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COLLEEN MORGAN



Archaeologist Colleen Morgan's daughter plays with a tool at a field site in Qatar.

PARENTING

## The family way

*Many researcher-parents are striving to conduct fieldwork while accompanied by their children.*

BY EMILY SOHN

**N**ana Apenem Dagadu has taken her two young children to Senegal, Uganda and Ghana — all locations for her fieldwork as a reproductive- and sexual-health researcher. Her son, aged six, and her daughter, three, have often joined her in the field, partly owing to necessity, and partly because Dagadu enjoys travelling with her kids. She also wants them to explore different parts of the world, including her and her husband's home country, Ghana.

Although there have been challenges, such as trying to get her baby to swallow anti-malaria medication, bringing her kids on fieldwork trips has brought many rewards, says Dagadu, an adviser at Save the Children, a non-governmental organization in Washington DC. Her family has developed strong relationships with the caregivers in other countries who tended to Dagadu's children while she was in the field. And her children have come to feel a strong, personal link to their parents' native country. "They say they're from Africa, and they feel very much connected," says Dagadu. "That's turning out to be a big part of their identities."

Researcher-parents sometimes choose or might be obligated to take their children with them on fieldwork trips. These excursions often require extra planning, gear and creative thinking to incorporate childcare. But those who travel with their children say that their presence can help to break down cultural barriers and forge connections. Sometimes, those connections lead to insights that inspire fresh lines of research on topics such as local views on health care and cultural practices.

Children can also benefit from exposure to other cultures, as well as seeing their parents at work. Away from home, lifelong memories form that can shape families, says John Ward, an archaeologist at Lund University in Sweden. He and his wife, Maria Nilsson, who is also an archaeologist, spend months at a time doing fieldwork in Egypt, where they stay on a boat on the Nile River with their two children, aged four and one. "Life is short: children are part of that, and it's not a hindrance," Ward says.

### CHILDCARE CHALLENGE

Taking kids into the field requires more planning than would a solo trip, and that preparation sometimes has to begin before your child is born, says Kelly Dombroski, a human geographer at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. She ►

► realized while she was pregnant that she would be taking her baby to China when he or she was about three months old. To prepare, she researched parenting styles that might make travelling with an infant easier.

As soon as her daughter was born in 2006, Dombroski used a sling to carry the baby, which eliminated the need for an unwieldy pram. “We really tried to think about how you travel with a baby,” she says.

Finding childcare solutions can be one of the toughest logistical challenges of bringing kids on research trips, especially because grants do not usually cover payments to caregivers. Some researchers can get help from family members, says Kathryn Grace, a geographer at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, who studies maternal and child health.

Grace did her PhD research in Guatemala when her first child was five years old. In the years that followed, she spent weeks at a time doing research in Burkina Faso in West Africa. In both countries, her schedule was unpredictable, and hiring a caregiver was logistically and financially impossible. Fortunately, her husband was able to join her.

Hiring caregivers is an option that can lead to the development of valuable relationships, and might be affordable, depending on the location. In Uganda, Dagadu paid US\$20 each day for two weeks’ of childcare. During a one-week-long trip to Senegal in 2017, she paid \$40 a day to a local colleague’s niece, who was on holiday from university, to mind both children. These amounts were fair wages for the caregivers, according to other local caregivers and Dagadu’s colleagues.

On her first visit to Uganda, Dagadu hired the cousin of a local colleague. When that caregiver graduated from university and got a job, the caregiver’s sister took over on a subsequent trip. After repeated visits to Uganda over several years, the sisters have become like family to Dagadu and her kids, who call them aunts.

Dagadu also researches the local norms to work out how much to pay caregivers, and includes potential caregivers in those conversations. These discussions enable her to meet the cultural expectations surrounding wages without paying exorbitant amounts that could make similar assistance difficult to arrange for other researchers in the field in the future.

Travelling with kids is often simplest in the first few years of their lives, say researcher-parents. As kids get older, being creative with funds can help to make research trips work, Dombroski says. In spring 2018, she received a lump-sum fellowship that she used to support field research in Bhutan, Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, Australia and Italy. The money would have been enough to pay for a hotel and three meals a day in a restaurant. Instead, she used it during the Australia portion of the trip to rent a home and buy groceries so that she could accommodate her entire family, which now includes four children aged between 6 months and 13 years old. Her eldest daughter,

who was 11 at the time, also accompanied her to Bhutan.

