

Juggling the demands of a career and motherhood: Perspectives of an academic in science

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One of the questions that I am regularly asked is how I have managed to juggle the demands of both a family and a career in science. The short answer to the question is 'with difficulty' and while this is the easy truthful answer, it does not really help to guide those young women who are grappling with the problem. Although I should include men in this equation as these issues should be as important to women as they are to their life partners, my focus here is as a mother and my suggestions are purely from my own personal perspective.

The first and most important advice I can add to this well-debated topic is that few people are able to focus on more than two time-consuming activities at any one time. The ideal situation would be to have to focus on only one core activity, but few mothers have this luxury. Making time for three focal activities is in my view impossible and it usually leads to disaster. Thus, the most important message I have for young women with families or women who are contemplating a family is that they are going to have to make some difficult decisions. One cannot resign (at least not naturally) from motherhood, but the amount of time one devotes to the role is in one's own hands. If one needs to have a job then it is necessary to decide if this is going to be in the 'rank and file' or whether one wishes to pursue a career in science. If one chooses the latter then it is necessary to understand that one's hands will be incredibly full juggling these two very rewarding and demanding occupations. And, to add to this, there will be no time for anything else and often little time for sleep.

How successful a mother or career scientist one can become is then dependent on how one manages to divide available time between the two activities. I do not think that motherhood and career building are mutually exclusive, but managing both roles involves a huge learning curve. I find that most career professional mothers are very well organised and that they use their time very carefully. My observation is that people who cannot manage their time have the greatest problem dealing with all the demands placed on them. As an aside, it is for this reason that I often prefer to employ mothers. Although this might sound a touch sexist, my experience has been that women who can juggle motherhood and a career successfully are usually much more effective than their male peers. Likewise, women who remain confused as to how to manage the two are disastrous in the work place, and often cause themselves and their colleagues distress and angst.

Mothers are usually better at multitasking in the work environment than their male counterparts, as they have had more experience in doing so. In addition, I have observed that mothers are more easily able to 'think out of the box'. They do not have to take expensive courses to teach them to think laterally – they do so every time they go home to their children. Young children do not care whether you have had a hard day at work; they typically are very selfish and self centred. Thus, mothers are forced, once at home, to think about things that are very different to the issues that have occupied their focus during their work hours. For example, many children have hobbies that necessitate very steep learning curves for mothers. I certainly know more about drums and cycling than I had ever wished to learn about. My children have stretched me in ways that I would not have achieved on my own. It is in this manner that I believe my children have forced me to become a more balanced person and probably also a better professional scientist.

Tackling a career in science and being a mother is not for the faint-hearted. If one is not sufficiently passionate and competent in one's area of specialisation, succeeding will probably be very difficult. The reality is that trying to juggle a career and motherhood requires one to be better than average at one's career. Ironically this sometimes means that you appear to be only average as the result of the constraints of your 'other' job. I should cover myself here by saying that this does not mean that all women who choose not to work do not have what it takes. Quite to the contrary, I sometimes think (during a long weekend at home) that it is probably harder to stay at home full time with one's children than to go to work.

Being average is probably not what the normal successful career professional would usually aspire to be. That this is often the reality for working mothers is because the criteria by which women are judged have been established largely by men. Some of these are unfairly discriminatory to



women and although attitudes are changing, we still have a long way to go. Given this inherent discrimination, why would any woman in her right mind try to climb the career ladder? Why not opt for a nine-to-five job that has fixed hours and is not nearly as demanding? The obvious answer to this is job satisfaction. The second answer is that while a career in science can require at least 60 hours a week of one's time, there is usually some flexibility. In the early years of motherhood the flexibility is in time, possibly being able to work at home when a child is sick or being able to watch that all important soccer match. Later, and as children grow older, the kind of flexibility that is important is often of a financial nature. You will be earning a better salary (than someone who has a technical or administrative job), enabling you to be able to afford some of the extras that children need – music lessons or a trip overseas with the hockey team. The third reason for climbing that ladder is that if one succeeds with the parenting part, children usually leave home eventually. And here an important question arises in so many cases that I encounter – what do mothers do at home when their children have left? While mothers who have had careers do not escape the empty nest syndrome, at least they are occupied and stimulated.

One of the comments that I often hear is that the hours spent at work need to be balanced by being able to spend time with one's family. The thought of a balanced existence does have a nice ring to it, but it is unlikely to earn one substantial job satisfaction or promotion, at least in a highly competitive environment. My experience has been that there is nothing balanced about highly successful professionals. They are all, without exception, passionate about what they do and usually also somewhat obsessive. Such is also the case for successful business people, top sportspeople and high-profile musicians. It is for this reason that I find it rather confusing that people have the expectation that a successful scientist should fit the mould of what some people consider to be 'balanced'. My children laugh when I try to convince them

that I am normal. I work long hours and love my work – how normal can that be?

I have a couple of 'do's and don'ts', which, once again I hasten to add, are in no way intended to be prescriptive:

- Don't apologise for taking time off for family emergencies. One is entitled to a certain amount of leave – use it carefully.
- Don't use family responsibilities as an excuse for not getting a job done. One's colleagues who do not have children earn the same salary and it is necessary to do the job that one is paid to do.
- Do diarise important events in the lives of family members. And it is worth taking leave to share them.
- Do have a backup plan. Make sure that support people (family and employees) are aware that assistance might be required.
- Do find another job if you are not enjoying your job. Juggling a career and motherhood makes sense only if one is having fun at work most of the time.
- Do make sure that your family understands that your work is important not only to you but also to them. If possible, expose your children to parts of your work so that they can understand you better.
- Do live close to work if you can. This is not always possible and may be more costly, but the cost is worth it in terms of one's time and peace of mind, especially if you have teenagers who are often 'home alone'.
- Do attend and participate in parent-teacher meetings – you need to know what is happening with your child at school.
- Do choose a life partner who shares your aims and ambitions. A supportive partner makes raising children much easier.
- Do be aware that children do not come with instruction manuals. But a happy mother usually results in a happy child.