Deadlines and diapers: being an academic dad

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Fatherhood represents the most emotionally stirring and challenging but ultimately satisfying experience most men will undergo. Once you have exhausted (pun intended) the brief paternity leave typically available, a demanding situation quickly arises where the dual roles of 'academic' and 'father' require to be balanced.

As an academic dad with a newborn baby in the house, you may have concerns over the potential detrimental impact on your career. Clearly, there will be less time available in the evenings and at weekends for lecture preparation, manuscript writing or to pursue the ever-elusive research grant funding. What will this mean for your status at work, how colleagues perceive you or your chances of promotion?

And as a father with a workload equal to that 'pre-child', you will undoubtedly be anxious about ensuring you play an active role in raising your child within the limited time available outside of work. How will you be able to best support your child and your partner? Perhaps as a single father you are concerned with who will support you? Will you be able to cope with the different daily tasks of feeding, changing nappies and settling the child through the night, while conscious of the fact you have a deadline for the next day?

However, this chef has learned in the process that priorities in life change. Having

that first-author paper published, or that grant application submitted, suddenly becomes less significant and satisfying than being able to make it home for bath time or seeing your new son or daughter smile for the first time. Your family is the priority, so keep that in your mind as you continue to work hard as an academic dad.

Ingredients

- One newborn baby (adorable, but potentially cranky and unsettled). In recipe terms, this ingredient is the equivalent of chilli peppers – more than one can be added, but proceed with caution!
- One line manager or head of institute – an essential ingredient, but one where the quality may be variable.
- Supportive colleagues.
- University policy documents related to family leave.

Method

1. Get prepared! Review your institute's family leave-related working policies and discuss with a member of Human Resources. The recent introduction of policies for shared parental leave, flexible working and time-off for dependants provide greater opportunities for fathers to spend time with, and give support to, their families at home.

2. Discuss your pending new arrival with your line manager. Statistics would suggest that although the number of hours worked by fathers has decreased in recent years (Aldrich et al., 2016), many still work far in excess of their contracted hours. Consider your workload model, reduce where (if) possible, and agree your strategic priorities for the next 12 months. Take a reality check. You will be combating tiredness and may have several unplanned interruptions from work for hospital visits or trips home. Recognise that it will take longer to get to tasks and then to complete them, as this chef can testify to from drafting this recipe! Learn to say NO to those additional jobs that always seem to emerge and expand your To Do list.
3. Then, discuss with colleagues, many of whom will have children of their own and will be understanding of your situation. Within your teaching team, and research collaborations, identify where and when your input is required and plan accordingly. You will need to implement strict time management but things will invariably slip! Make sure you keep colleagues updated when this happens.
4. A change of attitude will be required. You may need to remove any pride of being perceived as 'a hard worker' within your department. Arriving early for work,

Warning

It is likely, even after following this recipe, that becoming a father will have a significant impact on every other aspect of your life. Not just on your academic work, but also on your social life, activities and hobbies. You might not be able to see friends at the pub every weekend or train for that marathon. Be under no illusions, having children is hard; balancing fatherhood and academic life can be demanding to say the least. If you are part of an 'academic pair' then this can be even more challenging (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005).

According to the University of Edinburgh's shared parental leave policy, you and your partner can share up to 50 weeks' leave and up to 37 weeks' statutory pay. http://www.docs.csg.ed.ac.uk/HumanResources/Policies/SPL_Key_Facts_Father_Partner.pdf

staying late and taking marking home, all of which may once have been aspects of a typical working day, may no longer be possible. Instead, your academic work ethic will need to be shared with your new role in the home as a father.

5. In comparison with other professions, academia offers dads a degree of flexibility in regard to their working schedules. Take advantage of this and find a pattern of working that best suits your family. For this chef it was to start work early, ensuring a substantial period in the evening was available for family time and sharing household duties.
6. The seemingly all-consuming roles of father and academic often take precedence over our other role as husband/partner. Thus, an often-neglected part of this recipe is to ensure quality time is spent with your wife or partner. If possible, arrange a babysitter, rope in the relatives for help and enjoy some time as a couple doing things you did before you became a family.

Cook's tip

Despite this being a difficult recipe to master, always be aware that others may be working on a much more demanding recipe. For example, research shows that the impact on academic mums is far greater than on academic dads (Gaio Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005). Also, marking first-year undergraduate assignments is a breeze in comparison to your partner dealing with a newborn 24/7!

Some schools, such as the Schools of Molecular, Genetic and Population Health Sciences, and Clinical Sciences, delay the Chancellor's Fellow review to take account of parental leave, so you could discuss this or similar arrangements in advance with your line manager.