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## BALANCING ACT

# Frozen Eggs

**Oocyte cryopreservation is not the secret to professional success in academe**

By [MARY ANN MASON](#)

Last spring I gave a talk on balancing work and family to a class of M.B.A. students at my university. In the discussion afterward, a young woman volunteered, "I'm planning to freeze my eggs — it's very expensive and the procedure I hear is painful, but I don't see how I can plan a family until my career is going well."

Another student objected, "You don't know if it will work at all. The technology is still sketchy."

Yet another chimed in, "I waited until I was 35 to have kids. I thought I was young, but it was too late. It took five years to adopt."

This freezing procedure is experimental, costly, and fraught with medical pitfalls. In October 2007 the Practice Committee of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine released an opinion saying that "oocyte cryopreservation, or egg freezing, ... should not be offered or marketed as a means to defer reproductive aging." Many questions remain about the procedure, including the healthy development of babies born from such eggs.

Still, not one of the young people in the audience — mostly women with an average age of 31 — thought it was a bad idea. To them, it is just the way things are. If you start a new job after earning your M.B.A., you have to give it your all to prove you have the "right stuff." Giving your all means working 60 hours a week and traveling a lot. That is the deal.

The men in the class said nothing; they didn't have to. According to the 2000 census, the more hours that professional men work — up to 59 hours a week — the more children they are likely to have. But for professional women, the opposite is true: The more hours they work, the fewer children they are likely to have.

That same census offers an even more brutal assessment of the likelihood that academic women will have children. Among the professions charted by the census — faculty members, physicians, lawyers, and CEO's, between the ages of 35 and 50 — women in academe, no matter how many hours they worked, reported fewer children than women in all other professional fields.

Among female faculty members who worked between 50 and 59 hours a week, 41 percent reported children in the household, compared with a robust 67 percent for female doctors.

It is easy to understand why women who work long hours are less likely to have children, but what about men? Why does their fertility *increase* with the number of hours they work?

In part it's because men are still perceived as the primary breadwinners. For men in the professions, more hours worked translates into children but also into partners who do not work full time. The evidence for that is stunning. According to 2000 census data, 52 percent of male professors have wives who work part time or not at all, while only 9 percent of female professors have partners who work less than full time.

Marriage rates reveal the same paradox. Of those professors who achieve tenure, 70 percent of men are married with children, compared with only 44 percent of women. But women win in the singles category: Twenty-six percent of tenured women are single without children, as compared with only 11 percent of tenured men.

Women who begin graduate school have probably not read the 2000 census, but they can look around their departments and realize that the playing field is not level. Men can have children and pursue their careers with full attention because they are rarely the primary caretakers. Some women seem able to do that as well, but they are fewer in number.

Does it have to be this way?

In the academic world, the greatest demands are made on faculty members in their 30s and 40s. On average, assistant professors are hired somewhere in their early 30s and achieve tenure, if they are lucky, by around 40. Those are also the years when women are most likely to have children, if at all.

We need to rethink that century-old male model. The ideal workplace for parents would commit to flexibility at the front end of an academic career. Flexibility would allow fathers as well as mothers to balance their intensive demands at home and at work. It would allow young women to have children as graduate students, as postdocs, and as assistant professors — whenever they felt ready — rather than waiting until they have earned tenure. In higher education now, that is often impossible.

At the Berkeley Center on Health, Economic & Family Security, we just completed a survey of the members of the Association of American Universities — the 61 major

research institutions that produce the great majority of Ph.D.'s. Our survey revealed that paid maternity leave was offered to only 23 percent of graduate students, 36 percent of postdocs, 55 percent of academic researchers, and 65 percent of faculty members. That is not a welcoming message for motherhood.

Some universities get it. They are beginning to offer parental policies that are attractive to both mothers and fathers. The University of California system now offers six weeks of maternity leave at full pay to graduate-student employees, postdocs, and faculty members, as well as two semesters of relief from teaching for young faculty mothers. Fathers are included as well — they may be eligible for a semester without teaching obligations after the birth of a child. In addition, both mothers and fathers can stop the clock on their tenure and choose a part-time option for some of those pre-tenure years.

Other universities are turning toward such policies as well, motivated not just by enlightened ideals but also by good business sense. In academe, where 50 percent of the qualified workers are women, universities must compete for the best talent.

Anna Westerstahl Stenport, a Berkeley student whom I interviewed for my book *Mothers on the Fast Track*, had her first child while working on her doctorate. Her adviser was supportive, but when she attended the job fair for the Modern Language Association, she told me, "I did not wear my wedding band nor did I bring up my family." A year after the job fair, I heard from her again: "You will be happy to know that I got a job and I was pregnant at the time of the interview. Guess what? They offered me my first semester off for parental leave!" That was indeed a happy outcome for a faculty parent, and a hopeful sign that the culture is inching toward family friendliness.

Freezing your eggs is not a happy outcome. It's a desperate personal effort to solve a problem that should be tackled by a university culture frozen in time.

*Mary Ann Mason is a professor and co-director of the Berkeley Center on Health, Economic & Family Security. She writes monthly on work and family issues for our Balancing Act column. She invites readers to send in questions or personal concerns about those issues, and she will answer your questions in a future column. E-mail your comments to [careers@chronicle.com](mailto:careers@chronicle.com) or to [mamason@law.berkeley.edu](mailto:mamason@law.berkeley.edu). To read her previous Balancing Act columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/balancing\\_act](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/balancing_act).*

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