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<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i39/39b00501.htm>**OBSERVER****An Immodest Proposal: Have Children in Graduate School**

By KATHRYN LYNCH

I have an immodest proposal for academic women: If you have the desire and a willing partner, don't be afraid to have children while you are in graduate school.

Combining parenthood and professional life is particularly difficult for academic women. That is a truism I have heard from colleagues, encountered in the pages of *The Chronicle* and other publications, and even repeated myself to administrators. But for a long time, I resisted it in my heart. It didn't square with my own experience or with the motivations that led me to an academic career.

I wanted marriage and children, yet I also wanted to do important work and to use my mind in doing it. I didn't want to have to compromise in either area, and the flexibility of a college teacher's schedule looked to me like one of the best ways to achieve an integrated professional and personal life. Indeed, it turned out to be the right choice for me. I have three thriving children; a long, solid marriage (28 years); and a steady, satisfying career as a writer and teacher. There are scholars in my field more successful than I, but I have no illusions that my limitations have been caused by my children or my marriage.

My personal satisfaction has occasionally turned to smugness. I confess to having felt a wee bit judgmental, a tad impatient with the fretful sense of entitlement displayed by parents slightly younger than I am, and with their seemingly exaggerated struggles to carry off what by now feels like second nature to me.

But some surprising statistics summarized in Sylvia Ann Hewlett's controversial book *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* (Talk Miramax Books, 2002) have made me rethink my position. I don't want to get into the aspects of the book that have been polarizing the feminist movement -- whether, for example, Hewlett demeans women who have chosen not to have children. What I'm interested in are the implications of her research for academics who do want a family.

The full results of Hewlett's scientifically conducted survey of high-achieving women are available through the National Parenting Association (see <http://www.parentsunite.org>). Her data suggest that women are less likely than men to have it all -- profession, spouse, and children -- and that women in academe have more difficulty combining family and professional life than women in business, law, or medicine. Men in academe, however, are more likely than men in other fields to be married and have children. What is it about our profession that exaggerates the gender gap?

One chilling fact to which Hewlett returns again and again, and which has recently been reinforced by biological research, is that a woman's fertility begins to decline as early as age 27, only to fall off dramatically after age 35. Professional women who do have children, according to Hewlett's data, tend to have them early.

Perhaps it is the unforgiving trajectory of the academic career path that is responsible for the fact that female professors lag behind women in other professions in their ability to integrate work and family.

That surmise led last fall to the recommendation by the American Association of University Professors that colleges add as many as two years to the tenure clock for new parents. Yet, in the report that made that recommendation, the AAUP offered another startling statistic: The median age for receipt of the Ph.D. is 34. In other words, by the time a woman even begins to travel along the tenure track, she has already entered a period of declining fertility. While the option of slowing the tenure clock down is certainly welcome, it will hardly solve all the problems of timing faced by women in academe.

Thus, my immodest proposal.

The years a woman spends in graduate school are her most fertile years. Graduate school may also be an academic's most flexible period, a time when she can take a break without leaving a suspicious gap in her résumé. And in a tight job market, she may find advantages to taking a little longer to finish her dissertation.

That brings me back to my own experience. Could it be that some of my own success in balancing work and family came not from hard work, ability, or even luck, but from good timing? Two of my children were born while I was a graduate student -- one at the end of my second year, as I was nearing completion of my course work, and one when I was beginning to write my dissertation.

For me, having babies in graduate school meant that I got more help from my husband than I could have expected later, and that he was able to spend more time with our children when they were infants. As a law student, he was hardly a man of leisure -- but he had less flexibility later, as an associate at a law firm.

In retrospect, I believe that my impetuous decision to start having children in my mid-20s -- a choice that seemed inexplicable, possibly even insane, to everyone around me (and sometimes even to me) -- was at least partly responsible for putting me where I am now.

I know that there are good reasons to wait. Day care costs a lot of money; I could not afford full-time care until after graduate school. And graduate schools are not supportive of motherhood. To use a mixed metaphor, a pregnant belly is not the most impressive face to present to a prospective adviser.

I still bristle when I remember that one of my advisers referred to one two-year period as my slump. During that time, I had a baby, began my first teaching as a graduate instructor, learned Latin and passed an exam in the language, taught part-time at a local high school to make some extra money, and began studying for my oral comprehensive exam. What my adviser really meant was that he hadn't seen much of me in the hall.

Such incomprehension is enraging, but in the long run it can be overcome more easily than a hostile tenure committee or a loudly ticking biological clock.

Perhaps a more common reason for waiting involves less tangible motives. Many young women wonder if they are really ready to be parents. It seems like a feminist commonplace that women in their 30s are more mature and thus make better mothers than younger women. But I don't agree. One way to grow up is to take on the joy and responsibility of parenthood. My children taught me focus and perspective; they made me an adult, and I'm forever grateful that I didn't have to wait until my 30s for that.

One of the great illusions of youth is that life is always about to start -- in a month or a decade. For complicated reasons, many far beyond their control, graduate students can spin for years in a hazy orbit of delayed gratification and responsibility. But the fantasy that real life waits just around the next bend is

especially dangerous for young women. Reproductively, the future is here now.

In fact, time may already be running out.

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