How Motherhood Stunts Women's Scientific Careers
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When women in science decide to have a child, often it also means leaving academia.

Motherhood may be the single leading factor that pushes women with advanced degrees in science out of the academic pipeline, preventing them from earning tenured positions at high-ranking universities and ultimately decreasing their gender’s representation in science.

In an article published in American Scientist (1), Cornell psychologists Wendy Williams and Stephen Ceci analyze data related to the academic careers of women and men with and without children in different academic fields. As a result, the researchers found that women without children have careers equivalent to or better than men’s careers, receiving pay and promotion at the same rate.

On the other hand, if a female scholar decides to have a child, whether in the present or in the future, those women exit the research fast-track at a rate twice that of men or women who choose not to have children.

As a parent to three girls, Williams said she is not surprised that motherhood would be a major factor in women completing their doctoral and post-doctoral work and ultimately moving into academic positions. Her personal experience made her realize that the structure of the academic community was not accommodating to women with children.

However, Williams noted that some people may be surprised that motherhood could play such a major role, since the literature is "replete with claims of overt discrimination, in hiring and work evaluation, against women as the major cause of the dearth of women" in research-professor positions.

In their article, Williams and Ceci argue that the antiquated tenure system has a major influence on women who want both a career and a family. The system was created in a time when few females worked outside the home and the hired men, who were often single, lived in residence at their universities. It was "designed for people without significant responsibilities in household work or child care," Ceci and Williams wrote in their article.

To help more women continue their careers in science, Williams suggests that institutions could allow female scientists to work in a part-time tenure track position for about five years after having children and then ramp back up to full-time status when their kids are older.

But not all agree. On its website, the Association for Women in Science calls the conclusions Ceci and Williams draw one of the "most publicized pieces of maddening media" and points to many sources that break down the statistical and theoretical flaws with the research.

The organization also states, "...we would in theory prefer to agree with the authors that our efforts to eradicate gender
bias have been 100% effective, and there is no longer a need to address the issue. But as a representative of the 7.4 million women in [science, technology, engineering and math], many of whom still experience gender bias, we sadly admit that day has yet to come.”

References