

Can Australian Women be Successful in Science and Have a Family?

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When I decided to embark on a career in science 20 years ago, this was a question that never entered my mind. Now, as the mother of four pre-teenage children and Project Leader for two significant projects within CSIRO Wealth from Oceans Flagship Program, I find it is a question that I am frequently asked.

An older female colleague once told me that there is very little difference between the career experiences of the sexes until a child is born. In most developed countries equal opportunity laws ensure that candidates are appointed and rewarded on merit. However, becoming a parent has a profound effect on every individual and it is something that men and women experience in different ways.

Over the years I have been fortunate enough to meet many women scientists, including several in senior positions within CSIRO. All of these women have been very candid in sharing their experiences with me and helping me understand that success is very subjective. It is extremely important for all women to ask themselves the difficult questions early in their careers to avoid future regrets. "Having it all" requires a great deal of planning and an ability to be truly honest about what is important for each individual.

My first three children were born in Queensland, Australia, while I worked for Wide Bay Water (a business unit of Hervey Bay City Council). As recent migrants to Australia, all our family and friends were overseas, so our support network was limited. This was most apparent during periods of family illness, when we found ourselves pushed to the limits of physical and mental exhaustion. However, I was in the unique position of being the only qualified scientist in the organisation, living in rural Queensland, so my skills were in demand. My manager was also a father of four, married to a successful career woman and he understood my need to combine my career with motherhood. Local Government departments are expected to set an example to the community in implementing the policies of Federal Government, so we were able to be creative in our work arrangements and tried several different models, adapting to changes in the work/life demands as my family grew. These values of flexibility and balance were echoed at the Queensland Environmental

Protection Agency when I became an Employee of State Government.

In October 2001 I was offered a position with CSIRO (the Australian National Scientific Research Agency) as a research scientist. At that time I had 3 children under school age and had been out of mainstream scientific research for 8 years. I was extremely anxious about how I would cope with so many competing demands on my time and energy, but science is about finding answers to big questions and we negotiated a win-win compromise where both parties could get what they needed, utilising the flexibility afforded by CSIRO policies. When my fourth child was born in 2004, I was able to take on a new role within my CSIRO business unit, which created even more flexibility for me in managing the competing demands of home and work and provided a new path for career development.

While the last 12 years have had some difficult periods, I have no regrets about the choices that I have made. In my experience, it is possible to combine a career in science with a family, but it is important to be clear about your objectives and priorities. If you can articulate these to an employer and present an arrangement that meets the needs of both parties, then it is likely that they will agree to compromise on non key issues such as total working hours and/or flexible working arrangements in exchange for an enthusiastic and energised employee with a successful work/life balance.

CSIRO is Australia's national science agency and one of the largest and most diverse scientific research organisations in the world. CSIRO recognises that people are a key asset, which is exemplified by its mission statement: 'by igniting the creative spirit of our people, we deliver great science and innovative solutions for industry, society and the environment'.

CSIRO's culture, conditions and environment support people to manage their careers and strike a balance between their work and personal lives by including periods of paid maternity/paternity leave, leave without pay (up to 12 months to care for an infant.) and flexible work arrangements.

Additional information in regard to this article may be found at: www.csiro.au



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