

Family Care Needs of Scientists: A Brief Analysis of a COACH-Sponsored Survey

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In spring 2012, COACH developed an internet based survey designed to find out more about how scientists combine family responsibilities and academic careers, the ways that their institutions address these issues, and their views on policies that could help address work-family balance. Links to the survey were sent to the COACH mailing list and posted on a number of blogs and listserves directed to women in the physical sciences. We focused on mailing lists that primarily attract women and on issues that women face, both because of their traditional responsibilities regarding family care and to limit the scope of the survey. Over the next year more than 300 people responded to the survey.² While the sample cannot be considered probabilistic, it does provide a useful snapshot of views and concerns in this area, undoubtedly over-representing those with experience and concern with these areas.

The remainder of this short report focusses on four areas: 1) characteristics of the respondents; 2) how family responsibilities, with respect to both child care and adult care, have affected their participation in professional meetings and conferences; 3) reports of how their institutions currently handle issues related to work-family balance and responsibilities; and 4) their views regarding policy actions that would be helpful and appropriate to address these issues. A complete listing of the responses to each question and the open-ended comments is available on the COACH website.

Characteristics of the Sample

The majority of the respondents (82%) were parents, and most of the remainder (14% of the total) hoped to have children in the future. Those who were parents reported having from one to four children (average = 1.8, which is very similar to the total fertility rate for American women). Age of their youngest child ranged from early infancy to 42 years, but the majority of the respondents had pre-schoolers. One fourth of the sample had a child less than two years of age, over half had at least one child 3 years of age or younger, and several were expecting another baby. Less than ten percent reported that their youngest child was 18 or older and even fewer reported that their youngest child was a teenager.³ Over 90 percent of the respondents reported that they shared childcare duties with a partner or family member. Over 90 percent of the respondents were women, but there were no significant gender differences in these family characteristics (e.g. the men who responded also primarily had young children, were partnered, etc.).

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² As of May 2, 2013, 320 had started the survey, and 259 (81%) completed it (answered through the last question).

³ Some of the respondents with older children mentioned grandchildren in describing family responsibilities.

Over one fourth (78%) of the respondents reported that they “personally provide care for parents or adult relatives on an ongoing basis” or had done so in the past. Such responses were significantly more common for those with older children (over a third of those with children over 6 responded yes, compared to only six percent of those with children under three). A substantial number of the respondents anticipated that adult care would be an issue for their career activities in the next five years, including almost three-fifths of the respondents with children over six, over half of the respondents with children between three and five years of age, and a third of those with toddlers or younger children. (Again, this difference was statistically significant.) Women were slightly more likely than men to report currently providing elder care, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Two-thirds of the respondents were employed by research 1 or 2 universities. About three-fifths of the respondents were in biology, chemistry, or geology-related departments, while the remaining respondents were in a wide variety of other science related fields. As would be expected given the age of their children, the majority of the respondents were in early career stages. Over a third were untenured assistant professors, and just slightly fewer were at the associate rank. Only sixteen percent were at the rank of full, and the rest were in graduate school (3%), post-doctoral positions (6%), or held adjunct or non-tenure track posts (8%). Even though most were relatively junior in rank, almost half (44%) of the respondents reported holding leadership positions in their department or institution. Over four-fifths of these respondents had been committee chairs, and more than 40 percent had been a department or institute head. There were no gender differences in type of institution, career stage or in holding a leadership post.

Conference Participation and Family Responsibilities

The respondents were asked about the ways in which responsibilities related to both child care and adult care had affected their decisions to attend professional meetings or conferences.

Child Care Responsibilities

The respondents were asked how they handled childcare when they went to conferences and meetings away from home. The most common option for children of all ages was leaving them with care at home, followed by bringing the children to the meeting with another adult who could provide care. Substantially fewer respondents reported bringing the children to the meeting and using either conference provided childcare or other childcare (See Table 1). All of the options were reported to be used by parents of children in all the age ranges. (The higher percentages for infants and preschoolers shown in Table 1 are probably a reflection of the overrepresentation of parents with children of these ages.)

