

### The right time to have a baby ...

*A baby that depends on me, a thesis to finish and a career to plan... Quite a challenge altogether. Is it the right time to have a baby during the PhD?*

We were frequently asking the question to ourselves: When is good time to become parents? Then we realized that the ideal time for founding your own family simply doesn't exist. There is always a manuscript to finish, a grant to write or a project to finalize in an academic career path.

We noticed that handling a baby wouldn't be easier in the following years, when we seek a faculty position or are rising in a company. In the end we knew that at one point we wanted to have kids, therefore, we stopped planning the perfect timing for becoming parents and decided to experience it.

Parenting is like a second job. However, I saw very positive examples around that can handle both duties together. I met several female professors who have more than one child and young

group leaders who were successfully continuing their careers while being pregnant or after having kids. The general impression I got was that children were not probably causing any big delay in the career path. In some cases it can even substantially increase productivity and efficiency at work.

that I wouldn't jeopardize the completion of my PhD thesis.

I had quite a smooth pregnancy and birth and I think I was also lucky that our daughter Alya was very supportive. After the birth I have decided not to take a long break in my PhD. Therefore, when Alya was one month

old I started working from home and after three months I was more often in the lab.

Of course, this wouldn't have been possible without the great support I received. Most important is my family. My husband is taking time off during the week when I need to complete some experiments.

In addition,

my mother came over for one month to help with baby-care so I could go to lab more often. Secondly, our PhD program and my hosting lab together supported me by funding a half-time technician for several months, which enabled me to continue my work to a certain extent. Moreover, the time of maternal leave was added to the PhD deadline which gave me more flexibility. I was also lucky to have a very supportive and understanding boss.



Neva Caliskan, her husband Kemal, and their daughter Alya

When I have informed my boss about my pregnancy she was very supportive. Nevertheless, some changes had to be made. For example, my lab space was reorganized to avoid certain chemicals and radioactive material. I continued my work without problems until my maternal leave with the help of a technician when necessary. I should note that when I got pregnant, my experiments were mostly completed. Therefore I knew

Apparently, it is not always so easy and not only fun. First of all, it is without any doubt a big challenge to become a mum while writing a thesis and preparing a manuscript. Thanks to the motherhood hormone oxytocin, I guess I will forget about all this after a year. I have to be very well organized to have some work done.

The real challenge is to switch between the mummy brain and the PhD student brain, which consumes a significant amount of time. During the first weeks after Alya was born, I closely observed the sleep schedule of the baby during the day. Then I organized my work in small pieces accordingly, so that I knew exactly what had to be done next. For example, it is possible to scan through a paper or quickly write an e-mail during the short pauses. Also, I have been more productive in the evenings when the baby slept longer. This helped me to estimate the productive working times and be more efficient.

Likewise, my lab work had to be well planned and organized, as I could go there only for a couple of hours at one time. Consequently, I had (and still have) to finish all the work within a fixed timeframe to be back home when Alya needs me. However, I have to admit that there are still some inefficient days despite very well planning ...

We believe for our careers it is more advantageous to handle the situation with a shorter parental leave. Yes, it is more challenging; one needs to plan better, organize better and work more efficient, which



Neva and Alya on the beach

I consider vital skills in life. In our case, everything seems to work just fine up to now.

To sum up, it is possible to handle parenting with careers in case you have a supportive environment to continue your work. For us the most challenging period is, as we hope, almost completed by now and it is getting easier and easier. I am sure there will be more challenges ahead but we are stronger and more efficient than before in dealing with them.

Despite all the challenges and concerns about the career, it gives us more pleasure than anything else to see the smiling face of Alya and watching her growing up. I now look forward to finishing my PhD but also to hear Alya's first words she will speak soon.

**Neva Caliskan** is presently a PhD student with Marina Rodnina in the Department of Physical Biochemistry at the Max Planck Institute for Biophysical Chemistry. In her PhD thesis she investigates programmed ribosomal frameshifting in bacteria. Her daughter Alya was born at the end of her third year of PhD studies.