Keep the Momentum Going: Planning for Publishing While on Parental Leave

Yumeng Ou

Welcoming a new life into the world is arguably the most exciting and challenging moment one could ever experience. Although universities and institutions have been adopting generous parental leave policies these days, being an early-career researcher, while holding your newborn baby in your arms, you might still worry that putting your career on pause would make you lose the momentum and eventually your place in the field. I’ve been there, and I’m still working hard to dilute the impact the pause has made to my career. After all, there is no universal box that one can simply check to indicate such a career interruption. While you are on pause, other people are not. Luckily, I’ve got a circle of friends and mentors who have been in the same situation and have shared with me tons of insightful advice on how to stay productive and keep publishing during such a special period of time. The short answer is: yes, it is doable, and wise planning is the key. Here I would like to share some advice and experiences that I’ve found particularly helpful. Before going into detail, I would like to say that you should by no means feel guilty or anxious about not being able to publish as much as in your prime days. A new addition to the family is one of the most precious things in life that you should definitely celebrate and enjoy. Piece of Advice No. 1: Don’t be too hard on yourself!

My next piece of advice is to plan ahead well before the bomb goes off. One thing you will notice after the baby arrives is that your time is now chopped into tiny pieces (my husband and I call them “baby napping breaks”) and any long work blocks become a true luxury. So, how do you make the best of these tiny slots? Compared to the core step of brainstorming for a proof that requires an extremely high level of concentration and continuity, I find it a lot easier to use those slots to actually write a paper: adding in details, carrying out routine calculations, writing the introduction, polishing the arguments. These activities can be done while you are running on low battery (think about those sleep deprived first couple of months) and are much easier to slide back into after you need to step away to warm a bottle of milk. If you plan ahead wisely and assign these tasks specifically for your parental leave, you may be able to actually turn the leave into a productive writing retreat. In addition, even though it may be harder to plan ahead, you might consider using this period of time to revise a paper or write a referee report. In short, despite the fact that keeping your research going may be a very challenging task when you are essentially a walking zombie, there are many other steps in the pipeline of publishing that are still relatively baby friendly.

That being said, it is not impossible to keep pushing your ongoing research projects while on leave. I personally am very grateful to have a group of wonderful collaborators who have helped me tremendously during this period of time. For any collaboration to run smoothly, it’s always good to be frank about your level of commitment, especially when you are planning for or have been on parental leave. This way, you can collaboratively figure out a strategic plan so that you will have a chance to take a backseat during your leave and let others take the lead. There might be some suitable small tasks that you can take on such as solving a very concrete subproblem, or proofreading an argument. You will have the chance to “pay them back” by contributing more to the project after your childcare responsibilities are not as overwhelming. Having an ongoing collaboration (or multiple collaborations) while you are on leave will also help better structure your time and give you a sense of community.

Moreover, parental leave may actually be one of the best times to seriously plan for your future publishing. After all, people understand your struggles and wouldn’t usually expect you to publish as much (or any, to be frank). It is hence a great time to slow down and plan for your future research directions. Contradictory as it may sound, I would say it’s actually a golden time to write grant proposals (I’ve done two), even though you feel that your schedule is already crazily packed. This would give you a chance to step away from highly intense research activities to take a break, while at the same time gathering good ideas and getting prepared for future projects. Again, compared to core research activities, idea gathering and grant writing are much more friendly to busy new parents. I’ve developed a habit of listening to online talks (one of the few good things the pandemic has contributed to mathematicians) while rocking my son to sleep or even changing his diaper, which helps me keep up with the evolving terrain of the field and find good potential research projects. Thanks to modern technology, my son seems not to have been bothered (wireless headphones are a godsend!). In the end, it doesn’t even matter that much whether your grant proposal is successful or not (I know, it stinks). After your pause is over and the “play” button is hit, there will be a clear roadmap of future projects that you can follow to work towards new publications.

I know that all these are easier said than done, and being a new parent is such an overwhelming experience. It is okay to slow down, okay to be gentle on yourself. And you absolutely should. It is such a special and precious time for you, your baby, and your family, and you should by all means.

Yumeng Ou is an assistant professor of mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania. Her email address is yumengou@sas.upenn.edu.

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2369
Robert Ghrist is the Andrea Mitchell Penn Integrates Knowledge Professor of Mathematics and Electrical and Systems Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania. His email address is ghrist@math.upenn.edu.
DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.1090/noti2370