

Ask Professor Sarah Bellum

Professor Sarah Bellum answers your questions on navigating the often-uncharted waters of early career development. Professor Bellum was inspired by Ms. Mentor, a column by *Emily Toth* appearing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and is written by *Patricia L. Clark*, chair of the Early Careers Committee. Do you have a question for Professor Bellum? Send it to sarah_bellum@biophysics.org. Your privacy is assured!

Q: *I have just completed my first year as an assistant professor at a major research university, and last week I found out I am pregnant with my first child. My husband and I are thrilled, but I am very apprehensive about how to tell my lab, my department chair, and my colleagues about my pregnancy. Won't my students feel abandoned? Won't my colleagues resent having to cover my teaching load? Also, my university allows the tenure clock to be stopped for a year due to childbirth, and/or a semester leave-of-absence, but I am worried I will be perceived as a lightweight if I exercise this options. How can I minimize the academic fallout from what should be a joyous event?*

—Expecting in Evanston

A: Young women with plans to stay in academia often wonder, "When is the best time to have children?" Too often, the answer they hear is, "Never!" There is some truth to this: As a grad student/postdoc, there is not much money and there is a single-minded focus on research. Daycare, if affordable, constrains time in lab to a 9-to-5 schedule that may be incompatible with experiments. As an assistant professor, there is more money, fewer experiments, and a private office (invaluable for things like breastfeeding/pumping, diaper changes, spontaneous naps—for mother or baby, etc...), but the job intensity goes up ten-fold (or more!). As a tenured professor, money and job pressures may be more manageable, but fertility is waning. Of course, the specifics of these trade-offs are different for everyone, and will help shape the best time to start a family.

That being said, as the average duration of a postdoc appointment continues to lengthen, the average age for first childbirth continues to increase nationwide, and more and more women enter tenure-track faculty positions, it is

increasingly common for assistant professors to have their first child as an untenured assistant professor. Indeed, Professor Bellum personally knows three women who started their faculty position in a delicate condition!

But on to your specific questions: You are pregnant, and worry about how to tell your colleagues. Here is the most important thing to remember through all of the telling phase: more likely than not, you are far more worried about the impact of your pregnancy than any of them. After all, you are the one who will be most affected, not them, and you may already be battling hormone-induced

shifts in perception. But that being said, there are a few protocols to follow. It sounds like you have already finished the first, which is to pull out your Faculty Handbook and find out exactly what is written with regard to materni-

ty leave (or medical leave, if there is no specific policy for childbirth). Do not rely on word of mouth. Use this information to start constructing possible leave scenarios for your situation. The second is how you begin the telling phase: Tell your department chair first. As soon as you leave his/her office, tell everyone in your lab (as a group). These are the people who absolutely must hear this news from you, rather than second-hand from someone else, so they must be told in rapid succession.

Most likely, you will receive sincere well wishes from your chair and lab. After all, your chair hired you knowing you were a woman of childbearing age; your news may even trigger some nostalgic gazing back to his/her own days as an assistant professor with a new baby, if those days existed. Likewise, the general reaction from your lab will probably be positive: Your

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students who are childless (but hope to have a child one day) will rejoice that their mentor is tacking this big, extra, non-science component onto her life; they will likely be encouraged by this fusion of science with family. Your students who already have children will rejoice that soon, you will have a deeper understanding of what it is like to be

torn between running one more experiment and going to the zoo on Saturday. Your childless students who intend to always remain childless will probably regard the whole situation as strange and unfathomable: "What is all the fuss about?"

Granted, the congratulations from your students may come mixed with some worries about your attentiveness to their progress in the months to come. However, in Professor Bellum's experience, it is far more likely that your students will welcome the extra breathing room and reduced watchful gaze. Even better, the extra leash will probably encourage some of them to develop their skills as independent scientists and problem solvers. Nevertheless, if you are still worried that your students will feel abandoned, you can reassure them that their progress is your highest work-related priority, and you will do your best to make sure the pregnancy and childbirth are minimally disruptive.

You didn't ask, but a related question is, after you tell your chair, the lab, and any other key people, how do you spread the news to the wider department? If your chair or one of your stu-

dents has a big mouth, the situation may resolve itself without your input. If they are a discrete bunch, however, it may be worth it to next mention your news to a few departmental gossips, and let them take it from there. If you are not plugged into the department grapevine and therefore unsure who will spread the word, take yourself down to

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the department office and tell as many of the office staff as possible. An announcement in this public place, to administrators who see far more of your colleagues in a day than you see in a month, will ensure rapid distribution of your news.