Close to half of the parents (46%) reported having higher than normal childcare costs while participating in conferences or meetings. Most often, the additional costs came from additional daytime care (noted by 76%), followed by additional evening care (cited by 47% of respondents), transportation (45%), and weekend and overnight care (cited by 37% and 25% respectively). Estimates of the additional cost per day ranged from ten to several hundred dollars, with an average around \$140.⁴

⁴ Readers are cautioned that this estimate may be unreliable, for it is simply a self-report. Some respondents included the transportation costs for the extra caretaker and/or the child, while others did not; some included the

Ninety percent of the respondents indicated that they had not gone to a conference or meeting because of their parental responsibilities, and many respondents provided explanations of their answers.⁵ The most common response (given by about three-fourths of the respondents) was that attending conferences or meetings, especially when children were young, produced too much stress to the family and/or children. One fourth of the respondents specifically mentioned the cost involved in travel for children (if they went to the conference) and/or for additional child care; and slightly fewer noted concerns about the quality of child care at conferences and/or that there was no child care available at a conference. (The actual comments and reasons are available in the accompanying pdf of survey results and should be perused by those who are interested in greater detail.)

Adult Care Responsibilities

Of the respondents who reported providing care for adult relatives (a little more than one fifth of the sample), almost half (46%) noted that they had not participated in a conference or meeting because of these responsibilities. Of those who provided additional details regarding their decision, few cited cost as a factor. The vast majority noted emotional ties and feelings of responsibility for their parents or, in one occasion, a terminally ill spouse. While some noted increased freedom to opt out of conferences as their careers were well established, others noted a lack of understanding from their institution of these familial demands. One respondent also explicitly commented on the dual responsibilities that she was facing with caring for aging parents and teenage children. (Again, the verbatim comments are in the pdf of survey results.)

Institutional Responses to Family Responsibilities

The respondents were asked to provide information on the support that their institution provided for faculty, post-docs, and graduate students in handling childcare responsibilities. Responses are summarized in Table 2, with the most commonly mentioned policies listed at the top of each section. The first column of numbers is the percentage of those saying that a policy exists (using the total number saying yes or no as the base), and the second column of numbers is the percentage of the total group that were unsure about the presence of a policy.

The first panel of Table 2 describes policies that support faculty members. In general, the most common supports tend to be those that do not involve financial expenditures or extensive bureaucratic supports, including extension of the tenure clock for new parents, flexibility in hours, and unpaid paternity leave, reported by two thirds to four-fifths of the respondents. Slightly more than half reported the presence of paid maternity leave. Fewer reported quality childcare on campus (43%) or the presence of paid paternity leave (40%). Only a third reported support for faculty during life transitions (37%); about one fourth (23%) reported the presence of written policies prohibiting discrimination against parents, and only 5% reported the presence of financial support for conference attendance. The lack of knowledge about policies is striking, with more than two-fifths of the respondents unsure about policies related to written policies regarding discrimination, extension of the tenure clock for new fathers, and unpaid paternity

number of days of care required while others did not. Thus this value should be seen as only an approximation, at best. The more important point is that a substantial number of parents incurred these costs.

⁵ The categorizations were developed by the author and the percentages are based on surveys obtained through December of 2012, about two-thirds of the total sample. Responses could fall into more than one category.

leave. A third or more were unsure about policies for the extension of the tenure clock for new adoptive mothers and support during life transitions.

The second panel of Table 2 reports policies related to post-doctoral fellows, and the third panel reports on policies related to graduate students. The respondents were even less sure of policies in these areas than for those related to faculty. Yet it also appears that post docs and graduate students have many fewer childcare related supports than faculty members. For instance, apart from eligibility for sick leave, none of the policy options listed was reported by more than half of the respondents in the queries related to postdocs. None of the policy options listed was reported as available for graduate students by more than half of the respondents. One could speculate that the absence of such policy supports for post-docs and graduate students reflects their often tenuous role in the academy and the fact that they often lack the legal protections generally provided to employees, such as faculty.

Table 3 summarizes the policy supports provided to faculty for care to adult family members. The lack of knowledge regarding such policies is again striking, with almost one half or more of the respondents not knowing about the presence of any of the policies listed. The most common policies reported were, as with those related to childcare, those that do not involve financial expenditures, with unpaid leave and flexibility in hours and meetings reported by close to three fourths or more of the respondents. In contrast to results regarding policies related to child care, only a little more than a third of the respondents reported the availability of an extension of the tenure clock for adult care. Even fewer reported the availability of paid leave for adult care responsibilities. Very few reported written policies prohibiting discrimination against those who provide care to aging family members (13%) or (2%) financial support for help with adult care for conference attendance (2%).

