

3 Ways to Survive Academe With Kids

chroniclevitae.com/news/2275-3-ways-to-survive-academe-with-kids



Image: iStock

By Trisalyn Nelson

As midcareer professors, we often hear newcomers to the tenure track worry about having to choose between academe and family life. Likewise among graduate students, the general perception is that, to succeed, they will have to be 100-percent consumed with work.

Combining parenting with any job is not for the faint of heart. But from our perspective — as tenured professors and parents of, between the two of us, five kids, aged 8 to 11 — you do not have to sacrifice family life to succeed in an academic career.

But you may well have to sacrifice everything else. Both of us are in a phase of life that leaves little time for anything outside of our work and our kids.

There are major ups and downs, and, at times, we are completely stopped in our tracks and overwhelmed. There are days when we show up to work with oatmeal smudged on our pants because the kids used us as napkins before going to school. Other days, we get called out of meetings unexpectedly to pick up a sick child from the school nurse's office, or we are on the way home from work and remember the refrigerator is empty.

We have not perfected, nor do we aim to, the juggle of tenure-track work and parenting (we focus here on the tenure track because that is our experience, but we certainly recognize that managing academic work and parenting is even more challenging with contingent faculty jobs). Still, we have both managed to move forward in our academic careers while parenting young children. And we have found some degree of peace of mind with this stage of our lives, guided by three crucial survival strategies.

Strategy No. 1: Efficiency Is Everything

Given that you can't add hours to the day, you need ways to stretch time once kids come into the picture. If you are lucky enough to have the financial means, there are some standard things you can do like outsourcing house cleaning or buying a slow cooker.

But we use a few practical tricks that don't cost a thing. The following tips also serve as confessions. It isn't all pretty, but here are some ways to get the most out of your days.

Learn to use brief chunks of time in unexpected places. Don't wait for a large block of unscheduled time to materialize when you can "be productive" — those days are over. We have become masters at getting stuff done in short bursts and in random locations (e.g., soccer fields, pediatrician offices). The same is true on campus. Have 10 or 15 minutes in between meetings? Use it to do a small chunk of work.

Breaking a big task into smaller pieces requires a different way of thinking about academic work. Rather than planning to write a section of a paper, focus on writing a paragraph. Being organized helps you know what you can do in the time you have.

Also, it is good to have a stack of work you can carry around with you, especially once your kids reach the age where you are operating a taxi service. **Uninterrupted time waiting in the car can be great for reviewing a section of a paper.**

Find smart corners to cut. What are the things that you do, when you have time, that you can live without? For one of us — Trisalyn — it is folding laundry. Rather than lose time doing all of that folding, she organizes her children's clothes into four drawers: unders, uppers, lowers, and other. Sort, flatten (a little), and put the clothes into a drawer. No folding required. If your kids are like ours, their clothes will end up heaped in a drawer anyway the first time they go looking for something to wear. Why not give them a head start?

Related to that is a trick Trisalyn learned from her mom, who raised 11 dependents solo. Encourage your kids to sleep in their school clothes. Most kids are going to school in a T-shirt and sweatpants (or shorts) anyway, but Trisalyn's kids are happy to sleep in everything from jeans to school uniforms. Pajamas in her house are for weekends only. Less laundry and less things to holler about in the morning. The kids eat breakfast, brush their teeth (sometimes), put on sunscreen (we live in the desert), and go. Everyone is happier, and time

is saved.

Strategy No. 2: Adjust Your Expectations

Maybe, if you are like us, you imagined being a professor in a quiet, clean office space — or a quiet, book-cluttered one. Either way, it was quiet. Well, it's time to adjust your expectations about faculty life. Kids will make sure you keep it real. When you are running out to a meeting and your child starts throwing up on your shoes, it changes what seems important.

