

**Balancing Scholarship with Family Care:  
A Guide Commissioned by the Women's Caucus of the  
Society of Christian Ethics**

**Purpose:**

The field of Christian ethics is slowly changing, and it is beginning to include more women and men who have responsibility for the care of dependent family members. Caring for young children is perhaps the most visible issue, but many in our field also struggle to care for sick or elderly partners, siblings, parents, or grandparents. Without a doubt, the road to tenure is more difficult for these scholars, and yet their presence in the field is of great value. This guide is offered to younger scholars with the hope that they may benefit from what others have learned.

**Educate yourself: know your legal rights & what questions to ask about family-friendly practices:**

\*See "The Balancing Act," a regular column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (online for a subscription fee at <http://chronicle.com/>)

\*Resources available (mostly for free) from the American Association of University Professors are compiled at <http://www.aaup.org/Issues/FamilyWork/index.htm>.

**If you're in graduate school:**

\*It seems that there is no perfect time to have a baby. Some studies suggest that graduate students who have babies are less likely to finish their programs. However, some SCE members have had children in graduate school and done just fine. The key is finding an arrangement that will give you enough time for your baby and your work. Supportive partners and other relatives (some with flexible schedules) have been enormously helpful to many of our members.

\*A top priority is finding out how your funding will be affected if you take a reduced course load or temporary leave for the birth of a baby or care for a sick family member. If you use university-sponsored health insurance, investigate how your eligibility/ fees will be affected by a change in your enrollment status. Many programs have no written policies, although it is possible that you may be able to negotiate an individualized plan. If your school has an active graduate student association, they might be able to put you in contact with other students who have negotiated to maintain at least part of their funding while taking a leave or a reduced course load. A good advisor may also be able to help you find funding that will enable you to concentrate on research rather than earning money.

\*If you're still completing coursework, and if there is a consortium of several schools available, consider taking a course each semester at a school that operates on a different schedule from your home school. For instance, if your home school has a fall semester that ends in mid-December, and another school has courses that end in early January, you can stagger your final projects so that they aren't all due simultaneously.

\*Investigate with other students & recent alumni of your program to find a dissertation director who will be your advocate. You want someone who will usher you through the process efficiently, not someone with a track record of ignoring phone calls, procrastinating about reviewing drafts, or insisting that students read every obscure source even remotely relating to their dissertation topic. Ask your director to help you choose a manageable topic, and to craft your dissertation in a format as close as possible to a publishable book style.

\*Likewise, if you will work as a teaching or research assistant, investigate the track record of various faculty mentors. Request to be paired with one who will assign you a modest amount of work, not one who has a reputation for overburdening graduate assistants.

\*If you will teach courses of your own while working on a dissertation, offer to teach in time slots with a pattern of lower enrollment.

\*Graduate student with family care responsibilities are often at a disadvantage during the hiring process because they have not presented papers or published articles at the same rate as their unencumbered peers. Making time for these activities is crucial to your future success.

\*Learn how to be frugal. Check the internet using words like ‘voluntary simplicity,’ ‘frugal,’ or ‘tightwad’ to find websites with household money-saving tips. Let friends and relatives know you prefer practical gifts, rather than large toys. Contrary to what parenting magazines lead new parents to believe, your child does not need the best of everything. There’s nothing wrong with shopping at consignment stores; store brand diaper wipes, diaper cream, oatmeal, and medicine work just as well as name-brands; your baby can sleep in a play pen just as well as in an expensive crib. Consider seeking alternative housing arrangements—for instance, one SCE member earned her apartment in exchange for a modest amount of work as live-in staff for a Ronald McDonald house.

\*Impoverished graduate students with children may be eligible for local, state, and federal benefits such as Medicaid, WIC, reduced-fare passes on public transit, childcare vouchers, or reduced fees at summer camps for school-age children. You may be able to receive a free car seat (even upgraded as your child grows) from your local fire or police department.

\*If you want to take a few years off to have or care for children or other family members, it may be possible to do this during or after graduate school and return to full-time tenure-track work. Publishing during this time is ideal. Several SCE members have used this strategy successfully.

### **As you interview for jobs:**

\*Get the inside story on how family-friendly each institution is. You may want to be discreet about where you seek information. The people who are evaluating your application (i.e., the department or search committee chairs) may not be the best people to ask. They may not know their institution’s policies on family support, and their knowledge of your family status might negatively impact their evaluation of you as an applicant. Informative, unbiased sources include the institution’s website and personnel office. A university’s women’s center or Affirmative Action office may be better sources for information about domestic partner issues.

