Home truths

Is it possible for both male and female scholars to combine academic success with responsible parenting, or do mothers continue to pay a higher price? Three men and three women from a range of disciplines and seniority levels speak frankly about their own experiences

Much ink is spilled over the so-called leaky pipeline that sees so many women drop out of the academy before they reach its senior ranks. The key issue is typically identified as the enormous difficulty of balancing the duties of motherhood with the demands of an academic career.

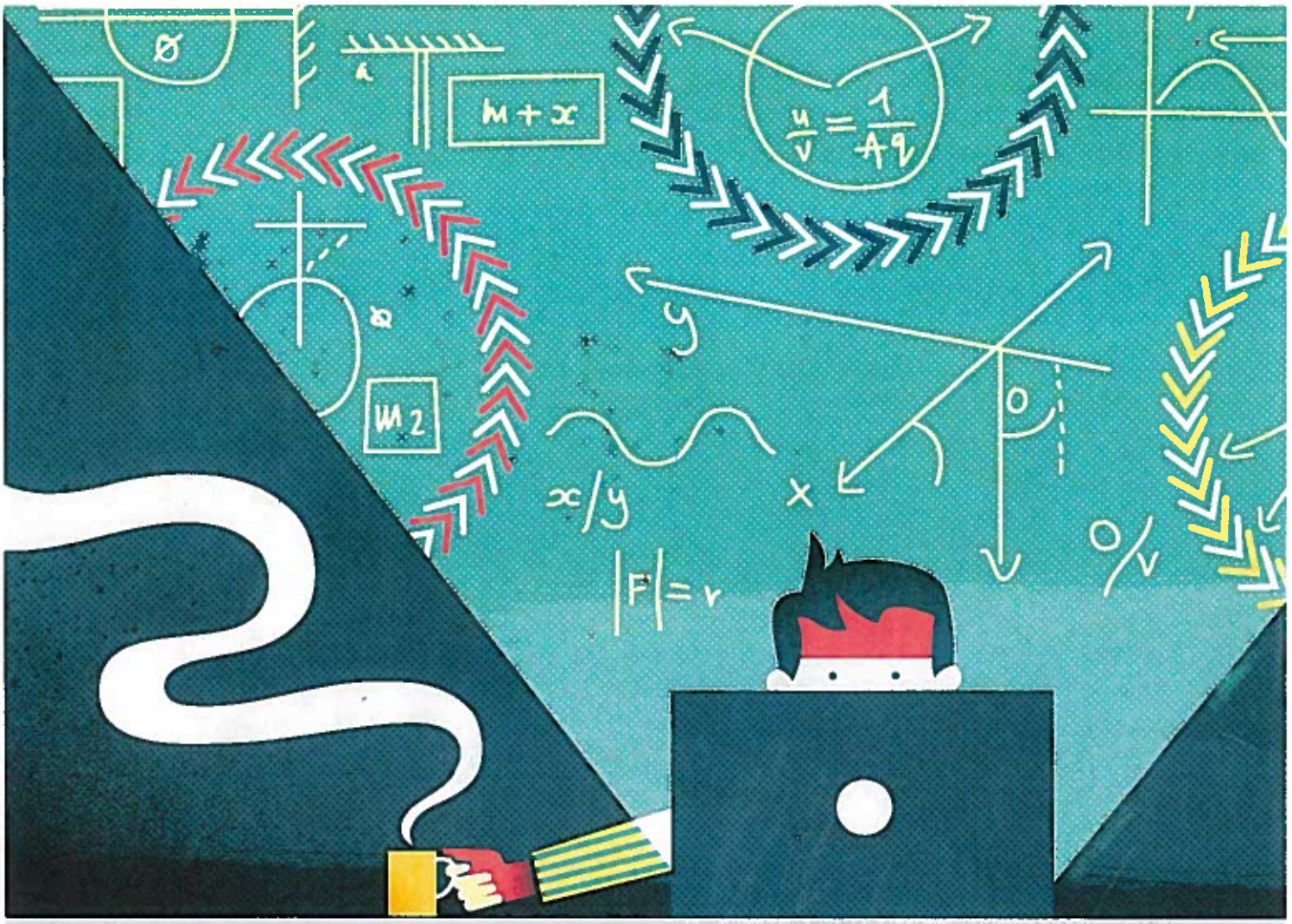
But are responsible parenthood and academic success really mutually exclusive? And in an age when men are more involved than ever in their children's lives, do female academics still bear a disproportionate childcare burden?

