Interlude 7

Parenting while Researching?

It Takes Support, Kid-Friendly Systems, and a Lot of Luck

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I started a family during grad school. I worked in an immersive, high-performing research lab, the Personal Robots Group at the MIT Media Lab, led by Cynthia Breazeal. I wasn't the first in my lab to get married or have a baby, but I may have been unusual in planning my wedding while running a two-month field study at a local school and writing my master's thesis. No one else was six months pregnant with their second kid while defending their dissertation, either. Balancing my family with lab life was challenging, but doable for a few key reasons. My husband was supportive. My advisor and department were supportive. My lab was more kid-friendly than most. And I was lucky.

Cynthia cultivated a lab where differing ideas and perspectives could flourish. As a fellow student explained to me in my first week, "There should be no 'squashing' of ideas, unless it has been done before, in which case gently point your colleague to the work already done." In other words, be positive. Be game. Don't dismiss ideas off the bat. Cynthia actively cultivated an accepting and supportive lab. My infant received a tiny t-shirt emblazoned with our lab's logo. Besides being a brilliant scientist and engineer, Cynthia was a mother of three herself. She understood the difficulty of the family balancing act, and after I gave birth for the first time, she gave me leeway to work remotely as needed. This kind of personal support led to increased comfort, productivity, and collaboration in the lab. More of this support is needed at all levels of graduate school in the United States, as Alma Villaneuva points out elsewhere in this volume.

Part of the collaborative atmosphere was due to our field and our lab. We had a habit of calling our research in human-robot interaction (HRI) a "team sport" since it is highly interdisciplinary (drawing on computer sci-

ence, psychology, cognitive science, robotics, philosophy, education, and more). Generally speaking, no one can be an expert in all aspects of HRI. Collaboration is a given. Cynthia had a compelling vision for how we could use social robots to help humans flourish. Much of our research while I was in the lab focused on using social robots to support young children's early language development—which meant we often brought three- and four-year-olds into the lab to play with whatever technology we were testing. The lab, as such, was relatively kid-friendly.

The lab's kid-friendliness was very important. My husband and I have a parenting philosophy that emphasizes children's rights (such as their right to their parents, especially very young children's right to their mothers), frugality, learning, and love. We both come from white, middle-class families with multiple siblings, mothers who stayed home, and fathers who worked. I was homeschooled, and even before COVID, we intended to homeschool our kids. We didn't want to outsource child care. Plus, child care is very expensive in Boston, and we were saving all the pennies we didn't spend on rice and beans to buy a house when I finished school. All of this meant I needed to be able to bring my first baby, and my husband, to the lab sometimes. Fortunately, my husband is a computer engineer who worked from home on his startup and on contract work for MIT, so his hours were very flexible and he was often on campus anyway. I shared an office with another graduate student mother, which afforded privacy for breastfeeding. We were lucky our son was generally happy and calm.

At the MIT Media Lab, research is the main event. Students are immersed from day one in a project-based, hands-on, learning-by-doing research culture. The ramp-up time is short. Taking classes often feels like a sideshow. As part of this structure, students in both the master's and PhD programs are funded through research assistantships. About half our time is officially allotted for research activities rather than a heavy course load. When I gave birth in my fourth year, I was finished with formal classwork entirely, enabling me to sculpt my schedule around baby feedings and naptimes. Since our research was predominantly grant-funded, everyone in the lab had to work on grant projects as well as their own courses and research. Usually, our interests were pretty well aligned with the grant projects we had to work on, since the grants always related to the lab's vision. I primarily worked on a series of experimental studies for a five-year grant investigating the use of social robots in children's early literacy education. I prepared and ran a study, or two, each year. I wrote experimental protocols, developed learning games, programmed robots, created new assessments for measuring kids' learning or social behavior, recruited participants at local schools, interacted with kids, teleoperated robots,

coded and analyzed data, drafted papers, and attended no small number of meetings. Fortunately, my professors provided excellent mentoring and feedback throughout this process. I gained a lot of experience designing and running experimental studies. I was lead author on multiple papers. In addition, I did my own, separate, master's and PhD projects. Each built on and referenced the work I did for our grants, using those projects as a cornerstone for my own explorations.

Balancing a baby with research was made easier because my department was trying hard to be a positive place for student parents. I benefited from several brave pioneers before me (who were likely much like Alex Hanson, writing in this volume) who had championed an extra month of maternity leave for women in my department. The department installed a Mamava pod on the fifth floor so we wouldn't have to walk to the basement in the next building over to nurse or pump. Even so, I felt like I was asking for extra accommodations or burdening my labmates and colleagues, even though they assured me everything was fine and that the baby improved morale. I couldn't work as much as I had before. As Andrew Hollinger wrote in this volume, balancing labor as a student with the labor of being a parent isn't easy. I opted out of most on-campus events, especially evening events, and stopped traveling out of town to conferences and workshops. I worried I wasn't keeping up academically, even though I published papers and had spent part of my maternity leave trying to work on my dissertation proposal.

Perhaps I worked more than was strictly necessary because I was afraid of falling into the stereotype of the working mother who scales back to spend more time with her family. No: I was dedicated to my research! I had to show it. So I showed up: leading those studies, organizing a conference workshop while pregnant, never missing a lab meeting. Perhaps I could have gotten away with doing less. But I couldn't do less. Even with the support I had and luck on my side, I felt I had something to prove, to myself, to the rest of the academic world: mothers belong in research, too, and we'll work hard to show it.