

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 and anonymity are assured!

Babies and the Professoriate, Part II

Q: *I am seven months pregnant with my first child, and four years into my first tenure track job. Balancing work and family has never been an issue for me, but how am I going to balance work and family after this baby is born? I currently work 10-12 hours/day during the week, plus another 10-12 hours over the weekend. I love my job; I love talking with the students in my lab, I love working on challenging projects, and I even love teaching. I am not so naïve as to think that I will be able to resume my current schedule immediately after the baby is born, but is it reasonable to expect to be back to 100% after a month? Two months?*

- Pregnant at Penn State

A: The short answer to your question is: it depends. Every pregnancy/childbirth is different, every newborn is different, and every home situation is different. Has your pregnancy been trouble-free? Are you healthy and fit? Will you have full-time help – a nanny, a devoted new grandma – at home with the baby? Then perhaps your recovery will be briefer than most. The particulars of your situation will determine how fast you can bounce back to a normal schedule, but because there will still be plenty of unknowns before the birth itself, you would be wise to start to adopt an attitude of flexibility now. In other words, be prepared to cut yourself a whole lot of slack in the months to come, because you might need it.

But let's look more closely at that word 'normal' for a moment. The 'normal' you will be working towards after childbirth is not the same normal you have now. No matter how easy the

birth, no matter how mild-mannered the baby, no matter how much help you have at home, the normal after the baby is born is a 'new normal' that will reflect this new additional priority in your life. For example, you should expect to work differently from how you work now: much more efficiently, and with a greater appreciation of the importance of being organized. Leisurely lunches and chats over the coffee machine will become rare, treasured events. You might find it is no longer worth it to spend twice as long writing something in order to improve it by ten percent. You will probably find that you rely on a schedule and do far more planning than you ever have before, and you may leave the office each day at a set time, whether your 'to – do' list is completed or not.

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Of course, many aspects of this search for the 'new normal' apply to new fathers as well as new mothers. Nevertheless, no matter how little (if at all) gender differences have factored into your life up till this point, childbirth will most likely change that. Consider untenured Elsa, who was six months pregnant when the wife of

one of her colleagues gave birth. The day after the birth, Elsa ran into her colleague in the department office; he had come in to teach his class and pick up his mail. A situation like this can be a watershed for a pregnant assistant professor or new mother: even under the best childbirth circumstances, Elsa could not imagine dropping by the department office (much less teaching!) the day after giving birth.

Professor Bellum is a big believer in

letting everyone do their own thing, but your eagerness to resume your current schedule does ring one alarm bell: please keep in mind that it is fantastically easy to overestimate your capacity to get non-baby-related work done in the first two or three months after the baby is born. Professor Bellum would rest much easier if she heard that you will consider using those

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first 2-3 months to completely immerse yourself in the absolute amazement of your new baby and getting used to your new life. Having a baby might be the biggest, most dramatic change you ever make in your life, and you should plan on it taking a while to get used to it. And at first, the baby is going to be changing and developing on an almost daily basis, and it would be tragic to miss that metamorphosis. This is not to suggest that you isolate yourself from work (heaven forbid!); by all means, talk with your students, keep up with your email, skim journals, even teach a class you have taught many times before, but think twice about plans to (i) revise a manuscript, (ii) draft a grant proposal, (iii) develop a new course syllabus during this time. Don't take this the wrong way: you will be capable of bigger projects like this and taking care of yourself and your baby during this time, but the smart money is betting you will be stunningly inefficient at it. Meaning: anything work-related you do accomplish during this 2-3 month period can easily be accomplished in 1/30th the time in later months. Please

read this next sentence twice: expect that one month of immediate post-partum work will be roughly equivalent to one day of your normal (pre-baby) work productivity.

On top of the inefficiency of immediate post-partum work, it is often also incredibly conflicting: you want to work on the manuscript/proposal/syllabus, but you also really want to play

with the baby/watch the baby sleep/make a sandwich/reduce the chaos that surrounds you/nap. After 2-3 months, the baby will not be changing so fast, you will have (mostly) recovered physically, the baby will be sleeping better (meaning you too will be getting more sleep), everyday things like bathing the little creature will not be so much of a production, some new patterns/schedules (the first signs of the new normal!) will have emerged, and a tiny bit of the novelty will have worn off (though not much!).

A common concern, particularly for younger faculty (with younger labs), is losing touch with the experimental progress of the lab. A great way to address this is to re-establish regular lab meetings as soon as you feel up to it. Even better, if your lab has more than four graduate students, start scheduling regular meetings with individual members of your research group. It is especially important that each member of your lab feels that he/she is getting prop-

er mentoring and attention during your leave. And while it is very easy to pay attention to the projects that are working well, it is harder to pay attention to those projects that really need attention. The easiest way to address this is to establish a mechanism to spend equal time with each group member, either through regularly scheduled individual chats, or small weekly subgroup meetings to review weekly experimental progress. These mechanisms will ensure that, throughout the week, you will get a chance to interact with each person in the group, and their projects.

Another often-underrated aspect of recovery from childbirth is the large emotional adjustments you will experience. Don't be surprised if you start back to work and still find you are highly distracted. Eight weeks after giving birth, Margaret found herself on the elevator with her department chair. Usually a

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natural conversationalist, Margaret realized she was suddenly unable to think of anything at all to say – her brain felt thick and woolly, and all she could think about was the first real smile her new daughter had bestowed on her just that morning. This distractibility can be very distressing, but rest assured it will lessen with time. Again, starting off with a flexible attitude and the capacity to cut yourself as much slack as needed will make every aspect of this transition as smooth as possible.