



University of
Lethbridge

NEWS RELEASE

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Pandemic underlines need to revamp academic system that disadvantages parenting researchers and women

The COVID-19 pandemic pressure tests our societies in many ways and reveals often overlooked, long-existing and festering systemic challenges and disadvantages. One of the most universal experiences associated with the current pandemic has been the struggle of working parents forced to balance full-time, stay-at-home jobs with the challenge of parenting and home-schooling.

University of Lethbridge researchers Drs. H.J. Wieden and Ute Kothe, along with graduate student Luc Roberts, detailed in a recent article published in *EMBO Reports*, that the struggle is just as acute in the academic world — widening an already existing gulf between researchers who are active parents and those who are not, thereby presenting a threat to the diversity, inclusivity and quality of research communities. The authors identify the pandemic as an opportunity to rethink and overhaul the academic career and reward system that consistently disadvantages parenting researchers and women.

[Parenting researchers — an invisible divide](#), examines the pressure active parents face while trying to juggle pushing scientific boundaries and child strollers all at once. In the article, Kothe, Wieden and Roberts argue an already broken system is being exacerbated by the pandemic, which only weakens the system in the end.

“The current structure of the academic system — funding, publishing incentives and career options — disadvantages parents and women in particular,” says Wieden. “The present pandemic deepens the already existing divide between parenting researchers and their peers without such obligations. In the long run, this will negatively affect recruiting and retaining junior researchers and maintaining a diverse talent pool.”

Roberts is a PhD candidate now at home with a toddler. His wife, a front-line medical worker, must continue to work out of the home, leaving him as the primary parent. A recent email he received reminded him that, “It is work from home and not a vacation.” Struggling to work on his thesis given his new responsibilities, he blistered at suggestions he should be even more productive at home with so much free time to devote to writing and publishing.

“Let’s be honest, unless my thesis is going to be about the sounds farmyard animals make — coauthored by my son of course — it is not getting written,” says Roberts in the article. “It feels as though I have to choose between my child and a scientific career, and as much as I love science, I am always going to pick my family.”

An age-old struggle, there seems to be an overriding perception that dedicated researchers are devoted to their craft because it is more important. Wieden, Kothe and Roberts would beg to differ, especially now.

“Without any doubt, the well-being of our children and family is most important,” says Kothe. “But it is not only for selfish reasons that our children must be the highest priority. They will be a generation who has experienced and been shaped by the pandemic — the greatest global crisis since the Second World War. It is essential that they are not traumatized by this experience, that they become strong and smart individuals who can build a resilient and intelligent society that is better prepared to handle future threats and pandemics. All parents have an essential and system-relevant job.”

Therein lies the conundrum and what the authors would like to see corrected when the pandemic ends. Good scientific minds have been put in this situation for years, pushed along by a publish or perish culture where rewards are based solely on productivity. As a result, the scientific community may be losing valuable scientific contributors who place familial priorities high.

“How we will deal with this situation will define the character of our research community. Do we reward only the most productive ones, or do we embrace anyone who genuinely conducts high-quality research?” asks Wieden.

They call for a complete overhaul of the academic system as it is currently constructed, recognizing at long last that true equity, diversity and inclusion is not a compromise, but a prerequisite to fostering strong and creative research communities that generate high-quality knowledge. Inclusion means fair recognition of the contributions of parent researchers, women and other underrepresented groups — including their additional obligations.

“Now is the time to completely re-think the academic system,” they argue. “It is critical that we analyze the effects of the pandemic on parenting researchers and trainees and seize the opportunity to thoroughly revamp the academic system and not simply go back to the old routine once it is over.”

For a look at the full article, visit [EMBO Reports](#).

To view online, visit [parenting researchers](#).

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Contact:

Dr. Hans-Joachim Wieden, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry
hj.wieden@uleth.ca

Dr. Ute Kothe, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry
ute.kothe@uleth.ca

Luc Roberts, Department of Chemistry & Biochemistry
luc.roberts@uleth.ca