

Dear Editor,

Since I received the RCUK Award for Women of Outstanding Achievement in Science, Engineering, and Technology earlier this year, I have been frequently asked about my views on combining a scientific career with having a life. Perhaps I might take this opportunity to address those among your readers who may have the same question.

Of course, you wouldn't even ask this question if you were not seriously considering a career in science, and if you were not also aware that somewhere down the line, you might have your own family. This is a wonderful view on the horizon, and you may sometimes feel impatient about reaching it. But don't be. I assume that you not only have talent, imagination, energy and enthusiasm – because you certainly need these – but also stamina and resilience. Put these ingredients together and you have the typical high-flyer mix. Now if you want to reach the top then you need to start establishing a career first. This is the time when you have to develop your more nerdy side. This means being obsessive about your ideas and methods, and always going that little bit further. Never mind if others call you workaholic, never mind if not everything goes according to plan on the first go; your reputation will grow with your achievements, and will allow you to shake off everyday trials and tribulations as trivial. You can't really take a rest, even if you can be justly proud of your achievements. Instead, the progress is ever onwards and upwards.

Now let's assume that your biological clock, in strange collusion with social pressure from all sides, will make you remember that you wanted to have a life as well as a career – and this usually means babies. Because nature programmed us this way, babies are intrinsically rewarding. It is a cliché, but there is a whole new world with intense joys as well as anxieties about a little person who wasn't there before, and who will, with any luck, but all too soon, become a big person. Can you take a rest now? No way! Your time is no longer your own. Actually, you need to be watchful because nothing is easier than becoming a slave to the charms of a little child, who is actually a tyrant with a round-the-clock need of your love and attention. This is when you need help to preserve your aims and ideals, your commitment to your work and career.

So here are some tips. Don't fall under the evil spell of those who say that your main duty is to your children, and that work should take a back seat. If you let this propaganda get to you, then you will feel guilty, whatever you decide to do. My view is that you can have both, a career and a life, if you 'cheat', and the reference to Delia is entirely intentional. Just as we don't feel guilty about not making proper bread

from scratch (from seed to grain to flour to dough), so we shouldn't feel guilty about letting someone else do the cleaning, ironing and, yes, the bulk of child care. Of course it is a question of cost, but hopefully you will earn enough later on when you are Head of Department. But perhaps your salary is not sufficient at the time. This is where it is marvellous to have parents who chip in, physically and financially.

I am sure you don't need Delia [Smith] to tell you how to cheat at cooking, but maybe you don't yet know that you can cheat at other things as well. Actually, it is not cheating, just sensible management of resources.

You want to know more? I highly recommend a poignant piece by the wonderful Christiane Nüsslein-Volhard in *Current Biology* (11 March 2008; 18(5):R185-7). It is entitled 'Women in Science – Passion and Prejudice'. Susan Pinker's book *The Sexual Paradox* is fun to read and will make you think again about the disadvantages and advantages of being a woman.

Professor Uta Frith
Emeritus Professor in Cognitive Development
Former Deputy Director (and founder member) of the UCL
Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience

The UK resource centre for women in science, engineering, and technology (RCUK) was founded in 2004 and is funded by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS). It is the Government's lead organisation for the provision of advice, services and policy consultation regarding the under-representation of women in science, engineering and technology (SET). To find out more visit their website: <http://www.ukrc4setwomen.org.uk/>. To read more about Professor Frith's award see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0803/08031401>.)