Yet juggling finances for childcare doesn’t always work out. Dombroski was denied money from her university’s discretionary fund to bring her breastfeeding son to a writing symposium in Italy and therefore had to turn down the trip. And Grace took several months off from fieldwork in Burkina Faso in 2015 when her third baby was a few months old, because she didn’t want to take anti-malaria medication while she was nursing.

Grace recommends trying not to worry about missing opportunities for fieldwork or publishing papers when others are collecting the data — something with which she struggled at the time. Although her project — about climate, land use and health in West Africa — lost some momentum during her time away from the field, Grace was able to bring her son, then one year old, when she went back to Burkina Faso the following summer. As an assistant professor who was not yet up for tenure, she found that she could resume her research when she returned. “I thought at the time that I was really missing out,” she says. “But going back, I felt like I hit the ground running again.”

Shifting fieldwork closer to home can be another solution to accommodating childcare, says Christopher Lynn, an anthropologist at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. He and his wife found out in 2002, while he was a master’s student, that they were having triplets. When the babies were born prematurely and needed extra care, he switched his research focus from topics that required far-away fieldwork to a study of Pentecostal churches near his home.

He now runs a laboratory that trains students to do local fieldwork. In a 2018 study, he interviewed more than 1,000 anthropologists and postgraduate students about how they balance fieldwork with looking after children

(C. D. Lynn *et al.* *PLoS ONE* **13**, e0203500; 2018). Most, he found, had family support to help subsidize their research. For scientists who don’t have independent resources or other ways to make it work, he advises looking locally. Sometimes, that might require a shift in research topic or a more flexible solution. “Some problems don’t have easy answers,” he says.

## BABY ABROAD

Taking children on fieldwork trips is often not as idyllic as it might sound, and the experience can raise complicated emotions. When digital archaeologist Colleen Morgan’s daughter was eight months old in 2017, she and her husband, who is also an archaeologist, took the baby to their field site in Qatar. For six weeks, the family stayed in a large house with the rest of the field team. But the baby woke up throughout the night, sometimes every two hours. Some nights, amid much infant screaming, it took them hours to get her to sleep.

Morgan, a lecturer at the University of York, UK, brought along ear plugs, which she offered to everyone in the house. And although Morgan worried, the crying didn’t seem that loud to other team members, says Ben Sharp, a former field archaeologist now based in Billingshurst, UK, who lived in the house at the time. He was so tired by the end of the day, he says, that he slept through it all. And he appreciated the presence of a baby at the dig house. “I think that it was good for the team, having a baby around,” says Sharp, who is not a parent. “It was relatively amusing for everyone getting up in the morning and having breakfast with a baby. It gave us all a distraction from work when we needed it.”

However, Morgan still felt uncomfortable about imposing her life on her colleagues. She felt awkward about drying the parts of her breast pump in the house dish rack. And she worried about how the baby might be affecting

## EASE THE WAY

### Fieldwork checklist

Experienced researcher-parents who have taken children on fieldwork trips offer tips for smoothing potential bumps in the road.

- **Become acclimatized.** Colleen Morgan, a digital archaeologist at the University of York, UK, recommends finding out where the nearest hospital and medical-care providers are located before setting out.
- **Bring the right gear.** Depending on the child’s age, pack specific equipment such as a stout carrier and the longest-range baby monitor that is available. Morgan advises getting one that is battery powered — her own monitor enabled her to put her infant down to nap in other people’s houses, despite a lack of access to electricity.

- **Take sunscreen and a tent.** Many researchers bring powerful sunscreen; others take a small tent that offers some protection from ultraviolet light and mosquitoes so that a baby can nap inside.
- **Buy goods locally.** It’s usually possible — and can be a fun adventure — to acquire nappies, food and other necessities on site. Morgan points out that bringing fewer things reduces the risk of offending local people by implying that your gear is better than theirs.
- **Consider the potential costs of medical care.** Some researchers travel without health insurance and pay for visits to doctors. Others buy extra insurance to cover their children while travelling. **E.S.**



Archaeologist John Ward shows his daughter how to operate a camera in the field in Egypt.

team dynamics in an already intense situation. “You just feel like the mum that tried to push her own way in, or tried to do the impossible,” says Morgan. “That was really a struggle.”

The experience can also raise parenting challenges, says Grace, whose five-year old daughter attended a school in Guatemala without any Spanish language skills when they arrived in 2006. She eventually became fluent in Spanish, made friends and got invited to classmates’ birthday parties. But it was challenging for the first couple of months, and, Grace didn’t feel comfortable asking for help. She didn’t even know who to ask. “I felt like it was my fault for having a kid, and so I needed to deal with that, like, I didn’t want to burden anyone,” she says. “I was working a lot and she was struggling and we didn’t always have the support that we needed.”

