The article discusses attitudes in academia towards female academics who have more than two children. It quotes women who say they are looked on with skepticism about their commitment to academics and their ability to handle the job. Statistics are cited to the effect that female doctors and lawyers on average have more children than female professors. The average number of children cited for American female professors is .66, compared to about two for average American women as a whole. A study of graduate students indicates that low numbers consider research universities to be family-friendly places for tenure-track professors. Female academics are quoted saying there is a mind/body divide in academia going back to the clerical tradition valuing the life of the mind over bodily issues.

Is Having More Than 2 Children an Unspoken Taboo?

By academic standards, Rebecca R. Richards-Kortum has it made. She is a full professor of bioengineering at Rice University, runs a thriving cancer-research laboratory, and is a member of the prestigious National Academy of Engineering.

But with four children at home, she sometimes feels like an academic outcast. In fact, Ms. Richards-Kortum says she is most comfortable in her dual roles as professor and mother during the research trips she takes several times a year to southern Africa.

"Here I'm this weird, freaky person because I have four kids," she says in Houston. "There I can establish rapport and credibility with people because big families are much more common. It's the only time I feel like it's a real professional advantage."

Ms. Richards-Kortum is one of a very small number of academic women with three, four, or more children. In academe, where having even one child can slow down success, trying to manage multiple kids can be a career-stopper.

Women with many children are seen by their peers and supervisors as less than serious about their work in a profession that often expects nothing short of complete devotion. Even administrators who consider themselves supportive of female professors with children may
question the wisdom of those with more than one or two.

"Kids aren't like computer programs that run predictably. With more than two, there is always going to be someone who is sick or needy, and so something at work is going to have to give," says an associate dean of academic affairs, who asked to remain anonymous because she did not want to be publicly critical of women with children. "If anyone told me they wanted three kids, I would be thinking, What, are you nuts?"

Managing both a career and several children can be a challenge for any professional woman. In academe the prospect seems particularly perilous.

True, an academic career can be flexible -- at least after tenure. But the dozen or so arduous years spent earning a Ph.D. and building a career makes academe one of the less friendly professions for women with children, say researchers who study the issue.

Graduate students have already picked up on that. In a 2006-7 study of 8,400 graduate students on nine University of California campuses, only 29 percent of the women and 46 percent of the men said they considered research universities to be family-friendly places for tenure-track professors to work.

Meanwhile, a national study of about 5,000 professors in chemistry and English, completed by researchers at Pennsylvania State University in 2002, found that female professors had an average of only .66 kids each. The average American woman by comparison, has about two children.

Yet another study, conducted by researchers at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Utah, found that academic women were 27 percent less likely than doctors and 17 percent less likely than lawyers to have babies. It also found that male professors fathered fewer children than their male counterparts in those other professions.

Anthony Russell, an associate professor of English at the University of Richmond, who has three girls, says he has never felt disapproval from colleagues over his relatively large family. But, he adds, "I feel that I've lived in a different world" from that of his colleagues. Most of them who are fathers have stay-at-home spouses, while Mr. Russell's wife worked. That means he has done a fair share of child-rearing himself. He has taught his girls to read and write his native Italian. "I spent years coming home from school not really having time to prepare for classes in the evenings like many faculty do," he says.

But despite stories like Mr. Russell's, studies have found that male professors are still more likely than their female colleagues to have a stay-at-home partner and less likely to say that because of their careers, they had fewer children than they preferred.

Academic women, meanwhile, are well aware of the harm that having children can do to their professional lives. In the national study of English and chemistry professors, 26 percent of women -- double the proportion of men -- said they had fewer children than they would have liked in order to achieve academic success. "The cultural line in academe is that one child is acceptable, maybe two, but three are not," says Marc Goulden, a Berkeley researcher who has completed several studies on academic women and children.

Julianna Baggott knows full well that the third child is often considered the third rail of academe. That's why, when she is asked how it feels to be a professor with five children, she has one word: "subversive." Ms. Baggott's husband stays home to watch the kids, but that hasn't made her feel any more comfortable about her large brood. She displays no photos of her children in her office in Florida State University's English department, and she never tells colleagues that she can't make a meeting because of the children, who range in age from 14 to 2. "I just say, 'I'm sorry, I have a conflict,'" she says.
"Academia assumes that a woman, once she has kids, is not going to be able to maintain her career at the same level," says Ms. Baggott, an associate professor. She just earned tenure and has written 14 books, including six for children. "I'm a workaholic," she says during a cellphone interview between stops on a West Coast tour for one of her latest books, The Prince of Fenway Park (HarperCollins, 2009).

