

## Singing the Grad-School Baby Blues

By JOAN C. WILLIAMS

### FIRST PERSON

Academics share their personal experiences

American academics have begun to recognize the "maternal wall" in their profession. The path-breaking work of [Mary Ann Mason](#), dean of the graduate division at the University of California at Berkeley, has shown that academic women who have babies within five years of receiving their Ph.D.'s are much less likely to get tenure than women without children or than men, with or without children. Robert W. Drago's Faculty and Families Project at Pennsylvania State University has shown that professors often defer having children because they fear it will be held against them in the hiring or tenure processes.

But what about women who have children in graduate school? How do they fare?

One of the many graduate students I spoke with in my work on the topic put it this way: "The message is: This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. You are at a great university; don't let your personal life get in the way."

That came from a man, but I heard many similar remarks from men and women alike:

- "The feeling is that children are an optional accessory you can think about having once you're tenured."
- "One professor told us all that you should not have kids if you want to get tenure."
- "If you have a child, you are made to believe that you don't have a place here."

In this column, I'd like to look at how doctoral students who decide to have children in graduate school are affected by the decision. In my next column, I'll discuss what can and should be done about those problems.

Are the students' fears legitimate? In fact, Drago found that graduate students with children are less likely to end up at research universities. "There is definitely a penalty," he concluded.

The issue has come up repeatedly in a project at Michigan State University that helps

graduate students resolve conflicts with faculty members. John Beck, a professor of labor relations there, and Karen Klomprens, dean of the graduate school, have developed videos presenting some common scenarios. In one, a graduate student who is a single parent cancels a discussion session because of a sick child. Her professor confronts her, pointing out that this is the third time she has canceled, and tells her that if things do not improve she may not be assigned a section next semester.

In another scenario, a male graduate student with a wife and daughter tells his professor that he is overburdened by classes, research, and his residence-hall job. When the professor suggests he quit the job, the student responds: "Well, they gave me money, and you didn't."

"If you get together a group of grad students and start talking about graduate school," said Beck, "these things will come up." When it comes to family matters, he said, it's important for students to reach early and explicit understandings with their faculty advisers.

How? I spoke with a male student (on a different campus) who, before accepting an admissions offer, told his adviser-to-be: "I'll be honest. I'm married, and I have children. You can't expect me to keep the same kind of working hours as an unmarried student who just finished college. But I am determined to be both a good student and a good parent." His adviser has been extremely supportive, even suggesting at one point, "I know you are ambitious, but you can't have three different projects for your dissertation if you want to get out of here in five years."

Some women are reluctant to be that upfront. As one told me, "When I met a well-known scholar of gender at an after-school activity, she said, 'Why are you here?' When I told her I was picking up my daughter, she was astonished: 'I can't believe you're a mother,' she said. 'We're really a family-friendly department: Why don't you bring your kids around?' I pointed out that the people who brought their kids were faculty."

Many graduate-student mothers feel the need to remain "in the closet." One mother took her cues from seeing a faculty member denied tenure after she had a baby. "When a faculty member is treated that way, *I'm* certainly not going to be treated better."

While several students expressed gratitude toward supportive advisers, negative stories abound: a mother who was asked to leave her graduate program after completing her master's, despite her desire to continue and her outstanding performance up to that time; a student who received a chilly response after asking to be excused from a research trip because it coincided with his wife's due date. Another woman described how she had repeatedly received unsigned articles in her mailbox with statistics on the future of women with children; "I can only assume where they came from. ... The message was that I was destined to fail."

Not only professors, but also fellow graduate students sometimes contribute to the chilly

climate for grad-student parents.

In assigning graduate-student housing, some institutions, such as Berkeley, give families with children preference over others, without apparent controversy. On other campuses, however, conflicts arise over whether it is fair to give families with children an edge. "I'm not here to subsidize your child's living situation' -- people actually say that," said one student.

Why have kids while in graduate school then? Some students have children before they decide on graduate school. Many more are concerned about encountering fertility problems later, given that many professors don't get tenure until they are nearly 40. One woman, who was determined to have children at the "right time," asked many different people. Everyone had a different answer. "I got so confused I threw caution to the wind," she said. "I decided that no time is a good time, and if I get pregnant, we'll have the baby."

Until you get tenure, no time is ever the "right" time to reproduce, unless, of course, you are married to a spouse who takes on total responsibility for children and household. But it's a new millennium. Aren't we supposed to have gone beyond workplaces designed for the 1950s family?

One graduate student with children describes how she operates: "I basically act like I don't have kids. I take on extra committee work. I volunteer for all these things." Why? "I want people to see that being a mother has nothing to do with my performance. And I want other women with kids to get admitted here after me."

After having a baby, another mother said, "I guess I feel like I have to work harder: 'Face time' has become more important."

Even when your adviser cooperates, you may run into resistance further up the hierarchy. One grad student worked out a part-time schedule with her adviser, so that she would be paid as an hourly employee for a 20-hour week. An administrator vetoed it: "The message was that it had to be all or nothing," the student said, even though the money would have come from" the adviser's grant, not from the university.

Another thorny issue for graduate students with dependents is health insurance. The health clinics that universities offer for students typically don't treat dependents. Graduate students working on an annual stipend of \$20,000 can't afford to pay \$4,000 for health insurance for their families. Many turn to state-subsidized health insurance and federal programs like WIC, the Agriculture Department's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, which provides free formula and food for nursing mothers).

"It's a difficult problem," Mason notes, "because the insurance is staggeringly expensive." One simple, logical approach used at Berkeley is to have the financial needs

of student parents reflected in their financial-aid packages.

Universities increasingly have accepted nontraditional students, including women and older students, into their graduate programs. But many institutions simply aren't prepared to deal with the fact that those students have families. And those families need affordable health insurance, preference in family housing, the flexibility to take time off for childbirth, and access to part-time schedules.

They also need an end to negative comments that some see as harassment and discrimination. Now that work/family issues are on the radar screen for faculty members, graduate students with families should not be left singing the baby blues.

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