What prompted you to re-enter research after taking time off?

I would say it was really a re-entry into the faculty scientific pipeline, to try to get back on track for an independent faculty position, so perhaps more of an altered trajectory. Although I took off only 8 weeks after my first child was born, I took off a year each after the birth of my second and third child. Following that, I worked part-time in a research position for about 13 years.

What were the challenges & obstacles you had to overcome?

The main factors in my re-entry were that I wanted to be able to prioritize the research projects and I had very specific opinions about lab environment and management. These goals required working toward obtaining status as a principal investigator.

What do you wish you knew then that you know now?

I wish I could have been more confident that my re-entry would be as successful and inspiring to others. I also wish I knew at the onset of my re-entry how motivating as I pursued my PI status.

What is your advice to other parents who take time off from their careers?

Of course, I would work to encourage them to take that leap of faith and go for it. If you had asked me what was the most rewarding, I would say that having young scientists in my lab, training them, and then keeping in touch as they embark on their professional paths.

Is there anything you would do differently if you had to do it all over?

I have no regrets.

What is the professional moment you are most proud of?

Obtaining my first R01 research award. It symbolized that, as a team comprised of a single talented research specialist and some very bright and dedicated part-time undergraduates, we cultivated an important research niche. It also represents that established researchers on the study section at NIH can think ‘out of the box’ and put into the appropriate context lapses in publication records undergraduates, we cultivated an important research niche. It also represents that established researchers on the study section at NIH can think ‘out of the box’ and put into the appropriate context lapses in publication records.

What makes Dr. Kern stand out is her non-traditional career path that included an extensive fellowship to start a family and returned to academia on a part-time basis after a 2 year hiatus.

Dr. Kern took time off between her post-doctoral fellowship to start a family and returned to academia on a part-time basis after a 2 year hiatus. Dr. Kern’s research focuses on the role of the extracellular matrix in development and disease. In addition to her science, she is passionate about teaching the next generation of scientists and dedicates time to the training of undergraduate students in research.

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What were the challenges & obstacles you had to overcome?

I remember a comment that I had received when I applied for my first pilot grant "I just can’t picture her running her own lab". Although initially very discouraging, ultimately it motivated me to change this perception. Simply because someone prioritizes family, doesn’t mean that they are not capable of running their own lab. Another major challenge was that I lost the early investigator status from NIH that affords a reduction of 5% for an investigator’s first R01 or major research award. Even though NIH has exemptions, I had worked too many part-time months after I obtained my PhD to qualify. The best I could do was make it an “uncomfortable conversation” with the head of the Early Investigator program at NIH when I asked what they were doing to change this. I asked if they were counselling graduate students regarding birth control, the number of children they had, and how they were disseminating the advice to delay obtaining their PhD to make sure to retain their Early Investigator status for when it is pertinent for their career trajectory. Thankfully it was not a career-ending aspect for me but in this climate of funding it very well could have been, and it is a policy that still needs to be changed.

What is your advice to other parents who take time off for your family and coming back to an academic career?

I have no regrets.

Do you have any regrets about the career choices you made, including taking time off for your family and coming back to an academic career? I have no regrets.

Is there anything you would do differently if you had to do it all over? Yes, I would work to connect with others who were balancing career and family responsibilities. I would seek outside objective individuals to help work on my lack of self-confidence and more efficiently navigating non-scientific and what I perceive are more gender-specific challenges that at times were more discouraging than the NIH pay lines.

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We sat down with Dr. Kern for a brief question and answer session.

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