Some women say it is academe's focus on the mind, not the body, that makes being a pregnant professor -- or one with kids -- so unusual and unwelcome.

"In academia, the mind/body split is operative," says Nicole Cooley, an associate professor of English at the City University of New York's Queens College and a contributor to Mama Ph.D.: Women Write About Motherhood and Academic Life (Rutgers University Press, 2008). "Academia's grounding in the clerical tradition means that a lot of your identity is your intellectual work, and you don't sully yourself with domestic arrangements and bodily things."

Andrea O'Reilly directs the Association for Research on Mothering at York University, in Canada, where she is an associate professor of women's studies. The idea that mind and body don't mix in academe is more than theoretical, says Ms. O'Reilly, who has interviewed 60 academic women with children. "Academia is a very competitive environment. You're supposed to be this cutthroat go-getter, and your work is your life. You're not supposed to be encumbered."

Women with several children say colleagues and supervisors alike are not shy about sharing their scorn over the women's über-fertility. Two years ago, when April Hill, an associate professor of biology at the University of Richmond, had her third child at age 38, one administrator remarked, "Aren't you a bit old for that?"

Elisabeth R. Gruner, an associate professor of English at Richmond who contributed an essay to Mama Ph.D., says: "There is a distaste that you'd want to spend a lot of time with little kids -- an idea that you may not be very smart."

Saranna R. Thornton, who heads the economics department at Hampden-Sydney College, was at a picnic with faculty and staff members nine years ago when she shared the good news that she was expecting her fourth child. A senior administrator looked at her and asked, "Don't you know what causes that?" Ms. Thornton even got quizzical looks from close friends and colleagues, who asked her why she was having another child. (The short answer, for Ms. Thornton and several other women who spoke to The Chronicle: They simply really enjoy children, sometimes much to their own surprise.)

Georgia Frank, an associate professor of religion at Colgate University, says she senses an attitude from some in academe that anyone who has more than two children has surpassed an invisible quota. "There is something greedy about going for just one more," says Ms. Frank, whose own children are 15, 12, and 7.

If having a big family and a big career is so unusual and ungainly, how have some academic women made it work? Most of the female professors who spoke with The Chronicle started having children early on, during graduate school. They came to their first institutions with a baby or two in tow. Perhaps, says Mr. Goulden, the Berkeley researcher, they found sympathetic department heads right from the beginning who helped them make it possible to manage an academic career and a large family.

Mr. Goulden also says his research shows that female professors with several children are simply more energetic than the norm. Some of those interviewed by The Chronicle said they get very little sleep. (For tips on how mothers of large families make their dual roles work, see box on Page B18.)

Some acknowledged that the stress of work and home can take a toll. "Every day I wait for
something to fall on my head," says Jill Nelson Granger, a professor of chemistry and associate dean of academic affairs at Sweet Briar College, who has four children. "I study my calendar the night before like every day is a test."

Julie Pfeiffer, who chairs the English department at Hollins University and has three children, ages 10 to 17, is leery of giving female students the misimpression that her own life means, "Oh, yeah, you can do it all, no problem." She believes that trying to manage so much over the years has hurt her health and her marriage. She has three autoimmune diseases, including one that put her on a liver-transplant list for awhile. And although her marriage is OK now, it was not a few years ago, she says. "I don't want to send the message to young women that there aren't costs and there aren't risks," she says.

Leslie Leyland Fields is perfectly aware of the risks of having a large family. She was keeping up, although just barely, with the demands of her tenure-track job in English at the University of Alaska at Anchorage's Kodiak College while raising five children. "I felt like I was doing the work of three different people, but I valued both sides of my life," she says. Then she accidentally became pregnant with a sixth. "I was doing it all with four. By the fifth it was difficult. And I knew it would be impossible with six."

Ms. Fields resigned in 2002, the year before she would have made her tenure bid. "I thought, I'm walking away from what I aspired to for 20 years, what I got three graduate degrees for," she says. "It was very sad."

Since then she has written two books, started teaching part time at Seattle Pacific University, and worked in commercial fishing with her family each summer. "I think I give a lot of young women hope," she says. "But I'm very much a realist, and I tell them that if you choose to do this, you have to bear a lot of sacrifices."

PHOTO (COLOR): Rebecca R. Richards-Kortum, a bioengineering professor at Rice U. and mother of four, prepares dinner with her family before rushing off to one of her children's concert.

PHOTO (COLOR): When April Hill, a biology professor at the U. of Richmond had her third child, at age 38, an official remarked, "Aren't you a bit old for that?"


By Robin Wilson

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