When policies are not written or documented in other ways, it is possible that they could fluctuate as administrative responsibilities change from one person to another. To assess this variability, the respondents were asked “how much variability have you noticed in support for childcare and family responsibilities from one department chair to another?” Over one third responded that there was “great variability” and an additional 42 percent reported some variability. Less than a quarter reported little or no variability in practices.

Desired Policy Changes

The respondents were asked to rate the importance of a variety of policies and programs for promoting the career advancement of women in scientific fields. There was very strong support for institutionalized and financial support for new mothers from both departments and funding agencies. Ninety percent or more of the respondents rated three of the policies listed in the survey as important or very important: no-cost extensions to grants for PIs who are new mothers, supplements to grants to cover childcare expenses at professional meetings, and departments adopting family friendly policies. Just slightly fewer (87% of respondents) gave a very important or important score to 3 months paid leave for post-docs and for graduate students who become new mothers; and three fourths gave this rating to providing 3 months of unpaid leave for post-docs who were new mothers as important. Similar strong support was voiced for the provision of grant supplements and institutional funds to post-docs and graduate students who were new mothers. There were no differences by gender in these responses. However, respondents who

were tenured and who reported having held leadership posts tended to express slightly less support for some of these policies.

It is important, of course, to have some indication of the potential cost of these policies. Given the low birthrate of the respondents, the costs for maternity leaves would generally occur only once or twice during parents' careers and thus are nonrecurring.⁶ Childcare costs, however, are different. To estimate the cost of supplements to grants to cover the extra costs of childcare necessary for conference or meeting attendance, respondents were asked how frequently they would use such funds when their children were in different age ranges. As shown in Table 4, the most common response, for children through the pre-teen years, was once a year, followed by several times a year. Notably one-fourth of the parents of infants indicated they would never use such care (reflecting no doubt the stress many reported in leaving and traveling with children at that age). Even more indicated they would never use such supplements when their children were pre-teens and teenagers.

Many of the respondents provided additional thoughts on changes that their institution could make to help faculty members, post-docs and graduate students better balance their work and family obligations. Many of the comments were detailed and thoughtful. I tried to categorize them very roughly into the following categories: 1) the need to develop flexible policies and attitudes that support family-work balance; 2) programs that would require monetary support including paid parental and/or family care leaves as well as additional technical support; 3) making on-campus childcare more accessible and affordable, including programs for infants; and 4) developing, coordinating, and/or clarifying policies regarding support to parents and families. Table 5 summarizes the percentage of respondents who gave answers falling into each of these categories as of the end of December, 2012. (Comments could fall into more than one category.) Developing policies and attitudes that support more flexibility in work life was mentioned by over one-half of the respondents to the query about faculty and two-fifths of the respondents to the query about graduate students. About a third of the respondents to each question explicitly mentioned changes that would require monetary support, usually paid parental leave. From a fifth (for responses to the post-doc query) to about one third of the respondents noted the importance of affordable and accessible childcare, especially the need for spots for infants. A quarter mentioned the importance of coordinating and clarifying policies related to faculty and post-docs. Many of the comments regarding post-docs noted the need to clarify their position within the institution. Readers interested in the more detailed responses and all of the responses that were obtained throughout the life of the survey are encouraged to read the full list of replies.

Many respondents also provided additional thoughts on changes that funding agencies could make to help faculty members, post-docs, and graduate students combine their family and career obligations (See Table 6 for a summary of responses obtained through December, 2012.). Over half of the respondents mentioned more flexible application and contract provisions, most often a greater use of no-cost extensions. Almost as many respondents also mentioned family related funding options, with funds for child care at conferences and for field work frequently

⁶ Given what we know about fertility rates for highly educated women and fertility rates in countries with strong policies of family support, there is no reason to expect that implementing these policies would lead to a "glut" of newborns or sharply increased fertility. The cross-cultural literature suggests that the likely outcome would be healthier and happier parents and children and that their parents would then be more productive.

mentioned. A number of people had very specific policy suggestions regarding both the application process and the workings of funding agencies. Only two respondents, as of December, 2012, specifically stated that they did not believe that developing policies in this area was an appropriate role for funding agencies. Again, much more detail can be obtained by perusing the individual comments.

Concluding Thoughts

It is important to note the limits of this survey and analysis. The sample was self-selected and thus we cannot provide accurate generalizations to the population. It no doubt over-represents, to a large extent, those with strong feelings regarding the area and with current or recent experiences with child and family care. Thus, the responses are probably indicative of the needs and concerns of those most directly involved with the issue. They do not, however, include information about many other segments of the academy and, thus, can't provide an indication of the extent of opposition to the policies examined.⁷ A survey using a representative sample would be important in getting such a broader view.