Set reasonable priorities. For us, work hours are for dropping the hammer, and we use almost every minute of designated work time to be productive. Some faculty members actually say their productivity spiked after having kids. They became incredibly focused during the hours they worked. They had less time to go for coffee. They kept working rather than taking a break to do a little online shopping. They grew more savvy about when to say yes and no.

There's an old saying, "If you want something done, give it to a busy person." In this case, that old saying would read, "If you want to get that paper submitted, get a miniature person to care for."

For many tenure-track academics, juggling parenting and work means we fuss less and just get our work done.

Don't try to keep up with the PTA parents. You are probably a competitive person. You wouldn't be in academe, or seeking a faculty career, without years of hard work, creativity, and honed intelligence. But beware: You cannot compete with the DIY, playground, and PTA parents.

You may want to be all of the above: a professor, a rock-star parent, a homemaker, and a spouse. But your time and energy are like rubber bands that keep stretching and stretching until something snaps. Once it does, you are miserable and very likely making everyone around you miserable, too.

Rather than compare yourself to those parents who volunteer for everything and make perfectly healthy lunches, try to see those wonderful people as a source of expertise. Stop comparing and start stealing. Use the knowledge of DIY, playground, and PTA parents as fast-track information rather than as fuel for self-loathing and guilt. Learn to lean in, ask for advice, and be thankful for their pro tips.

Strategy No. 3: Integrate Work and Family

Academic life and parenting are both all-consuming jobs that don't fit well into a contained 9-to-5 work schedule. Feeling like you never stop working (or parenting) can be a challenge, but, if managed well, the flexibility of faculty work offers many benefits.

Plan family holidays around conferences. One benefit of academic life is the opportunity to travel. Conferences, fieldwork, and collaborative meetings are often in interesting places. When finances and time make it possible, take your family along and add on a couple of days of fun. Traveling with kids creates memories (good and bad), and, if nothing else, you will appreciate how easy it is to travel alone.

More seriously, conference organizers are increasingly aware of family needs, and some are offering on-site child care. Check the organization's website and program to see what options are available. Alternatively, email a few colleagues who will be at the same conference. Are they bring their kids? If so, you can arrange to share child-care duties.

It's good for the next generation of scholars to see professors at a conference including their families on the trip. That sends an important message in support of faculty diversity.

When you can't bring the kids, you can still share the excitement of traveling to new places with them through photos, stories, and souvenirs. We both have maps on the walls at home. We show the kids where we're going and put little pins on the maps when we return — instant hallway geography lesson.

Share your work with your kids. For young children, especially, it can be hard to understand what it means to be a professor. All they see is you on a computer answering emails, and they are totally perplexed by the amount of time you spend meeting and writing.

Make your work visible beyond "bring your child to work day." We do that in a variety of ways, such as teaching writing workshops at our children's school (Jessica) and involving our kids in scholarly podcasts (Trisalyn). When our kids feel a part of the work we do, it makes them proud and it helps to bridge our work and family lives.

Share your kids with your work. We try to make our lives as parents visible on campus. We have photos of our children and school art hanging in our offices. We share stories of parenting and of juggling work and home life with colleagues — when the appropriate occasion arises. Of course some departments are more accepting on this front than others. But we've found that the environment is better for everyone if graduate students and faculty members don't have to hide their children.

We both feel that having children has made us more productive and joyful at work, but we recognize that isn't the case for everyone. We know faculty members who feel they've had to sacrifice their career goals to be parents, or vice versa. How people combine faculty life and parenting is deeply personal. There is no single, correct pathway.

Modeling that you can have a life outside the academy is a gift to graduate students. These days, there are plenty of good reasons for Ph.D.s to choose a nonacademic career path — like, say, the serious shortage of tenure-track jobs in some disciplines. But the one thing that should not dissuade anyone from a faculty career is the fear that it would prohibit them from raising a family.

Trisalyn Nelson is director, and a professor, of the School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning at Arizona State University. Jessica Early is an associate professor of English at Arizona State