

WHO CARES?

Researchers with Kids – Discussion Group

Best Practice Recommendations from a Workshop Series



A series of two-hour workshops entitled WHO CARES? Researchers with Kids – Discussion Group took place between October 2016 and May 2024. Workshops were held regularly and led by Tanja Neve-Seyfarth and Professor Carolin Strobl. Other professors were also invited to participate in individual workshops. During these workshops, participating professors, postdocs and doctoral candidates exchanged ideas on combining family life with an academic career.

This best practice guide summarizes and presents the outcomes of this series of workshops, including possible solutions proposed by the professors and other workshop participants for challenging situations that may arise. All of the professors and participants did not endorse all recommendations to the same extent. Moreover, all of the recommendations may not remain equally relevant over time and may not be equally applicable to each personal or professional situation.

You can find a wealth of information, documents and forms on this topic on UZH's family portal at www.families.uzh.ch.

1 Best Practices – Institutional Level

1.1 Maternity leave, unpaid parental leave and reduced workloads

- Let your line manager know in good time that you are expecting a child and if you would like to take any unpaid parental leave. You should also discuss all of the relevant aspects of your return to work (see also the following two points).
- If you wish to reduce your working hours (especially – but not only – during the qualification stage), bear in mind that formally reducing your workload may mean that you earn less but, in some cases, you may still find yourself working your old hours. Talk to your line manager in advance about the hours you are planning to work and about organizing a substitute or other assistance. Regularly assess if your plan is working, for example by recording the hours you work over a period of time in a phone app or similar program. If your actual working hours consistently deviate from your agreed working hours, contact your line manager to revisit your workload. Ideally, professorship funds that remain unused due to your reduced working hours should be used to fund a substitute and assistance, for example hiring and training a student employee to take over recurring tasks.
- As a safeguard for yourself and your line manager, complete the form Memorandum of Conversation on Parenthood, which sets out all relevant agreements in writing and is signed by both parties (available on UZH's family portal: www.families.uzh.ch).

1.2 When applying for a professorship, what should I take into consideration?

- Keep your CV ready and update it regularly. Don't wait until a new, interesting opportunity comes along to update your CV, because then you'll need to act fast – and that's not always feasible with children around.
- Apply for as many relevant grants, prizes, etc. as possible. This keeps your name visible, and you can list any you are awarded.
- Keep your website up to date (manage your list of publications, etc. and make sure your photo is professional and current). The information on your website is just as important as the details included in your application dossier, because it may be checked just before an interview.
- If you are applying or making a presentation for a professorship, arrive early to check the technical systems and bring your own laptop and a bottle of water (technology and refreshments may not be planned or provided).
- During your interview or presentation, reiterate your strengths, major grants, etc. (the committee or interviewer may have read your dossier some time ago and may not remember all of the important details).
- Practice your interview or presentation in advance with someone else.

1.3 When applying for a professorship, should I visibly communicate on my CV periods of leave or a reduced workload due to the birth of a child or childcare responsibilities?

Yes, to a certain extent (see final point), for the following reasons:

- Parenthood should be increasingly viewed as a natural development – and no longer as a disruption – in an academic career.
- The focus of your presentation and interview for a professorship should be exclusively on your academic qualifications. However, if you are in fact asked about your family background, present your family-related time management skills as a strength in your favor.
- If you are asked any critical questions about your flexibility, confirm your family's willingness to move (as previously mentioned, such questions should not be asked until the negotiation phase). Especially with female applicants, a committee often worries that a partner's unwillingness to move could prevent them from accepting an offer. Convince the committee by explaining, for example, that you have already visited the university's and/or city's website to find out about preschools and schools for your children as well as job opportunities for your partner. Mention how much you like the city/region and give specific examples of things that you have already looked into.
- If dual career promotion is brought up, thank the interviewer for their willingness to discuss the topic and revisit it in any appointment negotiations. The interview is not yet the proper time to make specific requests; it should focus exclusively on your academic qualifications.
- At some higher education institutions, including some of the faculties at UZH, parental leave is counted towards your academic age.
- Some organizations that award grants deduct a certain amount of childcare time (per child) from your academic age. Although there is certainly room for improvement, these days the time spent caring for children is generally taken into account.
- The professors who took part in the workshops generally believe that in higher education's current political landscape (at least in Europe), lost time, limited periods of leave and/or part-time employment owing to the birth of a child and to childcare are taken into consideration in the application process and can no longer be openly interpreted as a disadvantage.
- No empirical data exists on the impact of longer (e.g. many years) periods of leave and part-time employment during the qualification stage.

