

Managing a PhD and motherhood: Kirstin's Story

If you become pregnant during your PhD, don't panic! Ignore negative advice that it will make things more difficult and remember that there is never going to be a right time to have a child. As you go through an academic career you have ever more responsibilities and ever less time. So waiting for a better time makes little sense (you're only going to get older). It's perfectly possible to finish a full time PhD with a young child, although it can place strain on relationships, as parenthood does in any case.

My experience was that becoming pregnant part-way through my first PhD year rather than hindering, actually helped me to motivate myself and to get organised, as well as allowing me some breathing space to think about the shape of the thesis.

I began my AHRC-funded PhD in September 2003 and became pregnant in May 2004, having done little in the way of writing at that stage. I had read around the subject, begun to refine a research question and done quite a lot of travelling to collect materials. In July 2004, I applied to the AHRC for a 12 month period of maternity leave from January 2005-2006, to coincide with the due date in February.

With the new deadline of September 2008 and the birth-date approaching I got down to taking advantage of the remaining time to focus on writing. I upgraded successfully twelve months in, mid-way through October 2004. One out of my five PhD chapters was 'in the bag' and I had a clear sense of what the other four chapters would be about. It was then great to have the time officially 'off' while still thinking and working on the PhD - and with a sense of breathing space to watch the project take shape.

My partner and I lived in a shared house, renting two adjacent rooms. Someone advised me to put my name down on the list for Council Housing while pregnant. During my period of unpaid maternity leave I was entitled to state benefits – Income Support, Child Tax Credit and Housing Benefit. Although we did not have much money, it was quite possible to manage for a year with these benefits. As far as I remember, the first 4 months or so included maternity pay. Although the remainder of the leave period was unpaid, I had time to budget in advance and set aside some money for the unpaid months. I also extended my bank overdraft to the maximum for this period.

My daughter was born without complications in February 2005. The first few months were very child-oriented as they should be, I think. But, after a while I found that I wanted to read and write more again and began to work on the project when I could. By the time she was 6 months old or so our daughter was in a fairly regular routine, first with two naps a day, which we soon got down to one longer nap, in the afternoons. Young children need lots of sleep and I was careful to get everything else – housework etc. out of the way whilst my daughter was awake so as to clear time to work whenever she was asleep in the daytime and early evenings. For the first 11 months I snatched the work hours as and when I could in this way, and we took turns with my partner, who also worked at home, to give one another time to work.

I became frustrated by the division of labour between myself and my partner, though, as he preferred to work in the evenings and was not a mornings person. So, relying on him to be up and about in order to enable me to work during the day increasingly proved a major point of conflict that needed to be resolved. If he was not up and about in the mornings I would feel frustrated that sitting down to work at 2pm was too late in the day to get enough done. I realised that mid-morning was my optimum time for working as I found that by the late afternoon / evening, I was too tired to do much academic work.

When the scholarship payments restarted in January 2006 I was entitled to a dependents' allowance from the AHRC, as well as continuing to receive benefits in the form of Income Support and Child Tax Credits, and so I resolved the childcare sharing problem by paying for four hours of childcare a day. We found a nice girl who agreed for £6 per hour to come to the house from 10am till 2pm, five days a week. They played or went to the park. I could get on with some work on a regular basis and could often hear that they were having fun in the next room - which was reassuring. At 2pm, before leaving, the girl would put my daughter down for her nap and she would sleep until 4 or 5pm each day. This routine suited us all very well and we continued it for a year, until our daughter's second birthday.

When she turned two, we joined a local parent-run nursery cooperative with a small number of children. By the age of two children are very happy to meet others and really thrive in collective contexts. It was all very local and worked well for us as we could not have afforded a nursery place (although later Sure Start was introduced to help fund places for three year olds, and then extended to two year olds). The co-operative nursery meant that one of the parents could work one day at the nursery in exchange for reduced fees. My partner and I took it in turns to work at the nursery one day a week, working fortnightly. This was an excellent way of developing a supportive community feeling and a network of parents to share childcare with.

When I needed to attend research seminars or conferences there was a network of people we could share childcare with if her father was not able to look after her for any reason. I also found that my mother and a number of friends were happy to come on research trips with me, as I needed to take her with me while I was still breastfeeding. These people were happy to take care of her for a few hours a day while I went into libraries or interviewed people for my project. Once I stopped feeding her, I was able to make short research trips leaving her with her father.

I completed my thesis in time to meet the AHRC deadline – three paid years with a forth 'grace year' for writing up, in September 2008. The grace year is unpaid of course, so I saved some money in advance for this to pay to continue to attend the nursery for six months. As it was a parent's cooperative, it was possible for us to negotiate lower fees in exchange for taking on more responsibilities, and so I became the nursery accountant in exchange for one free day a week, and we continued with our fortnightly 'parent days'. When my daughter was three and a half, a free full-time nursery place became available at our local primary school and we left the parent-run nursery and were able to stop paying fees.

Although having a child meant that I completed a year later than I would otherwise have done, I think on reflection that it was a better piece of work as a result of being less rushed.

So, there really is no need to panic. Find out what your options are in terms of benefits and childcare, and enjoy combining intellectual work with parenting. It is a good mixture in my experience – one provides the perfect antidote to the stresses of the other. My daughter benefited from a combination of close contact with both her parents at home, a good relationship with a nice nanny, and then the fun of a small, close-knit nursery to develop socially in a safe happy environment with friends that she has kept up with since then locally.

The other bonus was that when my daughter was two, I approached the Council Housing Office to ask where I was on the waiting list. They ‘escalated’ my claim, as I had been wrongly placed in the ‘general band’. It turned out that living in a shared house (where you share a bathroom and kitchen with others who are not in your family) with a child automatically places you in the ‘urgent’ band. When my daughter was three we moved into a very nice council flat, where we live happily near the great local primary school. My daughter moved from the full time nursery at the primary school to reception class when she was four and a half, which gave her a strong social base and sense of security and continuity to transition into primary education.

The year after my PhD, I worked as a visiting lecturer at three institutions, and then secured a three year research fellowship. I have enough time for work now while my daughter attends school and clubs and so on, and after she has gone to bed at 7.30pm. My partner is able to take over when I am away, and relatives are happy to help at half-terms and holidays if necessary.