We asked three women and three men from a variety of disciplines and levels of seniority to write about their experiences and expectations of juggling campus with Pampers. Two of our contributors do not yet have children. One accepts the challenges as "just the way it is" and refuses to be put off by them. But the other is not sure she wants to join the ranks of harried academic mothers who only ever manage to "half do" anything.

Another contributor one year into motherhood has, with the help of her academic husband, found the organised chaos richly rewarding. A father of three finds it just about possible to keep his weekends free for his children by getting up at 4am during the week.

A senior female academic managed to have four children while rising to a pro vice-chancellorship by bartering childcare commitments with other parents. But a male peer cheerfully admits that work often held his attention more than his two daughters did. "Even if you largely ignore your children, they will probably survive," he notes.

It is doubtful that this is a hypothesis many academics will be eager to test, but if the demands on early career researchers continue to grow, it may be that increasing numbers of them have little choice.



I get up at 4am to work before taking the children to school

"Daddy, Niamh won't give me the loom band maker. And she won't stop singing *Let It Go* really loudly all the time. Tell her to stop."

"OK, calm down. I'll be with you in a second. Just let me finish this email."

"Daddy! She still won't give me the loom bands. And she still won't stop singing."

"OK. OK. With you in a second."

"DADDY!"

Deep sigh. Close laptop lid.

"OK. Coming now."

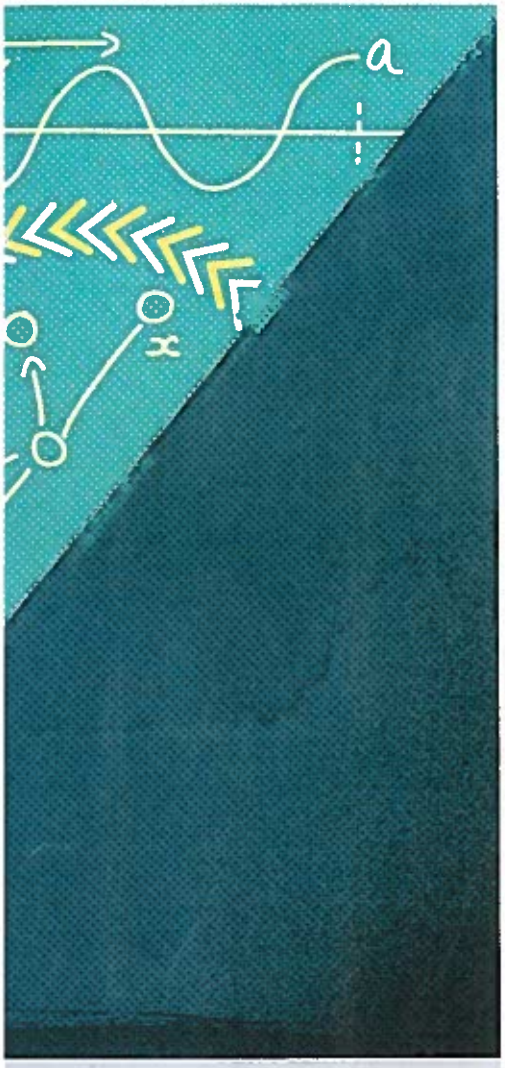
I'd foolishly broken my golden rule again: never attempt to work at weekends or before the kids go to bed. As a certain porcine mainstay of children's television who is wise beyond her years (and species) would put it: "Silly Daddy!"

Niamh, our first child, was born in 2003, when I was a reader. Her sister, Saoirse, arrived in 2005, when I was promoted to a chair, and her brother, Fiachra, came along another three years later. So my career was rather firmly bedded in before, in our mid-thirties, my wife, Marie, and I decided to start a family.

