

Juggling Family and Career

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I begin to write about juggling family and career on a day that I am doing exactly that: juggling. I woke my ten-year-old daughter this morning only to discover that she has a fever and sore throat. She will stay home from school today and the seven hours of uninterrupted quiet that had stretched invitingly before me—time to do the intellectual work I cherish—has evaporated into thin air. Today, there will be no getting lost in the life of the mind. Already, I have written a paragraph in my basement office, stopped to call the school and report that Elise will be absent, and then run upstairs to bring her some acetaminophen. I returned to write only a few sentences before I was interrupted by a phone call from my college-age daughter who is studying abroad in France. And it is not yet 8:30 a.m.

"Juggling" well describes what all people must do to meet the competing priorities of life. To actively pursue satisfying relationships, careers, personal interests, healthy recreation, as well as the simple responsibilities of living, requires devoting enough, but not too much, attention to each one. In this brief discussion of juggling family and career, I have focused exclusively on "family" as "children," even though I understand that many other relationships define "family," and I don't mean to downplay or minimize the needs of the other people in our lives. Children do, however, make demands on us in unique ways, often without contributing anything at all in the way of practical help, and for a time we are responsible for them as we are for no other human beings. In my own case, I had chosen to have children before I chose an academic career, and I thought long, hard, and often about how to balance something I had always wanted—motherhood—with my more recent decision to pursue my passion for history as a profession.

Juggling requires an oscillating focus and the ability to improvise, and it is marked by a constant state of risk. My focus is divided even in writing this piece, for I am unsure which passion I should prioritize: should I tell you how to prevent your career from sabotaging your family, or do you really need to know how to prevent your family obligations from restraining your career? Both warrant your fullest commitment and seem to require constant attention. Yet, you will have to improvise--to respond to changing circumstances while maintaining this dual focus--because children are unpredictable. They often don't arrive when it is convenient, never become sick at the best times, and they tend to have emotional needs that surface just when you want to be left alone to consider how some stunning new research will affect the brilliant argument you are crafting.

Unless you are quite secure, you may frequently wonder how you are doing at your balancing act. How bad a professional *faux pas* was it that I did not attend my colleague's talk because it came on the afternoon of my turn in the carpool? Are others quietly resentful that I never teach classes that go past 2:30? Do my children regret that I didn't help with their class Christmas party *again* this year? Furthermore, the jury on

both parental and academic success often remains out for a very long time—it takes years to grow a successful, happy adult and likewise years to achieve a respectable scholarly output along with tenure and promotion. In those years during which your children remain works in progress and your scholarship all sits on your flash drive for want of a convincing conclusion, how will you feel about what you are doing?

This kind of juggling is a messy art, and I certainly am not convinced I've always practiced it particularly well. I have been doing it a fairly long time. I began graduate school in my thirties as a single parent with two children under the age of six, and now, at 49, I have remarried and had a third child (born between qualifying exams and dissertation). After five years as a lecturer, I have a tenure-track position at a regional university and a book under review with a university press. My three children are well-adjusted and we have positive relationships, but I don't have pat formulas or easy answers as to how to make managing the demands of family and career workable. The best I have to offer are the following points.

Family. Children need to feel that you enjoy their company and that you want to be involved in their lives. It is sometimes hard to communicate this when your career is making what seem like all-consuming demands on your time. The following principles helped me juggle these competing priorities.

- Prioritizing family dinner is a good way to have time together. Our family committed to have dinner together a certain number of nights per week. The numbers of evenings we could do this diminished as my older children entered high school, but we still planned at least a few dinners a week as a family. My husband and I organized our schedules around these evenings, and we required the children to do so as well. We did not answer the phone during dinner, and we did not allow the children to answer it either (or their cell phones, when they got older). It was our time.
- Bring your children into your work whenever possible. I have taken my children on a number of research trips. Sometimes they have played while I worked, sometimes they have made photocopies for me, and occasionally, they have even looked at microfilm. My children have come to class when school was closed; my son even once quietly worked a jig-saw puzzle in the corner of a room when I was attending a seminar in graduate school. It is good for them to get a fuller picture of who you are and to see what you do.
- Bring them into the housework. Very young children can learn to empty a dishwasher and collect trash. These types of chores are important for teaching them that they are a part of a larger unit that is dependent on the contributions of everyone. Expect them to contribute, and don't fall into the trap of doing it all yourself because it is (temporarily) easier. Time together is not always about fun, it is also about learning what real life requires.
- Volunteer to drive. Modern parents spend a good deal of time chauffeuring their children to activities and social events. Though parents with fewer demands on their time may offer to drive more, do your share. You will find that you learn a great deal when you are in the car with your children and their friends. You will

- learn who is doing what, who is a good friend to your child, what teachers are saying in their classes, how their coaches behave, and a myriad other things you didn't even know you needed to know. In short, in the closed space of the automobile, they will talk. You will want to be there to listen and learn.
- You can encourage your children's independence from you in very healthy ways that will also free you up a bit. I discovered this when I was working on my dissertation while teaching three classes. My two oldest were in 7th and 8th grade. Something had to give. I informed them that they would have to learn to do their own laundry, as I simply couldn't get to it. I had intended to start doing their laundry again after I defended, but we all discovered that we preferred their doing it themselves. I was happy to relinquish this responsibility.
 - Insist that your spouse or partner truly do his/her share, and allow him/her to do it. It's good for both of you.
 - Never allow guilt about the demands your job makes on you to permit you to fail to set proper boundaries and administer discipline. All children will test the boundaries you set for them, and they need to find those boundaries very firm when they do. Likewise, you need to be able to let your children experience the consequences of their negative actions, even (and perhaps especially) when such consequences will cause them considerable disappointment or pain. Boundaries make a child secure and consequences make a child responsible—no matter who his/her mother or father is and what they do for a living.
 - Be fully present in whatever you are doing and for whomever you are with.

Career.

- Never offer—to yourself or to others—your family as an excuse for times you may drop the ball. Many people—men and women—make it work, and nobody wants to hear about how difficult it is (even though it is difficult!).
- Become a she- (or he-) devil time manager. Schedule the time you are going to work, and do the work you have to do during that time and that time only. Class preparation can be a bottomless pit for me, eating up whatever time I allow. Thus, I currently hold myself rigidly to teaching, class preparation, and grading on MWF *only*! Tuesday and Thursday are for writing *only*. Ruthlessly do the work you have planned when you have planned to do it.
- Carve out chunks of time where they seem not to exist. For me, getting up before everyone else and working for a few hours works very well. No one calls, needs their pants mended, or can't find the toothpaste between 5 and 7 a.m.
- Realize that you may not produce at the same rate as others. We all know the three-books-in-five-years folks. I will never be one of those, but I don't need to be.
- Read the other essays in this toolkit for great career advice!