

work

family

Learning

Growth

# Can women out of science be good for society?

Elaine Westwick thinks not

If, as has been fêted, we are living at the start of the 'scientific century', then we should do all we can to encourage children to appreciate the beauty of scientific truth. We could start by sharing our love of science with the very young, those already bursting with enquiry.

The percentage of primary school teachers with science qualifications is small. In early years settings it is almost non-existent. But what about the role of scientifically trained parents in enthusing their children? Parents able to answer the perpetual 'Why?' questions with real answers can tap into young children's innate need to experiment and probe. Highly qualified women slip guiltily off the career track. Instead, we need a shift of emphasis to celebrate their role in bringing up scientifically aware offspring.

There are a plethora of examples of incorporating science into the home: what floats in the bath, what happens when food is cooked, battles between white cell knights and evil bugs in poorly tummies, the increase in toy box entropy on a wet afternoon. In other words, child-led playful discovery rather than parent-enforced scientific hot housing; learning that happens alongside living.

We should applaud those engaging with the ordinary: whether it is bringing scientific facts to vaccine discussions at the school gate, expounding evidence-based thinking in non-scientific pursuits or gently challenging reactionary and irrational perceptions.

## All walks of life

I am not advocating extravagantly long maternity leave or paid career breaks. Mothers should be able to resign without their tail between their legs. If we value taking science training into the wider society, then women will feel more encouraged to return later. It should be easier to stop employment and easier to come back.

The years away from science may, due to financial necessity or the need for intellectual stimulation, include other forms of paid work. Intermediary, lower-key employment should not be viewed as a waste of an expensive degree or as an economic drag. Scientific minds are crucial in all walks of life.

We must, however, be fearful of losing women forever, and better family-friendly working styles are needed to enable them to re-enter the profession at a later date. Of course, for those who need or choose to remain at work, combining scientific employment with raising young children should also be made more achievable, but it should not be seen as the only way.

## Shift in mindset

Are there any benefits for mothers from having a break from the scientific establishment? Perhaps the intellectual holiday could leave women more open to novel ideas and less sullied by the scientific status quo. Too often science is done in a rush, tarnished with convention and without mulling over dissenting views. Could some time out of the race lead to broader thinkers with a wider perspective?

Of those with scientific training, it is not only mothers who can bring their knowledge into the everyday. Fathers can fulfil the role equally well. And fathers could equally benefit from the shift in mindset that looking after children inevitably brings.

Breaks are not just for when children are very young. Having ten years away should not be seen as exceptional. Given the opportunity, the brightest people, the ones most valuable to science, will adapt, thrive and make their way to the top.

We should applaud those engaging with the ordinary: whether it is bringing scientific facts to vaccine discussions at the school gate, expounding evidence-based thinking in non-scientific pursuits or gently challenging reactionary and irrational perceptions

Children being born today stand a chance of seeing the start of the next century. Perhaps by then we will no longer be struggling with the reality of childrearing in scientists' lives, and career paths that value a few years immersed in day-to-day society, for both mothers and fathers, will be the norm.



Dr Elaine Westwick is a writer based in Cambridge.  
elaine.westwick@gmail.com