It has still not been entirely straightforward for us to juggle Marie's shifts as a nursing auxiliary at the Queen's Medical Centre (next to the university) with the time and travel demands of my work in academic physics. But if the children had started arriving a few years earlier than they had, when I was a (relatively) fresh-faced new lecturer, I don't quite know how I'd have coped.

I found the transition from postdoctoral researcher to lecturer something of a culture shock. As a postdoc, your focus is almost entirely on research. A lectureship requires that focus to shift rapidly between at least three separate roles: teaching, research supervision and the ever-present administrative demands of both. Add in the demand to produce "impact" and you end up with a role that amounts to at least two full-time jobs in one. As a lecturer, I regularly worked 70- or 80-hour weeks (including weekends, of course), and this is not at all unusual in physics. Clearly that is not compatible with parenthood.

Nowadays, although I do sometimes fail, I try my utmost to keep evenings and weekends free to spend with the family. I have got into the habit of getting up very early in the mornings – around 4am – to have a few hours to work before taking the children to school. They are easily the most productive hours of my day. I have also tried, as much as possible, to cut down on the amount of travel to conferences and workshops I do. Again, this is much easier to do at this stage of my career than it would have been 10 years ago. Nonetheless, I still spend too much time away; so much more could be done via videoconferencing.



The working culture of your school or department is, of course, an essential factor in how easy you find it to balance family and work commitments. In my experience – and I know that this holds true for many of my colleagues – the School of Physics and Astronomy at Nottingham, where I have been since I was a postdoc, has been exceptionally supportive. As a testament to this, it was this year awarded "champion" status in the Institute of Physics' Project Juno for "taking action to address gender inequities across its student and staff body". I am not the first to observe that the changes facilitated by that project have resulted in a working environment that is better for everyone.

Still, I'm going to have to end on a downbeat note. Because I know for a fact that the research outputs I had when I landed my lectureship in 1997 would be nowhere near enough to secure that position today. Indeed, I wouldn't even be shortlisted. The bar for entry to the academy is being raised at an extraordinarily high rate. I'm sure I don't need to spell out the implications of this for the work-life balance of young scientists.

Philip Moriarty is professor of physics at the University of Nottingham.

Hovering over us is the spectre of the stalled careers of many female lecturers with children

I am a married, female early career researcher with no children, and I am ambivalent about whether to have any. At this stage in my career, you need to be extremely focused to construct a high research profile, and this is patently incompatible with the demanding nature of rearing a baby.

Hovering over anyone in my position is the spectre of the stalled careers of so many female lecturers with children. So often these mothers are demoted to roles such as the organising of college events, editing conference proceedings or administering professional organisations: experience that does not really enhance their academic prospects unless backed up by a solid research trajectory. And their perpetually harried countenances and incessant complaints about only "half-doing" everything do not exactly inspire confidence regarding the manageability of academic motherhood.

While university management ostensibly institutes policies to support mothers and spews rhetoric about child-friendly policies, the current academic culture of constant productivity makes only very superficial concessions. The insidious culture of gender discrimination in the academy licenses the downgrading of mothers and wrests all control of their academic work performance from them, and I have witnessed exhausted academic mothers, depleted by having to juggle it all, capitulate in the spirit of "anything for a quiet life".

Of course, the experience of womanhood is conditioned not only by the professional milieu, but also by the social and familial expectations of a normative gender performance. Luckily, my family do not pry or pressure, but I do perceive a distance between me and friends, many of whom are now mothers and chatter incessantly about childcare paraphernalia and their progeny's every movement. Any attempt at non-baby conversation is met with a monosyllabic answer or a bland platitude: any type of intellectually stimulating discussion is impossible.

To a certain extent we academics are, as television historian Lucy Worsley so aptly phrased it, "educated out of the reproductive function". The acute perspicacity we have cultivated enables us to see all too well the wider picture. For me, the acceptability of childlessness in my current institution has also had a dissuasive influence. The lives led by childless senior female academics seem so full of exciting personal and professional possibilities born of their autonomy, intellectual fulfilment, relatively large incomes and lack of familial binds. It has been insinuated to me several times that "having it all" is unviable, but, to me, these childless women represent a more novel and realistic perspective on that debate: the idea that maybe some women don't want it all, but simply aspire to a life adjusted to their foremost priorities, which do not often include children.

