



# Yes, You Can: Being an Academic and a Mother

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Can one be an academic and a mother? Of course. Of course you can, and yet, this question is a common one. It is one female graduate students ask, and it is one female faculty ask. We ask it because the answer is not clear. We ask it also because the answer is shifting.

For decades conventional wisdom about having a baby in academia was that this would slow down, if not end, a woman's career. Women who were pregnant were presumed to not be as 'serious' as men. What we now say is that this is no longer (entirely) the case. Things have changed. Universities have become more family friendly. Anthropology has changed. More women are now receiving PhD degrees in anthropology than men. The sheer presence of more women in the discipline compels change in both sentiments and structures, but not overnight, and not without struggle.

Having a family and an academic career is possible, but it involves sacrifice for women beyond that expected for men. In a recent study, University of California at Berkeley [professor Mary Ann Mason](#) argues that having children still has a negative impact on women inverse to that on academic fathers:

*"The most important finding is that family formation negatively affects women's, but not men's, academic careers. For men, having children is a career advantage; for women, it is a career killer."*

In addition, Mason contends the challenges of being an academic mother persist across the life course, from pregnancy through all the various stages of parenting experienced across one's career and as one's children age. However, the most



vulnerable time for a female academic is early in one's career, in the graduate student and pre-tenure period. Mason's new book is [Do Babies Matter?: Gender and Family in the Ivory Tower](#) (Rutgers University Press, 2013). Her answer is yes, they do. Babies matter.



[9/52 - Mom's Hug](#) by [Gordon](#) (flickr, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Ask any woman in academia about her struggles with issues around pregnancy, and the list of topics covered might be long:

- deciding when to try to get pregnant;
- trying to time a pregnancy with one's teaching schedule or going on the job market, etc.;
- infertility and pregnancy loss;
- negotiating maternity leave as a faculty member or researcher;
- negotiating contracts as an adjunct professor;
- negotiating time off and degree requirements as a graduate student;
- child care;
- private spaces for breastfeeding on campus;
- bringing infants to work and class;
- families and fieldwork;
- perceptions of scholarly seriousness, and more.

These claims are not just anecdotal. Instead they mirror the findings of scholarly research on academic mothers. In *Do Babies Matter?*, Mason and her co-authors [Nicholas H. Wolfinger](#) and [Marc Goulden](#) contend that a new generation of scholars desires improved levels of flexibility and work-life balance, but the culture and structure of academia has not changed sufficiently in response to either these desires or to the rising numbers of women in academia.





## [Immigration, Assimilation and the American Dream](#)

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My university's maternity leave policy is less than a decade old. When my son was born in 2004, there was no campus-wide policy. Instead, maternity leave was individually negotiated as needed, and thus varied widely depending on the generosity or negotiating savvy of one's chair/head of department and the dean. Women in some departments received better arrangements than did women in others. In 2007, when my daughter was born, I was one of the first faculty members to benefit from a new university-wide policy of one semester off with pay (that is offered to fathers as well as mothers). Other countries have better maternity leave policies than does the USA where I teach, but what are they? What can we learn from them? Which policies truly support female academics, and which policies need improvement?

*If academic practice and policies are not keeping pace with the practices and desires of female academics, then what do we do?*

One answer is to organize for institutional change. A second is to individually blaze as many trails as possible to normalize parenting in academia (as American University [professor of anthropology Adrienne Pine](#) did without apology in 2012). For both of these approaches, we all benefit from the work done by earlier generations of feminist scholars, some mothers, and some not. These scholars laid the ground for the parenting we now do as academics.



[Gen and kids searching](#) by [Dale Carlson](#) (flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

When my two children, now 8 and 11, were infants, they went where I went. If I went to a conference, they came with me. As a young faculty member, I had the financial resources to hire someone to watch them while I taught. I was able to



bring them to campus with me, and to arrange my teaching schedule to accommodate breastfeeding and other needs they had. They cooed and napped and played during my office hours. They were not old enough to be apart from me, and so they came to work with me.

As a young mother and professor, I discovered a parenting practice that mothers (and fathers and other caregivers) throughout history relied upon, carrying one's baby. From what we know about the lives of our human ancestors, we believe that humans evolved carrying and being carried. We were carried as infants, and then later in turn carried infants as their parents or elder siblings or caregivers. I carried my babies in slings just as people around the world have long done.

People have always fashioned baby carriers out of what materials were available to them: cloth, reeds, fibers, skins, bark and so on. Using a sling often soothes and comforts one's baby, while making life more convenient for the caregiver.



[Theo, sleepingly slung](#) by [McBeth](#) (flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

I lost track of how many lectures and talks I gave with my children in slings when they were infants. Both my undergraduate and graduate anthropology mentors were mothers, and so I had early and strong models for being both a mother and a professor. As a new mother heading to the annual AAA meeting, I flashed back to an image of a friend of mine giving a talk a decade earlier at the AAAs with her baby in a sling.

*When I looked around me, I saw women, amazing women, who were both anthropologists and mothers. With so many models visible to me, I didn't fully realize I was a model for the next generation until someone thanked me for being one too.*



At a conference, several years after my youngest was too old to be carried in a sling, a female graduate student from another university came up to me. She told me that in her very first year of grad school she had seen me give a talk with my daughter in a sling. In that moment, she said, she knew she could also be a parent and an academic. It was then I realized that we have to consciously serve as models, be advocates for other academic mothers, and talk about life outside the academy as part of our careers. Anthropology is a discipline in which the personal and the professional intersect in the field, in the classroom, and in our homes. The more we discuss this, the more we create spaces for needed conversations about parenting as an academic. And, the more we find ways to support academic mothers at all stages of their careers, the better.

Can one be an academic and a mother? *Yes, you can.*

*This post was first published on 11 May 2015.*