1.4 Attending meetings and events at UZH, your faculty and/or your division

- While you are on parental leave, try to remain in contact with those in your division. For example, stop by for lunch – whether or not you bring your baby with you is up to your discretion.
- Using a broad social network for support, try to attend important meetings and events within your organization, faculty and/or division as regularly as possible after your parental leave. Try as well, for example, to attend a dinner with guest speakers so that you are not overlooked.
- Create and maintain your professional networks, for example by staying for drinks after an event so people know that you are around.
- Talk to your line manager about mutually beneficial ways and possibilities that would allow you to participate in events that are related to your chair (e.g. indicate which days and what times best suit you). When necessary, remind your line manager of the possibilities you have discussed.
- Ask the person who is organizing an event related to your chair to choose a venue with good transportation connections.

1.5 Attending conferences

- No longer attending conferences is not a good option!
- Ask if childcare is available at the venue so that you can take your child(ren) with you (younger children who are not in school or school-age children during their school vacation).
- Talk to your partner or another potential caregiver (see the next point) about the possibility of turning your conference trip into a short family vacation. Then you would have your partner's support to be able to participate in important and necessary networking activities (especially with younger children or school-age children during their school vacation).
- Check if it would be possible to take someone besides your partner with you (e.g. one or both grandparents).
- Ask your university if any financial support is available for those who accompany you.

2 Best Practices – Private/Personal Level

2.1 How can I manage my workload effectively?

- Think about **when** you are able to work well (i.e. your biorhythm). Some people are more productive in the morning, others in the evening. Arrange your working hours accordingly. Handle important and larger tasks during your most productive periods.
- Think about **how** you are able to work well. If you are the type of person who can make good use of short time slots, then think and work in "puzzle pieces" (i.e. make use of every free half hour. Get down to work as soon as the children are asleep rather than doing other things such as the housework first). Or are you the type of person who needs longer or open-ended time slots to be able to focus on your work? Consider how you could arrange these during at least some individual days of the week, for example by having your partner pick up your children from daycare.
- When you are with your children, do not attempt to manage both your children and your work *at the same time*.
- Once you are finished working during a time slot, write down the current status of your work in a type of personal journal. Summarize how things stand and list the next tasks you have to do, including reminders of where you can find information and materials. That way, the next time you have a slot of time to work, you won't have to backtrack and will know exactly what point you reached last time as well as where to restart your work again. For example, your journal entry would not simply read "continue writing article" but would be broken down into "open mail from XY and extract literature references, produce chart – sketch stored in folder Z." Although this approach requires spending a little more time documenting your progress before you stop working (make sure you plan time for this documentation!), it also means that the next time you start working, you can get back into the subject faster and will be less likely to put off larger tasks.
- Set aside time for regular coordination sessions with your partner to look at what is happening over the next week, month, etc. Have these sessions once a week or at intervals that suit you.
- Agree in advance what you will do if your important appointments clash with those of your partner. One possible approach is first come, first served: whoever enters an appointment in

your family's calendar first has priority. Another approach is to assign each of you fixed days of the week to be responsible if an unplanned situation arises, for example if it is necessary to take care of an ill child (see also section 2.5).

- Get support with the tasks you don't like and delegate them. For example, you could invest in a cleaner. They wouldn't even have to come every week; they could come every two weeks and, depending on what you need, could only do big jobs such as cleaning the kitchen and bathroom, doing the ironing, etc.
- Discuss with your partner whether structured family time could work for your family (or whether you prefer to keep things spontaneous). For example, you might decide that you will attend only *one* evening event per week, which you would then select carefully. Or that you will attend only *one* international conference per month/quarter/half year, which you would also select carefully. Alternatively, you could make each Saturday or Sunday a family day, set aside for going out and doing something together. Fixed schedules help simplify other organizational tasks and create clarity.
- If you are under pressure to publish, think about your particular talents and join forces with other people whose skills complement your own (e.g. other postdocs from your broader field who also need to be published). You can rotate which person takes on the role of lead author, with the other(s) being co-author(s), which is an approach that benefits everyone. You can also contact individuals from your local working group, or you may meet other people at conferences whose papers you have already read.
- Seek out mentors who can support you. It is perfectly acceptable to have more than one mentor, as one person may be able to advise you well in your particular area and someone else may be better at answering general questions. The most important consideration is having the right chemistry between you and your mentor(s).