At times, the contrast between them and the aforementioned stressed mothers compels me to assess my life priorities, especially when the social cachet previously awarded to motherhood is so diminished, and the self-realisation implicit in intellectual work obviates the search for other sources of personal satisfaction – if the family still is one of those.

In her brilliant study of working parents, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochshild found that parents in a family-friendly company chose to stay in the workplace and not to avail themselves of policies facilitating extra family time. For them, the orderliness, camaraderie and regulated behaviour of the workplace easily triumphed over the unpredictability of a home life typified by persistent demands and scant gratitude. When your job validates you and provides for your affective, social and intellectual needs, bringing up a child begins to seem somewhat tedious.

Although there is a general assumption that academic women disdain motherhood, I revere the function itself. I believe it is the most important job any person can do. I remember being struck by John Bayley's account of the childlessness of his wife, Iris Murdoch. While not judging her, he ventured that she would have been excellent as a mother because she would have applied herself to the task with the same level of concentration with which she did everything.

In my view, this desire for excellence, whether professional or personal, is the crucial factor underlying the prevalence of childlessness in the academy. We female academics strive constantly for the best, and the "good enough" model of motherhood, in which one just muddles through, is unappealing – even offensive – to a discerning sensibility. I often feel that it is my overvaluation of motherhood, my acute awareness of its pitfalls and the absolute necessity of doing it well, that stops me from having a child.

The writer is an early career researcher in the humanities.

I like children, but work is just so damn interesting – it really is

I am the son of an obsessive academic who probably did not focus enough on his children. I am also the father of two daughters, now in their thirties, whose obsessive father probably did not focus enough on them.

I admire people who can lead balanced lives and devote huge energy to both their work and their children, but I could never manage it. If you choose to have children then of course it will impinge on your professional capabilities. I love my daughters to bits, and I hope I was not a bad father. They have rarely if ever heard me shout, I imagine, and I can barely remember having a row with them. But work is just so damn interesting. It really is.

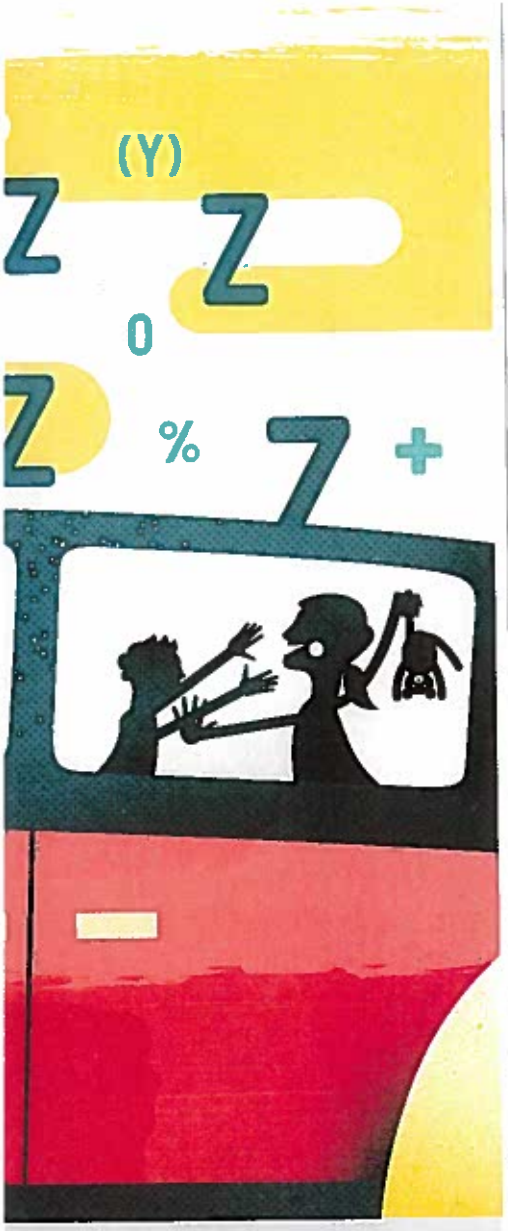
When my professorial dad took care of us on Saturdays, my three siblings and I would be driven into Edinburgh and left to sit outside the university's department of psychiatry for some hours in the back of an old Rolls-Royce (what do you mean you think mine was an unconventional family?) while he went in and pored over the previous night's data from his sleep laboratory. I don't remember what we did: bickered and shivered, I imagine.