\*If you check faculty web pages for the department where you are interviewing, you may learn which members have children. Or, if you wait until you arrive for a campus interview, you can try to see which faculty have photos of children in their offices, and then speak to them one-on-one. Try to get a sense of departmental expectations regarding “face time” and service expectations for junior faculty. It is probably unwise to introduce the subject of family-friendly practices during portions of the interview that involve larger groups of faculty.

\*If there are no faculty with children in the department where you interview, you might ask the personnel office if they can connect you with faculty members from other departments who have young children.

\*Check the institution's website for information about criteria for promotion and tenure. Here, and from the personnel office, you may learn whether the institution provides paid family leave; or allows tenure clock extensions, a half-time tenure track option, or modified duties for periods of intense family care. Most importantly, investigate how often faculty actually use these options, and still succeed at earning tenure. Studies have documented that at some institutions, faculty are implicitly (or explicitly) discouraged from utilizing the benefits to which they are officially entitled. Finding a working environment in which family care is valued is crucial.

### **When you get an offer, be prepared to negotiate:**

\*At this point—especially if you're fortunate enough to have multiple offers—the balance of power shifts a bit. Out of dozens of candidates, the department has chosen you. They want you to take their offer. Look up competing institutions on the web and find out what they offer. Then consider asking if your institution can sweeten the deal with family-friendly accommodations, such as:

- Relocation assistance scaled to family size.
- Health insurance that begins when you arrive in your new city, even if this is several weeks before the start of classes.
- Reduced course load for your first semester, a delay in advising obligations until your 2<sup>nd</sup> year, the ability to repeat courses in fall and spring semesters, or to teach accelerated/summer courses as part of your regular load—these measures will help spread your workload, and may also reduce your need for paid childcare.
- Flexible scheduling that takes family care responsibilities into account. For instance, if you have young children at home or an elderly parent who lives a long drive away, will your department allow you to teach all of your courses on Tuesday and Thursdays?
- A position for a partner who is an academic.

\*Academics are particularly challenged by family care issues because our jobs often involve moving away from family. If you are considering multiple offers, do not underestimate the benefit of nearby friends & extended family. You may be happier working at a less prestigious school closer to your loved ones than you would be at a better-known school far away from your support network.

\*On the other hand, if you're considering multiple offers, don't assume that a larger, research oriented university will be more demanding than a smaller one. At a smaller school, you will probably have a heavier teaching load, more course preps, and heavier service expectations, because there are fewer colleagues to share the work. A larger university is also more likely to have supports such as paid maternity leave, better salaries and health insurance plans, on-campus daycare, and graduate research assistants.

### **On the Tenure Track:**

\*Remain in contact with mentors from graduate school who may: give you feedback on your writing, introduce you to others in your field, help you find places to publish your work, and/or provide syllabi for classes you will be asked to teach.

\*Find mentors at your new institution who are engaged in family care. You may want to join or initiate a conversation about combining academic work with caregiving. Talking to those at your institution or similar schools about strategies will be extremely helpful. For more general questions, the SCE Women's Caucus offers mentors who are willing to give long distance advice.

\*Studies of successful faculty tend to show the importance of consistent work on research, teaching, and service from the very beginning of a career. Don't make the mistake of putting research on hold. Carve out a regular time for it and stick to it, as it will make or break you at tenure time at most institutions. New faculty can be overwhelmed by the demands of teaching and service. Find graceful ways of saying no to new commitments. If possible, seek out funding for research leave that will help you stay on track.

\*If you are considering extending the tenure clock, talk to others at your institution. The extra time may be valuable to you, as long as others in your institution do not look unfavorably upon your choice. Some faculty chose not to extend, because they do not want to wait for the extra money and security that tenure brings.

\*If your institution does not offer paid family leave, request it. Talk to other faculty members who have received paid leave, and learn from their strategies. Often, department chairs and deans will negotiate. Tell them that the best institutions offer one semester of paid leave.

\*Recent studies still show that the majority of academic women bear primary responsibility for home and child care. If you have a partner, work toward shared responsibility for care.

\*Caregivers can easily forget to care for themselves. Even though you think you don't have time for yourself, it is important to take some.

\*Become an advocate for university policies and an academic culture that values family care. Things are much better now than thirty years ago because women and men have pushed for changes, dared to say no to unreasonable demands, and asked for accommodations that allowed them to enjoy their families. Continuing the process is a crucial part of seeking more diverse faculties and more balanced lives.