

Creating Space for Academic Babies

 insidehighered.com/advice/2017/03/03/higher-ed-must-do-more-help-grad-students-babies-essay

In my [first essay](#), I reflected on the barriers I faced as a black mother in graduate school. Given the biases I had to confront, I attempted to hide my status as a mother when I went on the academic job market. I created a professional presence on social media that disclosed little about my personal life. I explicitly asked my letter writers not to mention that I was a mother. On campus visits, I asked vague questions about schools near the university.

I already carried job-market anxiety and impostor syndrome feelings as a student of color. On top of that, I worried that if word got out I was a parent, I might have worse chances of landing a job.

I did, however, keep an ear to the ground for how, or if, potential departments talked about work-life balance. When I arrived at my current institution, the University of California, Merced, I was pleasantly surprised. It seemed that work and life (including life with children) were not separate entities but rather two sides of the same coin. It was a place that valued the whole person, and I knew I wanted to be a part of it.

Support for Faculty With Children

My initial impressions were not misleading. Most of our faculty events are family friendly or scheduled at a time that is consistent with our child care schedules. Colleagues often ask about one another's kids, and it is not rare to see children on campus. This family-friendly climate made my decision to have a second baby while on the tenure track seem feasible. Indeed, I have had a positive experience so far.

For instance, shortly into my maternity leave, two colleagues invited my infant son and me to a nearby town for a morning writing session and walk by the creek. That was actually the first day since I had my son that I took out my laptop to work on an unfinished writing project.

More recently, I participated in a family-friendly overnight retreat for our faculty working group in Yosemite National Park. We worked during the day while the older children and nonacademic spouses were able to watch the younger children. Then we came together for family activities in the afternoon and evenings.

When the inclusion and support of parents and their children is purposeful, it increases both productivity and cohesion among faculty members. Ample research provides evidence that [paid leave is good for everyone](#) -- the children, parents and organizations. For instance, a report by President Obama's [Council of Economic Advisers](#) revealed that more than 90 percent of the employers surveyed that had implemented California's paid family-leave initiative reported either positive or null effects on profitability, turnover and morale.

It is important to note that the family-friendly climate on my campus is conditioned by relatively generous institutional parental-leave policies -- mothers and fathers on the faculty are able to receive relief from teaching and other modified duties after the birth or adoption of a child.

Limited Support for Grad Students With Children

Unfortunately, however, support of our graduate students is currently less institutionalized. My university has put in place a few policies that aid grad student parents, including designing buildings with lactation rooms and charging students at reduced rate for the on-campus day care.

But graduate student who are new parents are not released from their duties as teaching or research assistants, leaving faculty to make accommodations in the classroom or research teams on a (nonideal) case-by-case basis. In those scenarios I encourage faculty to be creative and empathetic.

I was put to the test in that regard at the start of my first semester of teaching. Shortly before classes began, I

received an email from a student informing me that she would miss the first few sessions of my graduate statistics class because she was scheduled to give birth in a nearby city. I took this opportunity to share my own experience as a mother and to work with her to jointly craft expectations and modifications for the class. Although I told her it would be beneficial to attend class as soon as she was able, I did not want to require her to “work” for at least six weeks. Therefore, I told her I would excuse her absences for those six weeks, give extended deadlines and accept email submissions of assignments, and forward her all my lecture slides.

In reality, she showed up to class by the third week and turned in assignments at a steady pace, but she appreciated the safety net I made available. As most mothers do, she showed strength and determination to pull through that semester. In the end, I still held her to the set standards but gave her a bit more flexibility in how and when she mastered the skills.

Making Universities Family Friendly for Everyone

Colleges and universities, as spaces known for shaping the future and creating change, should be at the forefront of implementing leave policies for faculty members, grad students and staff members. Change is needed not only at the structural level but also the ideological level. Academics must rid themselves of outdated gendered and racialized perceptions of working parents. Only then will there be more equity in graduate and faculty outcomes.

If you are wondering what you can do about creating space for academic babies, I encourage you first to look into [Do Babies Matter](#) as an important text that offers astounding statistics of the setbacks that parents face and also provides innovative solutions for institutions. Here are some additional tips for making one's department family friendly.

- Institute student leave policies that are applied consistently and equally to all students.
- Do not assume a student has chosen an alternative career or that they will drop out of grad school because they have children.
- Allow students to articulate their chosen career path and give them the tools to achieve success in whatever route they choose.
- When mentoring students, ask about their whole lives, children and family included.
- Discuss strategies for work-life balance.
- Ask students which positions work within their child care schedule.
- Include student parents on research jobs and publications; do not assume they do not have time.
- Plan departmentwide events that are family friendly. A noisy bar is not an ideal place for a child.
- Respect when a student declines an opportunity, but do not take that no as indefinite.
- Work with your institution to put in place affordable child care, lactation rooms, family health care subsidies and the like.

And for the grad student, if you have a child while in grad school, here are some tips for navigating your training as a parent.

- Decide the career path you want to take and make it clear to all parties involved.
- Ask for what you need. Need time to pump in between classes? Ask. Need to take time off from classes? Ask. Need additional research positions? Ask. Need to decrease research? Ask.
- Don't be afraid to say no. Your time is no longer only yours. Choose commitments wisely.
- Find an academic mother (or father) mentor. No one mentor can do it all for you. I sought out a woman who was a mother as a mentor at another university. Her advice was pertinent to my success and well-being.

- Schedule your time wisely; share your schedule with your family and your advisers so everyone can be on the same page.
- [Reject the idea of being a supermom](#) or superdad. Protect your sanity. Take breaks if needed.

Do you have other recommendations? Suggest them in the comments section below.