

Small steps towards campus child care [INT] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Dedicated fellowships, mentoring networks and tenure-adjustment programmes have been designed to promote women in science. But Anne Bertolotti, a geneticist at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, sees only one realistic way to meet that goal: provide day care. Tiny tots can prove formidable foes to a woman's academic career aspirations. Without affordable child-care options, long hours and low pay force many postdocs to make an unfortunate choice between work or motherhood.

Although Paris offers government-sponsored day care, demand exceeds supply. With care for one child already costing 25% of her income, Bertolotti faces typical concerns as she seeks a spot for her second child — availability, accessibility and cost.

The shortage of high-quality, affordable day care is enough to make academic parents cry. The US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) says that, along with retirement plans and insurance, child care is one of the top three issues raised in surveys. Although on-site child-care facilities are rare at research institutions, a number of universities have recognized the recruitment, retention and employee-satisfaction benefits they offer. Unfortunately, old-fashioned attitudes and cost remain barriers at most institutions.

Most academics around the world rely on private facilities. More than one-third of US postdocs have children, yet only 10% of the 70 US research institutions informally surveyed by the NPA offer child-care facilities.

Like many US universities, Princeton is taking baby steps to deal with the issue. Although Princeton has offered on-site child care for decades, a recent baby boom has increased demand. A health and well-being task force, created three years ago, estimated a need to double capacity. In the planning phase of the expansion, huge questions remain about where and how to run such facilities on campus.

The situation is similar in Britain. Although some UK universities, such as the University of Nottingham, offer non-profit day-care services, the demand for centres nearby is so high that private entities fill the gap. In the past few years, four new day-care centres have opened around the University of Cambridge.

In Japan, day care is almost exclusively private. With dozens of research institutes and universities in a city of 10 million people, some Tokyo academics have to travel for up to an hour outside the city to find a place.

With one of the most challenging child-care situations in Europe, fewer than 5% of German research institutes and universities offer day care. Those that do, such as Heidelberg's European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and the University of Heidelberg, find that it often makes the difference in researcher recruitment. Jan Ellenberg, an EMBL cell biologist, says that the lack of a public day-care system in Germany would have made it impossible for him and his wife — both faculty members — to work. "The best scientists will have choices on the job market, and having excellent day-care facilities makes EMBL a more competitive employer," he says.

A recent survey by Germany's Center of Excellence for Women in Science suggested that more than 40% of academic women choose not to have children; many others leave academia. Although remnants of the former socialist system still provide options for women in eastern Germany, academics in the west depend on parents willing to donate the time and energy to build and run their own day-care centres. Christa Schleper, now an environmental biologist at the University of Bergen in Norway, and her husband spent countless unpaid hours maintaining such a centre while working at the Darmstadt University of Technology in Germany.

In Norway, surprisingly, Schleper faces a similar problem. Although Scandinavian governments are family-friendly, places in public day-care centres are increasingly hard to find in some Norwegian cities.

Government-run programmes, such as those in Scandinavia, are accessible to everyone. That is not always the case in on-campus facilities. Although many US research organizations offer on-campus child-care services, they sometimes limit access to postdocs and graduate students, giving priority to faculty members. Indeed, organizations that actively recruit husband-and-wife research teams, such as the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas, use child-care centres as an enticement. "We're starting to recognize it's not just a women's issue, it's a dual-career family issue," says Kim Orth, a biomedical researcher there.

With campus day-care centres costing roughly \$1.5 million a year to run, it is not surprising that most institutions have yet to address the

issue. Indeed, cost remains the biggest hurdle - particularly in countries such as the United States and Britain. Postdocs there can spend half or more of their salaries on child care, whereas continental Europeans and Japanese are more likely to pay 10-25%, thanks to generous government or institutional subsidies.

Britain has started to offer a government voucher equivalent to £100 (US\$184) per month to help lower costs. But postdocs at UK campuses can expect to pay about 30% of their salary, or £600 a month, for infant day care. The University of Nottingham has offered university-sponsored child-care services for ten years, but demand has still led to the creation of private centres on campus.

Government subsidies, particularly generous ones such as in Sweden, make a huge dent in child-care costs. Stockholm's Karolinska University Hospital offers day care for employees that is the equivalent of about 5-10% of a postdoc's salary: only 10% of the real cost. The remainder is paid by tax initiatives. Norwegians pay more for child care and the subsidies are designed to encourage women to stay at home for a longer period of time - another contentious political issue.

With government help, parent-organized day care in Germany usually ends up being inexpensive. The EMBL facility is unusual in that it is open to all faculty members and postdocs and asks 10% of parents' combined income, whatever that is. It also offers other benefits for breastfeeding mothers.

The NPA has found that child care remains a 'mummy matter', with women postdocs paying almost double the care costs that men pay. This has led the association's president, Alyson Reed, to speculate that more men must have access to partial child care from a spouse or relative.

Access to affordable child care opens the door to research-minded women. As Bertolotti puts it: "Knowing her child is well cared for frees her mind to focus on the science at hand."

- reprinted from Nature

Region: Europe ^[3]

United States ^[4]

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