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Breastfeeding on the Job Market

*I knew I risked ruining my candidacy by bringing my infant daughter to the interview. Here’s why I did it anyway.*



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By Lesley Smith

Iwaited outside the department chair’s office for a 10 a.m. job interview, while she talked with students down the hall. At 10 after, she was free. Once in her office, I admired the art on her walls, and she told me the story of where it came from. At 20 after, she started the interview. After 10 minutes of discussing a syllabus (hers) for a class I might teach, she looked at her watch and exclaimed that our time was up.

Looking at a copy of my interview schedule for the day, she noted: "But you have free time now!"

I nodded, even as I feared that breast milk would soon start leaking all over the front of my crisp suit jacket. I imagined myself in the interview chair, dark circles expanding from each breast in a double bulls-eye pattern.

Not wanting to cut our talk short so soon, I suggested that we keep talking for another 10 minutes. I was acutely aware of my dueling needs: (1) to impress this person, who was not just the chair of the department but also head of the search committee, and (2) to nurse my five-month-old daughter who was waiting for me down the hall and had already gone four hours without a feeding. Any minute, I expected to hear her wails echoing through the halls of the department where I’d made it into the final three for a scarce and much-coveted tenure-track job.

By bringing my daughter with me to the campus visit, I knew I risked ruining my candidacy. I know people who routinely remove their wedding bands for interviews at the Modern Language Association conference. Bringing your baby to the interview is a rather more obvious statement.

I had planned my job search so that I would be able to do campus visits in the spring of 2014, when my daughter would be eating solid food and I would have had time to build up a supply of pumped milk. This particular search, though, ran early: I interviewed by Skype in October 2013 and was invited to the campus in November.

At first, I was excited. It was a great job at an elite liberal-arts college. Then my mind turned to the logistics. I would be traveling thousands of miles from overseas to a remote part of the West Coast; the campus visit would require me to be gone for five days. I calculated the amount of milk I would have to express to cover both my absence and my workdays in the interim. There was no way to express that amount of milk in the time I had left before the campus visit. I wanted the job, but I didn’t want to put my daughter on formula.

I had found only about 10 jobs in my field. This one might be my only chance. My visiting position was coming to an end, and I had no sure way in sight of paying rent and putting food on the table for the coming year.

So I took a risk: I let the chair know I would be bringing my daughter and someone to take care of her, whose ticket I would of course cover. I asked for nursing breaks in the two-day schedule of talks, interviews, lunches, and dinners. The chair obliged in a professional manner. The administrative assistant who drew up my schedule slotted in half-hour blocks of discreetly named "free time" and found me a suitable vacant office in which to feed my daughter.

I wrote my talk and devised my teaching demo in the hours after I had gotten home from my visiting position and nursed my daughter to sleep. I packed my handouts and interview clothes into a suitcase that was also bursting with baby clothes and toys. My husband took time off to come along and look after our daughter. We flew through the day, stayed in an airport hotel, and drove four hours to the campus through beautiful scenery, wondering if this was where our future lay.

When I arrived on the campus, no one seemed to know I had brought my daughter. People expressed surprise about the extra breaks padding my interview schedule. At first, I appreciated that my personal circumstances had remained undisclosed, but it soon caused confusion and even resentment. One dean hadn’t been told that dinner would be later than usual and seemed irritated with me about it, as if I had delayed the dinner just to go relax and powder my nose rather than feed my child.

In addition to class visits, I had individual interviews with every member of the department as well as relevant members of other departments: 10 interviews, two lunches with students, two dinners with faculty members—and, of course, my research presentation and teaching demonstration.

During my "free time," I rushed to my appointed "office" to feed my daughter as I inhaled carbohydrates and water (breastfeeding makes you extremely hungry and thirsty). I looked enviously at other people’s coffees, knowing that caffeine would only keep my daughter, and thus me, from sleeping.

I did not get the job.

I can’t say how much or whether the presence of my daughter, and reactions to the impression of a laid-back interview schedule, contributed to the variety of factors behind that decision.

Fortunately, I secured a tenure-track offer in the spring. For that campus visit, I had time to express enough milk that I did not have to reveal myself as a nursing mother—or a mother at all. I left my daughter behind and did not ask for any special accommodations.

But that led to its own problems. As I flew to another respected liberal-arts college, this time on the East Coast, I pumped in the airplane bathroom to avoid the pain of engorgement and was humiliated when someone impatient with waiting pushed the locked door open, displaying me on the toilet seat in the full glory of a double pump. When I landed, I frantically pumped in the stall of a busy bathroom before I met the member of the search committee who was there to pick me up.

My itinerary during the campus visit ran over time. At one point, scrambling for an excuse, I said I had to check out of my hotel so I could get away in order to relieve my swollen breasts and prevent leakage. During my exit interview with the warm, collegial chair, my chest hurt yet again. I couldn’t wait to get to the airport to pump, even as I knew that I should be enjoying this final moment of a campus visit I had relished.

Flying home, I realized my husband and I had spent five years trying to plan starting our family around the vagaries of the job market: trying to time pregnancy to avoid "showing" at either MLA or a campus visit; guessing when it was "safe" to reveal one’s family status; enduring the bodily sufferings—not to mention the emotional dismay—of living apart to pursue our careers and then separating from our new daughter.

The geographical demands and extended time frame of the academic job market ask too much from would-be, new, and (I suspect) seasoned mothers. If we want to support the careers of women in academe—and do that without supposing that it must mean deferring or abandoning dreams of having children—we must revisit our hiring processes.

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<http://chronicle.com/article/Breastfeeding-on-the-Job/149549?cid=megamenu>