2.2 How can I make sure that I still manage to relax?

- Think about what you need for your own well-being. Take into consideration neurodiversity: if, for example, you are a highly sensitive person or have ADHD, respect your individual needs and plan/act accordingly. Seek support if you need it, for example if you experience an increased sensitivity to sound, impatience or challenges with time management.
- Schedule time to relax in your calendar. You don't have to tell anyone else why you are not available. Just say that you have an appointment.
- Once your children are comfortable at daycare or with their caregiver, it won't matter, for example, if you pick them up 20 minutes later than usual because you took a short break after finishing your work to have a coffee or otherwise relax. This can help you feel less stressed when transitioning from work to spending time with your family.
- Make sure you communicate your need for downtime to your partner. Naturally, your partner is entitled to downtime as well.
- When you suffer from a lack of sleep (because your children wake up frequently during the night, don't fall asleep easily, or have been ill for a while), discuss with your partner how to split tasks that need to be done in a way that works for you both. You will never catch up on sleep entirely, but you can avoid having to shoulder the heavy burden of childcare on your own.
- Be careful to avoid gatekeeping, which is acting as though you know how to take care of certain aspects of childcare better than your partner does and thus taking them back upon yourself – which increases your burden again. Accept that your co-parent does things differently and let them handle things their way.

- Plan to spend time together as a couple as regularly as possible.
- Having fixed bedtimes for your children as well as a clearly structured daily routine will help your children – and you.
- Childcare tasks at home should be divided clearly and fairly between you and your partner.
- Be clear with yourself that you cannot do everything *in the same amount of time and to the same standard* as someone who does not have children. Look at any given situation and ask yourself what you can do *at that moment*. Then take care of it.
- Accept each situation as it is.

2.3 How should I handle negative comments?

- When possible, do not respond. Constantly having to defend your lifestyle choices requires too much energy, and it would be better to put that energy into your career and family.

2.4 My partner isn't keeping their side of the bargain – what should I do? / Having open discussions and negotiations

- Equal opportunity parenting only functions when you work as a team, you pull together and you both fundamentally believe it is important to be reliable. Therefore, consider the following points:
- Early on and before you start a family, discuss with your partner what your values and attitudes are, how you believe parenting should work in practice and how your careers might progress. Often, couples don't discover they have conflicting attitudes until after their child is born, leading both parents to fall back into traditional roles. It is clearly impossible to consider and plan every detail in advance, but you should discuss an overall approach.
- Achieving a fair division of responsibilities is a considerable challenge for many couples after they have children. And once the situation is out of balance, it's not always easy to discuss or change it. In the experience of workshop participants, such a discussion could start as follows: "I'm under enormous pressure with my teaching and research, and I'm not able to manage everything with the kids and the household as well (practically) all by myself. And there's really no reason why this work should fall only on my shoulders. Could we please discuss how to best divide up childcare and household responsibilities so it works for both of us?" Initially, such comments are often met with resistance, for example with one of the following lines of reasoning: "Everyone in my office works full time, so I can't work part time." "Now is not a good time for me to ask my boss to work fewer hours." "Part-time work isn't possible in my job." Workshop participants emphasized that it is important that you do not drop the subject in such a situation. Instead, follow up with questions or suggestions, such as: "Fundamentally, are you willing to do your share and reduce your workload?" "You could just try asking your boss." "There's probably never a good time to ask." "Try presenting it as temporary solution for a certain period of time." It's surprising how many parents experience that it is unexpectedly easy to reduce their working hours. And even if it's not possible to fully pursue your career for a limited period of time, it should apply equally to both partners. After all, having children involves working as a team and sharing responsibilities.
- To prepare for such a discussion, it can be helpful to fill out the mental load spreadsheet that lists parenting responsibilities (available in German, see "Useful Links" at the end of this document), which can make it clear who is currently taking over which childcare responsibilities and to what extent.

- Remember, however, that while you can do a great deal of advance planning, once your baby has arrived things may be different than you had imagined (e.g. initially you may look forward to spending time at home with your baby, but after a few weeks or months you might start going stir-crazy). That's why you and your partner should create a plan B in advance – and regularly realign your views according to what you are actually experiencing and feeling, even if that means you have to make new arrangements and plans.
- If your relationship gets stuck because of your differences, seek professional help via support services for parents (often offered through your local community center), coaching or counseling (e.g. with the organization Fachstelle UND).

