

Academic Life and Motherhood: A Skillful Balancing Act

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When I began my doctoral studies in the fall of 2002, I found myself engaged in a difficult balancing act. If two children under the age of six, a husband, a part-time job, and aging parents were not enough to manage, adding serious graduate work to this already heavy load seemed impossible to handle. Initially, I was unsteady – losing my footing and balance on the thin beam upon which I walked each day. Around the same time, I also came across an aphorism that encouraged slow but steady work towards the realization of a goal. It read something like this: Plant one flower a year and in ten years you shall have a beautiful garden. I decided to make this one of my mantras. And so, I began to work slowly but consistently towards my doctorate, taking two or three courses per academic year (or planting a couple of flowers at a time). Over the years, my decision to limit my course load has kept me from falling off the balance beam of life and has thus enabled me to juggle my family and academic demands with a good degree of dexterity. In retrospect, any other route to my doctorate may have yielded either sloppy work or neglect in many aspects of my life.

Each year, then, I progress slowly but consistently through my doctoral studies. I keep adding beautiful flowers to my garden (i.e., by completing doctoral hurdles) and am still able to savor moments with my two daughters. I continue to be present and available in their lives as they reach various milestones and quickly progress through different life stages. Planting only a few flowers per year has allowed me to embark on two rewarding journeys. The first journey is an intellectual one, which has provided me with both personal and professional growth, and the second journey is a familial one, which has given me the opportunity to oversee a similar type of growth in my daughters as I watch them expand their boundaries and forge new social identities.

While careful, long-term planning is indeed beneficial, the road to a doctorate for mothers also requires a great deal of fortitude and flexibility. Mothers frequently balance a “heavy interactional load” (Kendall, 2008). In other words, they must be able to multitask and take up different positions as the need to shift from one task to another arises quickly and often unexpectedly. For the thirty-five to forty-something individual who is caught in the sandwich generation, the constant need to switch positions (e.g., from homework helper to meal-time preparer, from school volunteer to sporting event chauffer, from part-time teacher to evening graduate student, and from caring daughter to caring mother) entails an even more complicated juggling act. This generation must not only balance their graduate work, and the demands of raising young children, but they must also deal with aging parents. While balancing motherhood with doctoral work is difficult enough, adding concerns for older parents (and sometimes one’s own changing health needs) requires an even more careful balancing act. It is as if one is required to walk on the same thin balance beam, but now blindfolded and backwards. Being highly organized, leaving ample time to meet deadlines (which allows room for unexpected occurrences such as doctor visits or a sick child home from school), and getting as much outside help as possible (be it for childcare or for household chores) will not only help mothers bear and balance their interactional load, but it will also keep stress and tension at a manageable level.

While stress is inevitable given the extraordinary demands of motherhood and doctoral work, it can be managed if mothers do not neglect their own needs. In the midst of caring for other family members, and trying to meet academic deadlines, personal, quiet moments are rare and often non-existent. Since such moments are essential to one's physical and emotional well-being, some time for them should be allotted. A weekly exercise routine, a massage, pedicure, facial, or some simple quiet time (an hour or two) away from home is strongly recommended. Not only will this personal time act as a tension and stress reducer, but it will also provide some much needed cognitive regeneration. It will allow the doctoral student/mother to step back from all her demands, reflect on her upcoming tasks and duties, and reprioritize, if necessary.

In sum, my recommendation to both new and veteran mothers alike is to take a manageable course load, maintain an organized calendar that leaves ample time for the completion of deadlines and for scheduling unexpected meetings or visits, have reliable, weekly childcare and/or household help, and schedule time for yourself in order to recuperate, rejuvenate, and refocus. This will help you juggle the conflicting demands of motherhood and doctoral studies. For as the mother and student parts of your life grow and flourish, you will see a beautiful garden taking shape on both ends, with new, added flowers blooming each season as a result of your sustained effort to maintain the right balance between family and academic life.

REFERENCES

Kendall, S. (2008). The balancing act: Framing gendered parental identities at dinnertime. *Language in Society*, 27, 539-568.

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