

Balancing act

As the year comes to a close, I've started to reflect on the events of the past 12 months. I've had manifold personal and professional challenges – and have taken them on with mixed success.

Professionally, my research is really picking up. I finally have more material to work on than I know what to do with. I am preparing to clone a gene positionally, write another grant and try some new methodology in my research. I'm excited by my progress and by future possibilities.

Personally, things are a bit different. I started this year off with a baby on the way, which presented a whole suite of challenges, mundane and profound. I expected that she and her brother would have daycare four blocks from my home, in a place that we loved. But last month that rosy scenario came to a close, as my daycare provider recently gave us notice.

Now our daycare is located 20 minutes out of our way, making that whole 'work smarter not harder' thing even more important. Most places didn't have any space for an infant. On the positive side, the kids were reunited with their friends and a teacher from the closing facility.

My husband and I have had to be very flexible and patient this year. We've had to decide who should stay home with a sick child. We've had to negotiate who will go back to work in the evening. We've had to negotiate the cost of having another child by shaving expenses in other areas. Given my hectic and sometimes unpredictable schedule, I suspect my supervisor has had to exercise patience and flexibility as well, although he is too kind to say so. I know I have had to be patient with myself and forgive myself when I can't be all things to all people. I remind myself that it will all work out fine in the end.

When the year began, I felt that having a family was something I shouldn't talk about much in the lab, something I should keep completely separate from work. It was foolish for me to think these two parts of my life would never intersect. Now I have a policy of open disclosure with my principal investigator (PI) and lab; I need them to know what's going on when I get called away. All of my lab mates, including my PI and his wife, have been very supportive.

My personal and professional challenges of the past year have spurred welcome e-mail responses from several readers. Some have been very funny and others have been uplifting. One reader offered a theory: the job of every child under five, he wrote, is to "suck the life out of their parents". Another reader reminded me that my children's intense need for my attention will pass quickly as they grow and become more independent – and that I should enjoy these fleeting moments, even if they sometimes seem frustrating. Such stories have really underscored the fact that my position as a working scientist with two children is not unique. I am happy to report that we are everywhere, and we are succeeding.

So what does the future hold? For now, I'm content to stay at Cornell for a few more years, writing up my work for publication. Beyond that, I don't have any more answers or direction than I did at this time last year. Both industry and a small college faculty position seem attractive. In making any decision, I'll carefully weigh my professional priorities. Of course, I'll carefully consider the priorities of my family as well. I hope the two are largely the same.

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