At a recent birthday party for me, one of my daughters gave a speech. People laughed out loud. Laughed and laughed. "When we were little, our father used to drive us into Oxford on Saturday mornings. There he would take us into the Institute of Economics and Statistics, where we would have to sit and wait for hours, bored, until he had looked through some kind of work." Oh no, I suddenly realised. Oh no!

So what facts or advice would I pass on to any youngish – or even middle-aged – academic when it comes to children? First, the researcher in me feels obliged to say one thing. The statistical evidence suggests that, on average, people with children are neither happier nor less happy than those without children, but people with children do report slightly higher levels of feelings of worthwhileness of their lives.

Second, you might as well face the fact that as a parent you will end up dwelling on what you did wrong when bringing your children up. One does not dwell on the good stuff, but rather on the parts that make one feel guilty.

Third, I like children and always have, but



in the academy the pressures are high, and things can easily be all-consuming. So your children will get somewhat neglected some of the time. I remember once forgetting to pick up my young child from the local primary school, admittedly only 600 yards away from my house. When I arrived, 30 minutes late, there she was, a wee crumpled-looking lassie, with large eyes, standing all alone on the pavement.

Fourth, even if you largely ignore your children, they will probably survive. When I had to give a speech at my own dad's funeral, I realised that although he paid us virtually no attention for the whole of his life, it actually had some good effects on me and my siblings. He produced four mavericks: an artist, a strange professor and two iconoclastic self-employed professionals. So what the hell: maybe neglect works. Mavericks to mavericks; dust to dust. Best of luck with it all, anyway.

Andrew Oswald is professor of economics at the University of Warwick.

Combining parenting and research made both much better experiences

As a theoretical physicist I have long been familiar with the concept of the emergence of order out of disorder. However, my experience of being a mother in science has made me appreciate the concept on quite a different level.

As an academic, particularly one in a theoretical subject, I have a flexibility that is difficult to find in any other profession. As one professor in my department recently put it: "My kids were sick last week, and nursery wouldn't take them, so I had to stay at home for the week. You see, my wife works, and she has a real job..." Our family is in an even better position: neither I nor my husband has a "real" job, as he is also an academic.

For me, it was always clear that I would not be able to stop being a scientist for an extended period of maternity leave. While I did take 16 weeks of leave after our first daughter was born last September, we did our best from the beginning to share the childcare and to integrate it into our lives as researchers. This led to a beautiful muddle between writing grant applications, changing nappies, finishing calculations with the baby on my lap and discussing research with students while feeding her.

In January, the balancing act really started. I returned from my maternity leave to resume supervising two undergraduate and two postgraduate students and teaching quantum mechanics for three hours a week. I went into my office two or three days a week on my own, working long hours (usually from 8am to 8pm) while my husband stayed at home with the baby. My husband – who taught eight hours a week, supervised a number of students and was the deputy head of his department – did the same.

I usually took the baby into work once or twice a week, and I scheduled most of my meetings for those days. Thankfully, our daughter has been a very social baby from the beginning and is happiest when there are people around. At the weekends we tried to catch up on all the work that didn't get done during the week while the other took the baby out shopping or for long walks. There were clearly patterns emerging from the chaos, and I realised that while it was important to have overall plans, flexibility and the ability to go with the flow was the key to getting through.

