of a research post. It also led her to turn back to acting, this time on the scientist-centered comedy The Big Bang Theory.*

### How did you become interested in science?

I had tutors for every subject while I was working on *Blossom*. But it was a biology tutor who gave me the confidence to know that I could be a scientist — even though at first I had the feeling that science and mathematics were more for boys.

### How did you end up doing a PhD?

Some of it was momentum. I studied neuroscience as an undergraduate. I was pleased to have a new life after *Blossom*. After that, I had to choose between medical and graduate school.

### Were other students aware of your TV fame?

*Blossom* was a popular show, and most people knew who I was, even the professors. It was more acute as an undergraduate, but, with the exception of a few foreign graduate students, everyone knew who I was.

### Did you have to overcome bias at university to be considered a 'serious scientist'?

I think some professors were harder on me than on other students. After I did poorly in an examination, I got some amazingly insensitive comments from a professor who basically said I was not cut out to be a scientist on the basis of this one test. Another professor brought his

children to meet me after I did my final exam. That was actually kind of awkward.

### Were you aware of how tough an academic career is?

Well, there is always a need for teachers, and that aspect of being a research professor was always something I was interested in. I figured that my husband and I would get into graduate programmes, and that I would eventually get a research and teaching job.

### What role did the birth of your first child have in your decision to leave science?

I needed a lot of adjustment and recovery after giving birth. I was in the data-collection and analysis phase of my dissertation. It was hard. We never used child care, and we had decided that I was going to be the one to take care of our son. Of course, plenty of scientists go back to work after six weeks; new mothers' brains work just fine; but if you want to breastfeed on demand and be there for their formative years, it is hard to pursue tenure at the same time. I talked to some scientist mothers, who said they had chosen less-demanding career tracks. Being at home with your children can sometimes mean not reaching your academic potential.

That is the reality. It may mean not running as big a laboratory or not having as many research projects going on.

### You have studied the science of attachment behaviour in humans, the basis of your book *Beyond the Sling*. Did this actually end up pushing you away from science as a career?

Well, what I learned supported what intuitively felt right. Some women feel that if they want to compete in the workplace, they have to not give in to those intuitive feelings of 'I want to be with my child'. I didn't want to not give in.

### Why did you return to television?

I wanted to be with my children. Also, we had finished graduate school, and needed health insurance — I got pregnant with my second son the week I filed my thesis. Once he was about one year old, I started going to auditions. All of us would pile into the car. I would breastfeed before running into the audition.

### Your character in *The Big Bang Theory* is a neurobiologist. Did your background help you get the part?

The character wasn't a scientist when I first appeared on the show. When I came back the next season, co-creator Bill Prady made her a neurobiologist. He thought I could help fix things — the science details — if they got them wrong. We have a physics consultant on staff and our writers are generally very intelligent.

### Why do you think it is important for a comedy to get the science right?

For a show about 'geekdom', it has to be authentic or it wouldn't work. Our physics consultant is David Saltzberg from the University of California, Los Angeles. Several of the writers happen to have science backgrounds or are just really well-read people. The show was co-created by Chuck Lorre, who loves details, and Bill, who is a genuine nerd from way back. So we are just a meticulous bunch.

### Do you worry that the show reinforces scientist stereotypes?

From working in science, I know people who are like all of the characters. But it's entertainment, and it needs to be entertaining.

### What was it like to meet British physicist Stephen Hawking when he was a special guest on *The Big Bang Theory*?

It was a powerful experience on so many levels, especially to see his caregivers and to see how loving they are and how deeply cared for he is. He did smile at a lot of the jokes during the run-through. The biggest smile came when the character Penny — played by Kaley Cuoco — said, "I know who Stephen Hawking is! He's the wheelchair guy who invented time." ■

INTERVIEW BY GENE RUSSO