

Laura Itzhaki

Reader, Department of Pharmacology

Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

As the head of her research group, Laura is kept busy with grant applications, teaching responsibilities and guiding more than 10 graduate students through their more or less organised doctoral and Master's degrees, while a few couple of post-docs help out wherever they can. A normal supervisor's job, one would say. One of the things Laura misses most about a "normal day" is being able to take the time for chatting to people at tea time and after departmental talks in a more social environment.

Laura coordinates her work arrangements with her family commitments. Being primary carer for two children and being an academic is already challenging. Having a child with special needs can be an entirely different matter. Her younger son was born with Down Syndrome and other health complications. During the most difficult times when he was ill as a baby, before he was able to attend nursery, Laura was glad to have a carer living with them. Her help was indispensable if Laura wanted to keep her lab running and producing good science. Things settled down when each of her sons was in nursery full-time and she did not need much flexibility in her working hours. But as her older son started school she did not have after-school care and hence she picked him up every afternoon. Although it was cutting short her day at work, she loved being there for him at the school gates, getting to know the other children and their parents and swapping playdates. "There are benefits to having children that one cannot measure", she says. In the evenings she would then continue working.

Just after Laura moved her lab to Pharmacology, where she had secured a lectureship, her younger son started school. Unfortunately, he had difficulties adjusting the new surroundings, which meant that Laura needed to go to school for lunch every day as well as drop him off in the mornings and pick him up in the afternoons. Eventually the situation improved and Laura could return to more regular hours. She often works a few hours in the morning from home, then comes in to the Department and leaves usually about 4pm to spend the rest of the day with her children. If meetings are likely to run late, she has a childminder who comes to receive her younger son as he arrives back from school. The only ongoing issue is childcare during school holidays, as there is very little provision for special needs and it is prohibitively expensive. Laura is looking into establishing a University initiative to support staff who have children with special needs so that they can overcome the barriers to working that they encounter – such an initiative would complement other University initiatives that often cannot be accessed by these parents.

As things stand, her working hours have become normal, not only to the members of her own lab but to her colleagues in the Department as well. Although it might be challenging from time to time to arrange meetings, she is always there virtually. Laura's family commitments make it difficult for her to attend conferences. She has received funds from the Returning Carer's Scheme for that purpose, but the nature of her caring responsibilities often does not allow for long-distance travel. Laura has also experienced that the career progression of women with children tends to be slower than for women without. However, in a department with a good working environment and supportive colleagues it is not impossible. Since her appointment in Pharmacology, Laura has been promoted to Reader and had full support from her Head of Department throughout.

The freedom and flexibility in her working hours enable Laura to combine academic success and a complicated family situation in the best possible way. With her background and understanding and as the department's Athena SWAN academic lead, she actively promotes flexibility within her group and her department. She encourages post-docs and other academic staff to take advantage of all available opportunities, such as the Returning Carer's Scheme or Dorothy Hodgkin Fellowships, which allow them to be scientists and carers at the same time.