What every parent will tell you is that you magically become much more efficient when you have children. In my case, that meant that, by the end of the term, I was no further behind on deadlines for exams and preparations for my lectures than I usually was. In addition, having a baby who relied on me prevented me from doing crazy night shifts to catch up, which would have robbed me of all my energy. Standard advice on working time management, such as breaking down big tasks into manageable small chunks, has become invaluable. You always have to have a small task on hand in case there is an unexpected nap time. Also, if you know you have only one day to finish something, you do not devote half a day to searching the internet for a rather irrelevant piece of information, as I used to do fairly frequently in my former child-free life.

But I confess that I have recently begun lapsing into those old ways again. This has become possible because our daughter now attends nursery a few afternoons a week, which she enjoys tremendously. It has taken the edge off the chaos, and life is getting closer to some kind of normality again. But while the past year has been very demanding, it was nevertheless one of the best times in my life. The combination of parenting and being a researcher made both much better experiences, and I am really glad that I was not put off by the scare stories about how difficult it is to balance the two.

Eva-Maria Graefe is a research fellow in the Faculty of Natural Sciences at Imperial College London. She was recently awarded a L'Oréal-Unesco UK & Ireland fellowship for women in science for her research into engineering holes in quantum systems.

The key to combining a career with children was setting up a barter system

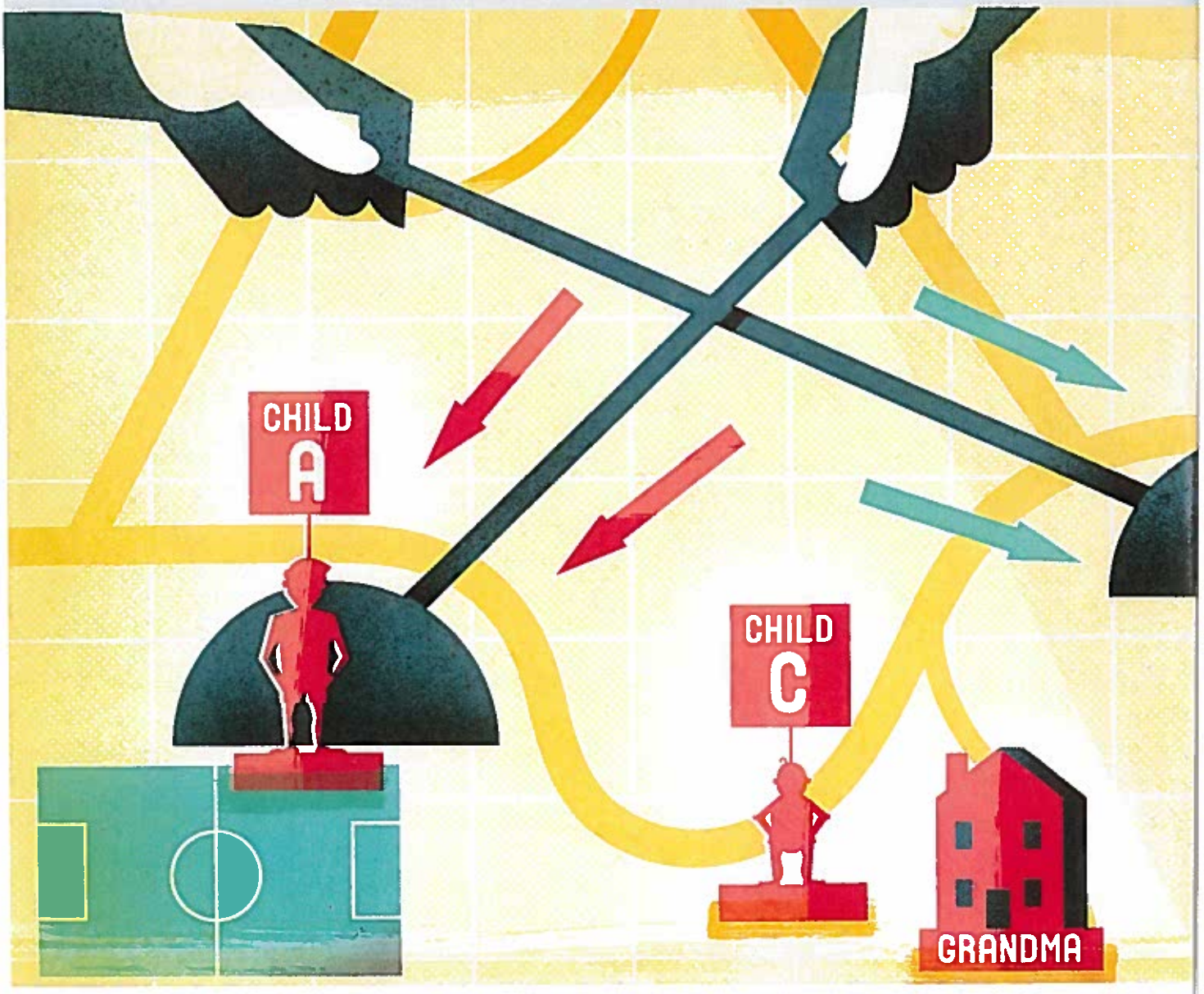
I never gave childcare a thought until I had my first daughter. I was still writing my PhD and on a temporary lecturing contract, so at first my husband and I shared childcare. But then we split up and I had to look for a job as a single parent.

