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Women Who Have Children Early in Careers Hurt Their Chances to Achieve Tenure, Report Finds

By THOMAS BARTLETT

Women who have children early in their academic careers hurt their chances to achieve tenure, according to a new report.

The authors of "Do Babies Matter: The Effect of Family Formation on the Life Long Careers of Women" said colleges should do more to help female graduate students and tenure-track professors who start families. "We need to face these facts very early on and talk about what the real work/family issues are," said Mary Ann Mason, dean of the graduate division at the University of California at Berkeley, who wrote the report with Marc Goulden, a research analyst at the university.

The problems women with children face cut across disciplinary boundaries. The report found that women who had at least one child before completing five years of post-Ph.D. work were 24 percent less likely in the sciences and 20 percent less likely in the humanities to achieve tenure than men who became fathers during that time. Women who waited to become mothers until later in their careers, or did not have children at all, were more likely to get tenure.

For men, however, it was a different story. Those who became fathers during the first five years of their careers were actually more likely to achieve tenure than men who did not.

Also, a majority of women who achieve tenure in the humanities have not had children in the household -- 62 percent. The number was 50 percent for women in sciences.

The trend remained consistent even at different types of institutions. "The early baby gap is evident at large, research universities as well as small, liberal arts colleges," Ms. Mason said in an interview.

The report suggests several ways in which colleges could help women in academe who have children, including:

- Providing mentors for graduate and postdoctoral students specifically to focus on family/career conflicts.
- Stopping the tenure clock for childbirth and caring for a young child.
- Creating faculty support groups for family issues.
- Accommodating couples in which both partners work in academe.

- Providing a part-time tenure track with "re-entry rights" and discounting "resume gaps" for candidates who have been inactive for a few years because they had children.

The report used data from the Survey of Doctorate Recipients, conducted by the National Science Foundation, from 1973 to 1999.

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