

The Master Jugglers

May 04, 2011

As if graduate school was not challenging enough, add the additional responsibilities of children and you've become a master juggler. These demanding responsibilities may explain why "student parents," as they are sometimes called, are few and far between in graduate school. Being a parent and a graduate student concurrently is no easy task and is not for everyone, but it is possible to do and is a very rewarding experience.

Student parents must concentrate on their educational requirements while balancing the responsibilities of running a household. They endure such parenthood tasks as managing child care, changing diapers, engaging in potty training, overseeing their children's education and afterschool activities, and much more. The responsibilities of parenthood are never-ending, while the duties of graduate school serve as a means to an end.

I have been a parent for as long as I have been a graduate student. Through this experience, I have learned to feed a baby with one hand while typing a class report with the other. I read the latest issue of Psychological Science while playing at the park with my kids. I analyzed data with structural equation modeling while helping my school-aged children with their science fair projects. So how do student parents do it all? To say they are great multitaskers would be an understatement. If you are a parent who is toying with the idea of starting graduate school, or if you're a graduate student toying with the idea of beginning a family, consider the following tips, which have proven successful for me and for many other student parents.

1) Commit

Be committed to your education and career goals. Most graduate students suffer from economic deprivation, relying on student funding while completing their education. Student parents encounter the same issues, only these issues are multiplied by the number of family members. Continuing one's education despite the financial struggles involved requires commitment and determination. Doubts may creep into your mind when times get tough, and you may consider quitting school altogether or taking a semester off. But don't give in — be relentless in your drive to achieve your goals.

2) Balance

Balance your home life and your education. You have to find that middle ground that will help you put family first but still devote your attention to education. This is one of the hardest tasks student parents face. Student parents have to be realistic about their duties and understand that, depending on the situation, their separate roles may dominate. For instance, when the children have a cold, student parents miss class to stay home. But while at home, they keep up with course readings while rocking a child to sleep. On the other hand, if it is time to defend your dissertation, perhaps someone else kicks in with the child care responsibilities, such as a spouse or grandparent. If you plan on taking on both roles, you have

to be prepared to take all measures necessary to attend classes, read materials, and complete assignments successfully without neglecting your family.

3) Schedule

Schedule everything. Plan what time you will get up, eat, take the children to school, attend courses, meet with professors, and attend your kids' soccer games. Make sure to schedule downtime for yourself as much as possible. This schedule should always be with you, and you should be prepared to write everything down.

4) Find Funding

Because higher education is so costly, students and their families are often hit hard financially. Imagine trying to support a family on graduate student grants when many graduate students can barely support themselves. Student parents usually have to find additional sources of income. You may hold a part-time job on or off campus, or your spouse may work full-time. You should also apply for additional funding whenever possible, which may include research grants, fellowship awards, and scholarships. You may choose to take out student loans as well, under the supposition that, upon graduation, you will have the finances to repay the loan.

5) Budget

Budget your finances carefully. Generally, at the beginning of each semester, funds should be allocated for each expense (e.g., tuition, books, rent, food, utilities, day care, etc.). These expenses may be paid in advance, or funds may be set aside. An emergency fund should also be allocated, to cover all of those unexpected costs.

6) Adapt

Remain flexible. While you will have a schedule and do everything possible to keep on task, at times, this is not possible. For instance, children catch colds, cars need repair, unexpected events happen in the family, the university calendar is not congruent with the public school calendar, and children have assignments due for their education as well. Do your best to roll with the unexpected, and try to allow some wiggle room in your schedule and your budget for such events.

7) Seek Support

Student parents need as much support as they can get, both financially and emotionally. Support can be found from a variety of sources. Family can serve as both motivation and inspiration; however, sometimes students are not geographically close to their families during graduate school and may need to seek support from within and outside of their institution. Universities often offer students health services, on-campus child care, and counseling and psychological services, as well as a graduate student association that can be of assistance. Universities may also have organizations tailored to student parents and other nontraditional students. Local community and state resources include agencies that assist temporarily with financial matters, such as unexpected bills, child care costs, health care, and groceries. Many state and federal resources can be easily located using the nationwide referral service (see

resources list below).

8) Have Faith

Support may also come through faith and spirituality. Positive psychology researchers have found a link between faith in a divine spirit and positive outcomes, such as individual happiness and family well-being, lower rates of stress and depression, better sleep, good health, and higher academic achievement (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Laurencelle, Abell, & Schwartz, 2002). For me, being able to discuss issues and ask for guidance from a higher source helps with decision making and, when times get tough, my faith serves as an inspiration. Feeling that your struggles serve a greater purpose may reassure you to keep to your chosen path. Moreover, having faith in something larger than yourself can help to put your personal issues into perspective.

9) Be Passionate

You must possess passion and love for your field of study. Your level of commitment and your passion for psychology is what will give you the strength to endure numerous hardships and to shine in your program. This level of dedication will no doubt follow you as you complete your education and begin your career.

10) Be Patient

Graduate school can seem long and sometimes tedious. It takes around four to six years to complete a graduate education, after completing a Bachelor's degree. During this time, student parents not only have to succeed in their field of study, but they also have to juggle family life and parenting. Student parents can stay on track by remembering that the financial and emotional strain is not permanent and by seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. Student parents must be patient with their graduate education, their family, and themselves. In agreement with the proverb spoken by Piers Plowman, patience truly is a virtue. æ

Resource

211 Information and Referral Search offers information and serves as a referral service for community agencies that can help when times get difficult. www.211.org