

Rachel Oliver

Reader, Department of Material Sciences and Metallurgy

Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

In academia it often seems difficult, if not impossible, to lead a research group on a part-time basis. Rachel, however, is the perfect counter example. She had been leading her research group for a few years on a Royal Society Fellowship before she was fortunate to secure a University Lectureship. Her ability to combine childcare with her position as a group leader and lecturer was based on three crucial factors: the flexibility of the Head of Department and childcare, having “about 6 different back up plans” for childcare, and the willingness to be flexible herself.

After her son was born in 2010, Rachel took 18 weeks of maternity leave. While continuing to breastfeed she returned to work on a 50% basis under the graduated return from maternity leave scheme. Probably, it would have been possible to take a longer maternity leave but Rachel felt that staying at home for longer would have removed her too much from what was happening in her group and her department. Working mornings only enabled her to keep on top of things, while still taking care of a baby less than half a year old. Rachel’s husband is a medical consultant who has to commute for over an hour both mornings and evenings. Due to the nature of his work, it is difficult for him to take up major caring responsibilities. Hence, their son went to nursery and is now attending school. The balance they have worked out for themselves is that “he does more travelling, and I do more picking up” – however, Rachel thinks that she has gotten the better end of the deal!

At the point when she finished her graduated return, 9 months after returning to work, she commenced her lecturing duties and changed to 80% which allowed her one day off a week. However, since the price of full-time childcare did not differ much from a pro-rata basis for four days, she was able to be very flexible as to which day she would take off. Furthermore, if there was a last-minute meeting on that particular day, or something else required her presence in the department, she could drop off her son at short notice. Considering her responsibilities of lecturing multiple undergraduate courses and being the co-director of a Master’s course, having a son of just over one year required her to have multiple emergency plans. It was very helpful that her dad and his wife were living close by and were flexible enough to help out from time-to-time. Other family members also provided support.

These days, Rachel is working 90%. Three days a week she leaves early to pick up her son from school. Again, the after-school day care is very flexible and therefore she is not confined to specific hours. At the beginning of each week Rachel assesses her work load and depending on that she arranges for childcare. Although most weeks her hours add up to full-time, the part-time agreement secures her the flexibility she needs for spending time with her son. It also helps her to limit additional teaching and administrative tasks. Rachel was promoted to Reader in 2013 and won a prestigious Leverhulme Trust Senior Research Fellowship for the 2015/2016 academic year, so she is currently on leave from her teaching duties. These successes illustrate the potential to make career progress whilst working flexibly. In her free time she trains for marathons and the whole family has started mountain biking again since the son is old enough to join in.