In addition the analysis was relatively "quick and dirty." While I rechecked results and ran very simple statistical tests to compare results across groups, I did not have time to link the data on open ended responses to demographic/career characteristics or to do any type of multivariate analysis. In addition, I was the only one who coded the open-ended responses and a more thorough analysis would involve a cross-check of the categorizations. More extensive analyses could, of course, be performed in the future if desired.

Several aspects of the results should, perhaps, be highlighted and can serve as a summary.

- Parents use a wide variety of ways of obtaining childcare when attending professional meetings.
- A substantial proportion of the parents had higher than normal childcare costs while participating in professional meetings.
- Many have restricted their attendance at professional meetings and conferences because of childcare responsibilities.
- Reasons for these restrictions involve concerns about stress to the family and children, but also the cost involved in getting alternative means of care and high quality care.
- Of those who provide adult care for relatives almost half have not participated in a conference or meeting because of these responsibilities.
- Respondents reported a wide variety of institutional policies that support family members, but those that were of little cost to the institution (monetarily or bureaucratically) were more common.
- Institutional policies that support post-docs and graduate students were less common than those that support faculty.
- Respondents were often unsure of the presence of family support policies at their institutions and reported that support for children and family responsibilities varied from one department chair to another.

⁷ The lower level of support for some policies from those who have held leadership positions can perhaps indicate that such feelings may not be uncommon and should be anticipated.

- There was strong support for institutionalized support for family responsibilities from departments and funding agencies.
- Suggestions from respondents regarding changes within their institutions included those that could promote more flexible policies and procedures, stable and well supported leave policies, accessible and affordable childcare, and clear and consistent policies that were widely disseminated.
- Suggestions regarding changes for funding agencies included alterations to application procedures and contract provisions, providing financial support for childcare needs, and specific changes to procedures and policies.

Table 1

Ways that Respondents Handled Childcare When Going to Conferences and Meetings Away from Home by Age of Child

	<u>Infant</u>	<u>Presch.</u>	<u>Elemen. School</u>	<u>Pre- Teen</u>	<u>Teenage</u>	<u>Count</u>
I left my children with care at home	77.6	78.1	56.7	23.8	21.0	210
I brought my children with me and used conference provided childcare	53.6	39.3	32.1	7.1	3.6	28
I brought the children and another adult with me, and the other adult provided childcare	78.2	56.6	29.3	13.5	3.8	133
I brought the children with me and found other means of childcare.	67.4	32.6	28.3	13.0	15.2	46

Note: Percentages are calculated using the number of responses for each option (the count column) as the base. For instance, 77,6% of thr 210 people who indicated that they left their children with care at home did so when their children were infants, 78.1% did so when their children were preschoolers, etc.

Table 2

Availability of Institutional Childcare Related Policies that Support Families

<i>Policies that Support Faculty</i>		
	<u>% Yes</u>	<u>% Unsure</u>
Extension of the tenure clock for child bearing mothers	84.4	21.6
Extension of the tenure clock for new adoptive mothers	80.1	36.8
Flexibility in work hours/meetings/etc. for parental responsibilities	78.3	14.4
Unpaid paternity leave	75.3	41.8
Extension of the tenure clock for new fathers (biological or via adoption)	67.8	44.8
Paid maternity leave (apart from sick leave or disability)	52.8	13.7
Quality childcare on campus	42.9	5.1
Paid paternity leave (apart from sick leave or disability)	39.8	19.8
Support during life transitions: release time from teaching, research personnel (such as graduate students or postdoctoral associates), or lab equipment	33.2	32.9
Written policies prohibiting discrimination against faculty who are parents	22.6	45.8
Financial support for child care while attending meetings or conferences away from home	4.9	13.5
<i>Policies that Support Post-Doctoral Fellows</i>		
Sick leave or disability for which post-docs are eligible	54.8	53.2
Quality child care on campus	45.2	30.2
Unpaid paternity leave	37.3	62.4
Alternative assignments during pregnancy	27.6	60.6
Paid maternity leave (apart from sick leave or disability)	16.2	47.1
Written policies prohibiting discrimination against post-doctoral fellows who are parents	16.1	57.9
Paid paternity leave (apart from sick leave or disability)	9.6	48.6
Financial support for child care while attending meetings or conferences away from home	2.1	36.8
<i>Policies that Support Graduate Students</i>		
Quality childcare on campus	42.3	21.9
Alternative assignments during pregnancy	27.5	57.5
Guarantees of continued support during pregnancy and after giving birth	15.6	55.3
Written policies prohibiting discrimination against graduate students who are parents	15.2	51.2
Financial support for childcare while attending meetings or conferences away from home	0.7	30.2

Note: Percentage of respondents saying yes are based on those who answered yes or no, omitting those that were unsure.

