

Becoming Dr. Mom

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Being a parent while going through a graduate program is not an easy task. I certainly could not have finished my doctorate on my own. I had an understanding advisor, a helpful husband, and supportive classmates. There were many times I just wanted to give up, but they were the ones who encouraged me to keep going. I am not an expert on being a parent or a student, but here are some of the things I learned as I tried to balance graduate work and family obligations.

It is crucial to write down your goals for each semester, but those goals should be attainable. When you set an unrealistic goal (e.g., finish your entire dissertation draft in one semester) and fail to meet that goal, I think you may be more likely to get frustrated, and you may take it out on your family members. You need to admit to yourself that it takes a long time to complete the program, and with a child it is going to take even longer. You are a parent first. You have to cook, feed, play, and give a bath to your children before you can sit down in front of the computer at night to open your dissertation file. By 10:00 p.m., you are exhausted and it is unlikely that you will stay up all night to write an entire literature review chapter.

Since it takes a long time to complete the program, everyone constantly asks you when you are graduating. Every time someone asked me, “So, how’s the dissertation going?” or “When do you think you’ll finish?” it made me feel bad. But I tried not to take it personally. I kept telling myself that people are not accusing me of being a slacker. They really do just want to know how things are going in my life.

What worked best for me was to establish a strict schedule for myself. For instance, I put my son in daycare on Tuesdays and Thursdays. I thought of putting him in daycare five days a week in an attempt to finish sooner, but I knew I was not likely to focus or work as hard if I had too much time to myself. If he were in school five days a week, I certainly wouldn’t have worked on my dissertation all week. There were always errands, housework, and other distractions that would eat into that time. With the schedule I established, I knew I only had Tuesdays and Thursdays to myself. I focused only on my dissertation on those days, and I think I was much more productive knowing that I only had a limited amount of time.

Another important thing is to try to keep up with current research in scholarly journals. This was the hardest goal for me. Not only was I pressed for time to read anything, but my brain was focused on feeding schedules, sleeping patterns, diapers, and goo-goo ga-ga talk—nothing made a lot of sense. Trying to read something intelligent or complex seemed impossible. Nevertheless, it is important to have quiet time to yourself every now and then to learn about what’s going on in your field. I had a hard time trying to incorporate current literature into my dissertation because I struggled to keep up with what was current in the field. But this really is critical; people are less likely to read your dissertation carefully and critically if it seems obviously out of date and disconnected from current theory or practice.

I hope my comments will help those who are trying to earn a graduate degree and raise children at the same time. It can be overwhelming at times, but it really is all worth it in the end.

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