

It takes a village

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I found out I was pregnant one week after landing my first faculty position at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland. After the initial excitement, reality set in: I would be launching my own lab right when my baby was due.

At first this seemed impossible. But I managed to set up my lab by day and my nursery by night. Within seven months, I had hired Ph.D. students, postdoctoral fellows — and a nanny.

Many people see having children as a major obstacle to a woman's career. I can attest that it's not easy to balance lab life with family life. But with the right support, it's possible, even enjoyable.

I spent four months at home after having my son, Giovanni. But I continued to run weekly lab meetings by Skype and kept in touch with my team and my collaborators daily. Sometimes I felt as if I were failing as both a mother and a mentor. But the people in my lab and in my department always supported me.

Now that Giovanni is 2 years old, my biggest challenge is travel. I am lucky to have a supportive husband who is fantastic as a father. He is totally self-sufficient when I am away — which comes to about seven times a year. But he works for the World Health Organization and travels just as much as I do. We try to stagger our trips, but we often lean on our nanny and family for help.

Lean on me:

Another challenge is the unpredictable nature of both parenting and running a lab. When I took a tenure-track position at the University of Geneva earlier this year, I was lucky enough to get a spot for my son in the university's nursery. He spends his days about two minutes away from me, in the same building as my lab. This means I can drop him off in the morning and pick him up in the evening. Even more importantly, if he is sick and needs to go to the doctor, I can make a round trip in a couple of hours. I even have time to take him to a weekly music class.

I know I'm lucky to have the supports I do. But still, I can't do everything. Sometimes I have to miss a conference because school is closed or my husband is traveling at the same time. Or I have to miss a family event because of a work commitment. Last summer, I arrived late to a wedding because I was speaking about women in science at a conference.

I've also learned to lean on other women and learn from their experiences. I still turn to **Monica Di Luca**, my mentor in graduate school, for advice. She is a great scientist and a great mother.

I try to do the same thing now with my lab. I encourage my students and postdocs to come to me with questions about lab or family life. I can only speak from my own experience, but I am happy to help them in whatever way I can.

I'm still learning how to navigate an academic world dominated by men. I realize that although I can learn something from my male colleagues, I am in a better position than many of them to promote the importance of quality time at work and at home.