Whether or not to take advantage of a semester leave is not clear-cut, and may depend on the exact timing of the birth. After all, long ago (like ten years ago, when many maternity leaves were six weeks long), a large fraction of academic babies were born immediately after spring final exams were graded, in order to avoid conflicts with teaching schedules. Fortunately, most departments have undergone a Childbirth Enlightenment, meaning they have acquired a

more realistic view of what it takes to have/raise a baby and maintain a world-class teaching and research program. And remember, regardless of when your baby is due: it is very easy to underesti-

mate the amount of time and energy that a baby requires. Even with an 'easy' birth and lots of help at home, your short-term productivity will take a significant hit, and your work schedule and habits will likely be permanently altered. So, Professor Bellum falls firmly in the camp that suggests: if you have the option of a semester-long leave after childbirth, go ahead and take it, even if you do not think you will 'need' it. Yes, it is certainly true that the longer you are on leave, the longer your department colleagues must cover your teaching load. But get it out of your head right now that taking a semester of leave will come back to haunt you in some way.

After all, do you really expect your department is going to tot up all your publications, grants, teaching evaluations, and service at your tenure review and then say, "Well, this would be fine under normal circumstances, but she had an extra semester leave, so we would really like to see two more papers/another grant/etc."? Not hardly. A central component of the Childbirth Enlightenment was the realization that

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release from teaching after childbirth lets a new mother spend what little time she can scrape together after the birth on the care and feeding of her research program. This makes sense: it is in your department's best interest to do everything it can to help you establish and maintain research productivity, and an interruption in your

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teaching has little impact on the department when compared to a drop in your research productivity. Departments that understand the relative importance of these demands are investing wisely in the future of the department; a reasonable maternity

leave arrangement is one part of this understanding. Likewise, and perhaps most importantly, if you decide not to take the

leave, and your tenure decision is on the fence, get it out of your head right now that anyone in the room will point out that you had a baby but did not take any extra leave. In other words, taking the leave is unlikely to hurt you, and you definitely will not receive any 'extra points' for not taking the leave.

The above assumes you do a fair amount of teaching, because this is what your 'leave' will really be a leave from: your lab is not going anywhere, nor are your commitments to collaborators, etc. So, if you are in a medical school or some other situation where the teaching loads are light, a leave may not ease your schedule that much.

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As for stopping the tenure clock for a year—why would you not want to do this? After all, most universities that provide this option require that you exercise it at the time you apply for maternity leave. But if you are ready, you can still go up for tenure early, or on your original track, so this seems like a win-win situation. Meaning: just because you stop the clock does not mean that you must delay your eventual tenure application. And keep in mind that some pregnancies/births are more disruptive than others, and there is no way to know what your situation will be like until it is upon

you. So consider the stopped clock as an extra buffer, or an insurance policy, but not one that will necessarily change your plans or goals.

“But what,” some of you whisper, rattling your newsletter, “what if I am in a department that has not undergone Child-birth Enlightenment? That has a draconian maternity leave policy? Or no policy at all!?” Do not despair! First of all, it would be helpful to find out if there is another woman in your depart-

ment (tenured or not) who has had a baby—from her, you can learn how your department chair handled her maternity leave. For example, maybe she asked your chair for, and received, a semester off from teaching, even though this is not an automatic university policy. If you have no trailblazer in your own department, ask within your college, or ask friends (or even casual acquaintances) at other universities how their leave was handled. Then go ahead and ask your chair for something reasonable, like a semester off from teaching. The worst you can hear is no, which is still better than not asking at all.

Finally, if faculty childbirth is a rare event in your department, you may feel especially concerned about how you will be perceived (that whole 'lightweight'

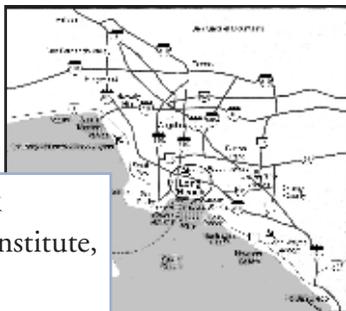
thing again). As a positive thought to help counteract these worries, keep in mind that you are serving as a tremendous role model. Everyone in your department (female and male) who would like to

have a family of their own will benefit from seeing your example that families and academic jobs can indeed go together!

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Joachim Frank
Howard Hughes Medical Institute,
Wadsworth Center
2005 National Lecture



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