I well remember one interview at which I was asked how I would cope with a three-year-old. When I mentioned nurseries, one member of the panel said that, in his view, it was wrong to have children and then farm them out to other people. I stood up and said we should terminate the interview immediately. Although I was asked to sit down and continue, they chose someone else.

When I did find a job, it was at a university with a crèche. It was small and expensive; I couldn't afford to put my daughter there full time, so I found a nice woman who looked after her for half the week. Looking back, I was paying someone who was not registered as a childminder: that would be seen as something of a risk these days, but I did it again when my second child arrived four years later.

I have no idea how much I paid for childcare over the years, but it was a huge amount. I campaigned passionately for better and cheaper provision in the 1980s: the decade when I had two more children by a partner who spent long periods in hospital having a series of major operations. Friends in Italy used to send me students in the final stages of writing their undergraduate dissertations; they would live with us for a few months rent-free and avail themselves of unofficial supervision while I had in-house child support. I am still in touch with some of those wonderful women.

For me, the key to combining a career with four children separated in age by 16 years was establishing a system of barter with other people: I'll pick your children up on Monday if you pick mine up on Friday; I'll do your weekly shop if you can have my son stay over for two nights so I can go to a conference, and so on. It was a system that worked, but only because of the almost military planning and organisation that went into it. The school runs were Byzantine journeys around the Midlands, with children in nurseries, primary and secondary schools, and every week I would do two very late nights, working until