2.5 My/our family lives abroad. / I'm a single parent. So I/we have no family support with childcare. How can I/we get help with childcare?

- Get out early on so you make good contacts and expand your social network to include reliable people such as neighbors or friends.
- Ideally, you will meet people who are able to help *during the day*, for example when a child is ill, so that you will be able to keep important appointments (see the "Useful Links" section at the end of this document).
- If both parents live locally, you should divide childcare responsibilities fairly when your child is ill. This may affect several days or even weeks, especially in the first years your child is at daycare. One way of organizing yourself could be to mark extremely important dates (such as key presentations) in your calendar and to agree with your partner that he/she will not enter an equally important appointment at the same time. This makes it easier to decide who will stay home with your child when it's necessary.
- The kihz Foundation offers a variety of fixed and flexible daycare and vacation childcare solutions (see the "Useful Links" section at the end of this document) and gives advice on other options, such as nannies.
- In some cases, regional networks can put you in touch with seniors wishing to take on the role of substitute grandparent (see the "Useful Links" section at the end of this document).
- Keep a look out for other babysitting services, which are often provided by neighborhood organizations or churches.
- Consider setting up a shared household with other parents or parents-to-be or watching each other's children so that you can help each other with childcare.
- Depending on the character and age of your children, they may not be willing to stay with a relative stranger when you really need them to, which will increase your own stress levels. You may therefore need to have several of your planned "emergency" caregivers look after your children regularly, even without any particular reason. Even if this results in higher expenses, for example because you pay the babysitters, it can still be an important and worthwhile investment.
- Take advantage of the [Parents@UZH](https://www.families.uzh.ch/en/netzwerke/parents_uzh.html) network:
https://www.families.uzh.ch/en/netzwerke/parents_uzh.html.

2.6 My partner has been offered a job in another city/country. There doesn't seem to be anything for me there at the moment. What should we do?

- An academic career usually involves job changes. Be clear from the beginning that this may mean living apart from your partner and your child/children for a certain period of time or for certain days of the week. This, too, is something that should be discussed early on in your relationship.
- Draw up a plan A for the best possible scenario: for example, one parent goes to a new city for one year (with or without the children) while the second parent looks for a job in the new city and joins the other parent later – or one parent goes alone to the new city (or abroad) for a predetermined, limited period of time and then returns to the previous location. Make a plan B in case plan A doesn't work out. In addition, think about the maximum length of time you are prepared to wait to get the result you want.
- Inquire at the UZH offices responsible for postdocs and doctoral candidates (see the "Useful Links" section at the end of this document) and at the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) about possible grants that encourage and support time spent abroad.
- Talk to your partner about taking turns with your career moves. That means that if parent 1 accepts the first job opportunity that comes up, then it's parent 2's turn for the next career move, and so on.

Useful Links

UZH's family portal

<https://www.families.uzh.ch/en.html>

Fact Sheet Parenthood and Memorandum on Conversation on Parenting

https://www.families.uzh.ch/en/kind/nachwuchs/nachwuchs_mitarbeitende.html

Childcare – kihz Foundation

<https://www.kihz.uzh.ch/en>

Working in a lab – Checklists and information sheets from the Office for Safety, Security and Environment

<https://www.su.uzh.ch/de/unsere-aufgaben/arbeitsicherheit-gesundheitsschutz/arbeitsmedizin/doku.html> (some documents only available in German)

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Checklists for shared parenting

https://disg.lu.ch/themen/gleichstellung/gleich_aktivitaeten/projekte/gleich_regie (only available in German)

Zurich community centers

<http://www.gz-zh.ch>

Substitute grandparents

<https://www.care.com/de-ch/profile/kinderbetreuung/leihoma> (website for Switzerland only available in German)

Fachstelle UND

<https://www.fachstelle-und.ch/privatpersonen/uebersicht/> (available in French and German)

Mental load spreadsheet for parenting responsibilities

<https://www.froehlichimtext.de/mental-load-1/steuerboard-liste/> (only available in German)

ParenThesis – A blog from parents and for parents in academia

<https://parenthesis-blog.de/> (only available in German)