Researchers who have juggled family life with fieldwork recommend considering health and travel insurance, and seeking support from supervisors, colleagues and other researchers who have had similar experiences. Until April, Dombroski belonged to a private social-media group of ethnographers that hosts discussions about doing fieldwork while accompanied by kids. Members pose thorny questions and offer their experience or potential solutions, Dombroski says.

Health insurance is another concern, and researchers can take various approaches to planning for illness and travel emergencies. University insurance often covers researchers but not their families (see ‘Fieldwork checklist’).

To get work done with children around, experienced researcher-parents suggest altering work schedules. In Qatar, Morgan got up at 4.30 a.m. to work before her baby awoke. On days that she went into the field, she would take the baby with her until midday, when temperatures rose. After her husband returned from the dig later in the afternoon,

she would hand over the baby and resume work at her computer.

As children get older, their care needs change, Morgan points out, and field researchers will need to adapt. At eight months old, she says, her daughter’s sleeping habits were unpredictable, but she was portable. On Morgan’s next trip to the same location, when her daughter was 20 months old, the baby’s naps were longer and more regular, but she demanded more attention and couldn’t just be carried around to accommodate work tasks.

By the time kids reach school age, Ward adds, parents might have to make some tough decisions. He and Nilsson will need to work out whether they will take turns to go to Egypt for fieldwork, or both go for shorter periods, so that their daughter can attend kindergarten in Sweden.

Being flexible during a fieldwork trip is key, says Dombroski. She returned to Asia for a one-year stay in 2007 to work on her PhD project, when her daughter was eight months old. Her original goal had been to interview Muslim women about the local economy in a village that required a drive over a high-altitude pass to reach. But the elevation might have been too high for the baby, who wouldn’t have been able to say if she was feeling sick. And Dombroski couldn’t leave the infant, who was still breastfeeding, at home. Instead, she worked with her supervisor to develop another project, which focused on women from all ethnic groups in a city lower down on the Tibetan Plateau.

#### BENEFICIAL FOR ALL

Despite the logistical and financial struggles, seasoned researcher-parents say that the rewards of bringing children into the field are many, and can even include the development of new research questions. In China, Dombroski found that the presence of her baby prompted conversations and unsolicited advice, which

caused her to question her assumptions about parenting. She received disapproving remarks, for example, about her baby’s outerwear, an issue that she had never considered when living in New Zealand, where children wear short trousers all year round, even in winter.

The comments led Dombroski to investigate the idea of ‘awkward engagements’, in which the cultural behaviours of people from differing backgrounds don’t match. That work led to several publications that resonated with other researchers. Some of her most cited work, she says, has been the result of research trips that included her children, which suggests that their presence did not inhibit her work. And she regularly gets e-mails from other researchers about those papers and her blog, *Throwtogetherness*, which includes articles on parenting. Family, she says, “doesn’t have to be something that holds me back”.

Similarly, Grace published a study on the links between climate change and reproductive health (*K. Grace Nature Clim. Change* 7, 479–485; 2017), which was influenced by her own experiences of breastfeeding, as well as talking to women about breastfeeding in Burkina Faso.

Grace thinks that sharing stories of including children in fieldwork with other scientists is an important step towards changing funding policies to help parent-researchers to bring their kids into the field, and can give researchers the confidence to do so, she adds.

“Science benefits from having women willing to go into the field while nursing their babies.”

“Science benefits from having women willing to go into the field while nursing their babies, and I think it’s a shame that the costs are on us,” Grace says.

She has started to add a note to her syllabi to say that babies are welcome in class. The challenges she faced when first taking her kids into the field “made me feel like I was doing it wrong,” she says. “But I think science has it wrong.”

Ward marvels at his four-year-old daughter, who can speak English, Swedish, Arabic and some French, thanks to her exposure to a multinational research team. His son, who turned one while they were in Egypt, thinks of the research boat as a big fort. Both kids have become accustomed to finding 3,500-year-old human remains spread out on the dining room table.

“It’s a totally different life and I wouldn’t change a thing,” Ward says. “There is a euphoria in this family unit of ours. It’s wonderful and I don’t think you can easily put that into words, no matter all the ups and downs. If you have the opportunity to do it, do it. You’ll never regret it.” ■

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