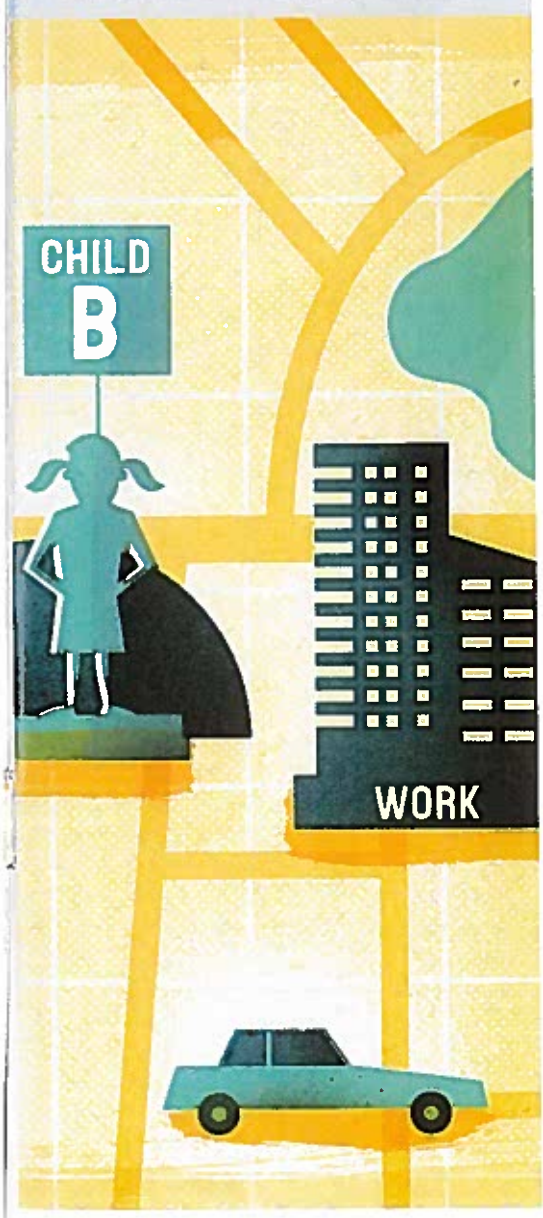


maybe 2am at my desk to catch up.

Of course, things continually went wrong: children were ill, meetings went on too long, I got stuck in traffic, the washing machine broke and publishers hounded me over missed deadlines. I always felt guilty, but I never missed a single school assembly, Christmas play or sports day. I rescheduled lectures, bartered to exchange seminar groups and, when driven to the wall by an unexpected meeting, I simply lied and said I was ill or had a dental appointment. My life changed for the better only after my widowed mother moved to live close by. She had the pleasure of a close relationship with her grandchildren, and I finally had cast-iron support after 16 years of boxing and coxing.

It seems to me that things are no easier for the present generation. Balancing children and an academic post is as hard as it ever was. But I would not be who or where I am now without my tribe.

Susan Bassnett is professor of comparative literature at the University of Warwick. She has twice served as a pro vice-chancellor.



My fiancée will do a better job of child-rearing. The question is when to start our family

Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but I think my fiancée will do a better job of child-rearing than I would.

I am in my first postdoctoral position, and she has just begun a PhD under my supervision. This arrangement sounds crazy to many of our peers, but husband-and-wife teams (or wife-and-husband team in the case of Marie and Pierre Curie) are not so uncommon in science.

It is not that I do not want to be involved with my children's upbringing, but it would probably be more detrimental to each of our careers if we both reduced to part-time working during the baby's early development, rather than for just one of us to do so. Grants and fellowships are still largely secured via the applicants' output of papers and conference proceedings, so it is important for at least one of us to keep up a steady flow so as to secure the project funding that could be used to support both our salaries.

However, I hope to play a large supporting role in the childcare, allowing my fiancée to return to work if and when she wants to. The big question is when to start our family. Having a baby during her PhD could interrupt the flow of her project, which may result in an overly delayed finish – especially if she is unlucky with results. But waiting until her first postdoctoral position could lead to problems with financial insecurity; while PhDs last three or four years in the UK, and up to five on the Continent, the majority of postdoctoral positions are funded for only two years. Securing employment beyond that period is highly dependent on what you achieve in the first two years; and if a newborn is taking priority, that might be not very much. On the other hand, the stipend most PhD studentships pay is lower than a postdoctoral salary.

Then there is the question of where to start our family. I am generously funded by the Wellcome Trust, which gives me the opportunity to conduct studies in at least three different institutions during the four-year fellowship. We are currently living in Germany, but I am expecting to work at Cardiff University and at least one other lab in Europe or the US before I finish, so the children may well have to change school and languages quite a few times.

Then there are the long hours that academics typically work, which is hardly conducive to the kind of work-life balance many people would consider essential to child-rearing. I can see why the academy has such a high female dropout rate beyond the PhD. I recently attended a Lindau Nobel Laureate Meeting in Germany, where a great emphasis was placed on encouraging young women to stay in science and start a family, but I don't think encouragement alone will overcome the fundamental problems.

But in our case, we will try to take all the obstacles in our stride. It is easy to moan, but conferences are not long sea voyages and long lab hours are not night shifts. We may have to plan our family more carefully than people in most other professions do, but at least we will never be bored or lack autonomy. The system of short-term contracts and stiff competition is good for identifying able and highly motivated scientists. Its downside is the low level of stability it offers young families, but that is just the way it is. It certainly won't stop us having children.

Ben Newland is a Sir Henry Wellcome postdoctoral fellow based between the Leibniz Institute of Polymer Research Dresden and the Brain Repair Group at Cardiff University.