Table 3

Policies Supporting Faculty for Adult Care Responsibilities

	<u>% Yes</u>	<u>% Unsure</u>
Unpaid leave for adult care responsibilities	84.9	53.3
Flexibility in hours/meetings/etc. for adult care responsibilities	72.1	51.6
Extension of tenure clock for adult care	36.6	79.4
Paid leave for adult care responsibilities	30.9	54.6
Written policies prohibiting discrimination against those who provide care to aging family members	12.6	77.2
Financial support for help with adult care while attending meetings or conferences away from home	1.5	45.1

Note: Percentage of respondents saying yes are based on those who answered yes or no, omitting those that were unsure.

Table 4

How Often Respondents Would Use Supplemental Grant Funds for Childcare Needed for Conference Attendance

<u>If my child were</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Once a Year</u>	<u>Several Times a Year</u>
an infant	20.6%	50.5%	28.9%
a preschooler	10.2%	51.4%	38.4%
elementary school aged	17.2%	47.0%	35.8%
a pre-teen	34.0%	38.6%	27.4%
a teenager	55.5%	22.5%	22.0%

Note: The full question was worded, "If a supplement were available to cover the extra costs of childcare necessary for conference or committee attendance, how often do you think you would use the funds? The question was answered by 145 respondents and the percentages all used this number as the base.

Table 5

Ways in Which Institutions Could Help Faculty, Post-Docs, and Graduate Students Better Balance Work and Family Obligations

	<u>More Flexible Attitudes and Policies</u>	<u>Financial Support for Leaves and Assistance</u>	<u>Affordable and Accessible Childcare</u>	<u>Coordinating and clarifying policies</u>
Faculty Members	54.4%	30.4%	36.8%	26.4%
Post-Docs	25.0%	33.8%	21.3%	25.0%
Graduate Students	41.3%	33.3%	30.7%	17.3%

Of the 135 people who responded to the query about faculty as of December, 2012, 3 said they had no opinion, 6 said that their institution was already doing well in this area, and 1 said that current legal protections were sufficient. Percentages for responses regarding institutional changes for faculty are based on the remaining 125 respondents. Of the 101 people who responded to the query about postdocs, 21 had no opinion, usually because they did not have post-docs at their institution or because they did not want to repeat comments. Percentages for responses regarding institutional changes for postdocs are based on the remaining 80 respondents. Of the 98 people who responded to the query about graduate students, 23 had no opinion, usually because they did not have graduate students at their institution or because they did not want to repeat comments. Percentages for responses regarding institutional changes for graduate students are based on the remaining 75 respondents. Categories reflect coding of open-ended responses.

Table 6

Ways in Which Agencies Could Help Faculty, Post-Docs, and Graduate Students Better Balance Work and Family Obligations

	<u>More Flexible Applications and Contracts</u>	<u>Family Related Funding Options</u>	<u>Specific Policy Suggestions</u>
Faculty Members	53.7%	47.4%	33.7%
Post-Docs	52.5%	54.2%	28.8%
Graduate Students	54.2%	54.2%	20.8%

Of the 103 people who responded to the query about faculty as of December, 2012, 8 said they were unsure or had an unrelated comment. Percentages for responses regarding agency changes for faculty are based on the remaining 95 respondents. Of the 74 people who responded to the query about postdocs, 14 had no opinion, usually because they did not have post-docs at their institution or because they did not want to repeat comments, and one said it was not the agency's responsibility. Percentages for responses regarding institutional changes for postdocs are based on the remaining 59 respondents. Of the 67 people who responded to the query about graduate students, 17 had no opinion, usually because they did not have graduate students at their institution or because they did not want to repeat comments; and two indicated it was not the agency's responsibility. Percentages for responses regarding institutional changes for graduate students are based on the remaining 48 respondents. Categories are groupings based on the content of the open-ended responses