

After eight hours in the lab, molecular biologist Joaquin Espinosa goes to his other job — a 12-hour night shift. Granted, he is allowed to sleep some of the time, but it is no less demanding than his day job, as he is taking care of his newborn twin daughters, Paloma and Azul.

Espinosa directs his fledgling lab at the University of Colorado, Boulder, from noon until 8 at night. Then he heads home to help wife Eliana Gomez bathe, change and feed their girls, taking responsibility until 8 in the morning, when his mother takes over. The schedule works better for Espinosa than full-time paternity leave.

"I'm wasted in the mornings, so I sleep in and get to the lab around noon," he says. "This is one of the privileges of the academic setting." Indeed, the flexibility of academia can sometimes offset the pressures of balancing home and lab time.

All families — large or small, with newborns or adolescents — must have some time together. Lab-management experts have found ways of keeping that time a priority during the hectic years before gaining tenure. They also manage to squeeze some work in at home without crossing the workaholic line. And some have invented creative ways to harmonize home and lab by involving family.

Time for tots

Juggling a new career and starting a family worries many scientists. But waiting to start a family until after tenure is a reproductive gamble.

"It takes nine months to go on the job market and, coincidentally, it takes about nine months to make a baby," says Sandra Schmid, chair of cell biology at the Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California. She had her son Jeremy, now 18, at the end of her postdoc and daughter Katie, now 14, as a new investigator.

Espinosa and Gomez took a slightly different tack. Gomez decided to take a year off after her postdoctoral fellowship and to look for a scientific position next year. "It would be way too much work setting up two labs and bringing up babies at the same time," says Espinosa. The approach became essential once they learnt they were expecting twins.

Schmid advises parents of toddlers to rely as much as possible on others, including students, postdocs, spouses, relatives, technicians, administrative help and hired help at home if necessary. "You don't have to do it all on your own," she says — the value of your time has increased since graduate school.

"Don't hesitate to say, 'Ask me to join that committee again in two

Toddlers, teens and test tubes

Young careers and young families can leave investigators feeling stretched.

Kendall Powell finds out how to keep the two from clashing.

years when Billy starts kindergarten,'" she adds, noting that it gets easier as children go to school and can help in the house. And count your blessings when it comes to schedules — Schmid coached her kids' soccer teams for seven years because she could leave work at 4 p.m. every Monday.

Coaching or taking a day off to chaperone a school field trip may mean more to children than staying at home full-time. Although it may take some ingenuity, busy researchers don't have to sacrifice quality time. Find out what matters most to your children and then make time for swimming lessons or tea parties.

Drawing the line

Get over the guilty-at-home, guilty-at-work syndrome and be focused on where you are, advises Schmid. Susanne Mandrup, a molecular biologist at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, agrees. In the early years, she says, "you often find that home gets the lowest priority. You have to manage that, otherwise you ruin your personal life."

When at home, Mandrup gives her family her full attention, limiting television and phone calls and finding activities that her teenagers can enjoy with her and her husband. "We concentrate on each other, do daily things such as cooking dinner or baking bread together," she says. Her family make time together each night as well, in the Danish tradition of cosy intimacy called *hygge*. Before the youngest child goes to bed, this might include reading, watching a film or playing a game accompanied by some tea and chocolate.

Carol Thornber, a marine ecologist at the University of Rhode Island in Kingston, reserves weekend time for her husband who, during the week, works three hours away in Amherst, Massachusetts. Designating family hours keeps her and other junior scientists motivated to be efficient at work.

"You have to know when to listen to your wife's 'no laptop on holiday' policy," notes Dirk Schübeler, an epigeneticist at the Friedrich Miescher Institute in Basel, Switzerland. But when his young sons go to bed, he catches up on e-mail with his US collaborators.

Home office

Parents of young children often have to work from home — Espinosa and Mandrup spend the hours after their children's bedtime reading papers or writing. "For many years, I've worked every night to catch up on what I don't get done during the day," says Mandrup.

Espinosa changed the way he uses his computer so that he can work as easily in his home office as in his lab office. "Before, I didn't even bring my computer home



Starting young: Madeline Hull Brazas gets to work.

C. HULL

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“Last Sunday I got in at 5 a.m. and had everything done by 7 a.m., in time to make breakfast with friends,” she notes. As her daughter gets older, Hull tries to incorporate necessary weekend trips to the lab with some fun for Madeline.

Daughter-at-lab day

Some faculty members would prefer to separate home life from work with a clearly defined line. But others, including Hull, say that there are ways to bring your two halves — scientist and parent — together.

Madeline, for instance, has her own box of ‘experiments’ to investigate while waiting for her mother to finish bench work. She gets her own agar plates, gloves and different coloured solutions in test tubes to test the growth of common bacteria, moulds and mildews.

“Now I have a six-year-old who absolutely loves to come to the lab,” says Hull. “Making it a fun environment and including her has helped.”

“It’s important for your kids to see that their parents enjoy work and find it exciting — it’s an important impression to convey,” says Mandrup. It also helps them accept your long working hours.

Your family might even accept work meetings or phone calls at home, if it lets you spend more time with them, says Bernard Golding, an organic chemist at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. He often meets colleagues at home because his wife is “more agreeable to this than my staying late”.

Golding also found an inventive way to expose his 11-year-old granddaughter Holly to his work: she went with him and his wife to a chemical-biology meeting at the Austrian ski resort of Kleinwalsertal. “She got on really well with five of my trainees there. It was a good message for her to mix with these academically minded, clever, attractive personalities,” he says.

Golding wishes that he had taken his children to more meetings and he now encourages junior faculty members to look for meetings with open times during the day as a “good way of involving family in your job”. He also advises parents not to cut out exercise when family and work duties expand. “If the going gets tough, at least try to walk or cycle to work,” he says. Combining chores with leisure can help: Mandrup makes dinner while discussing her teens’ days, and Espinosa reads papers while waiting for the midnight feed.

“Nobody ever talks about, ‘Gee, I had a balanced week,’” says Schmid. “The meaningful phrase is a balanced life. You can’t do everything all the time at all stages. Look overall at what you can do with a young family and career.”

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and I would unplug my brain from science on Friday evening. But I can’t afford to do that anymore,” he says.

He set up a home studio and switched to the smallest laptop available. He equipped both offices with large monitors, extra keyboards and hard drives to back up files. This helps him keep in touch with lab members, too, whose schedules might not overlap much with his.

Working at night or in the early morning while family members sleep can reduce the impact of work on quality time — find a schedule that works for you and your family. Schübeler prefers starting and leaving work early, in contrast to Espinosa’s late start at the lab.

Christina Hull, a molecular biologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, routinely goes in extra early on weekend days to check experiments. This saves the rest of the day for family activities with her husband and six-year-old daughter Madeline.



In the pink: late nights don’t faze Susanne Mandrup.