# Taking Care of Academic Parents

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Abstract

How can academic mothers work and parent without taking a massive toll on their physical and mental health? In this contribution, I reflect on my path as an academic mother and my learning through two critical experiences: For several years, one of my children suffered recurrent febrile seizures. This required me to plan for unexpected disruptions and shifted priorities. Later, the pandemic shocked the recently-achieved family-work-life equilibrium. I reflect on how I dealt with quite idiosyncratic versus systemic challenges, and how I moved beyond "survival mode" to healthier ways to work, parent, and enjoy life. In doing so, this essay provides an illustration – almost like a *testimonio* (Saldaña, Castro-Villarreal, and Sosa 2013) – of the challenges academic mothers face, and coping mechanisms that could work for others (Cheng 2020, Crawford and Windsor 2021).

# Taking Care of Academic Parents

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Competing demands from teaching, research, service and outreach, and the sense of urgency marked by tenure clocks and promotion expectations, make it hard to find the time or mental space for self-care. Simultaneously, as fulfilling and gratifying as parenting is, children need attention, time, and material resources. And occasionally, children need extraordinary dedication and availability that makes planning futile. Although these demands are common for all parents, parenting takes a heavier mental and physical toll on women (O'Laughlin and Bischoff 2005), including demanding more time from them (Kotila, Schoppe-Sullivan, and Kamp Dush 2013; Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012; Snyder 2007). This broadens the gender gap for mothers – in contrast with childless women (Cheng 2020; Morgan et al. 2021).

How can academic mothers work and parent without taking a massive toll on their physical and mental health? In this contribution, I reflect on my path as an academic mother and my learning through two critical experiences: For several years, one of my children suffered recurrent febrile seizures. This required me to plan for unexpected disruptions and shifted priorities. Later, the pandemic shocked the recently-achieved family-work-life equilibrium. I reflect on how I dealt with quite idiosyncratic versus systemic challenges, and how I moved beyond "survival mode" to healthier ways to work, parent, and enjoy life. In doing so, this essay provides an illustration – almost like a *testimonio* (Saldaña, Castro-Villarreal, and Sosa 2013) – of the challenges academic mothers face, and coping mechanisms that could work for others (Cheng 2020, Crawford and Windsor 2021).

I had two children during the first five years of my and my partner's first tenure-track jobs in a research-intensive institution. As a first-generation academic, I had no direct reference of balancing academia – or even work outside the home – and parenting. The parenting model I grew up with was centered on a stay-home mother, fully devoted to her family and household. Trained in the U.S., the academic model I was socialized into hinged around long hours of intensive, productive work. On both fronts, people I love and admire seemed able to almost fully concentrate on occupations presented as missions. For many of them, time for oneself seemed like slacking or lack of discipline. Yet, neither model seemed feasible or desirable for me. Through trial and error, I found it useful to listen to other female academics with parenting

responsibilities. Thus, without intending to give advice regarding how to deal with competing demands, here I reflect on what helped me to make parenting and work "work," and how I dealt with challenges along the path.

*In normal times*

For me, finding *role models and a support network* has been key. There is no book like "What to Expect When You're Expecting in Academia."[1] Seeing how others dealt with their pregnancies and early parenthood was very helpful not only to get information and tips, but also to share the journey. I found most role models outside my institution. Many accomplished academic mothers were kind enough to talk in broader forums (such as the ISA's *Pay it Forward* program) about their own experiences and what worked best for their careers and families. Living far away from my family and country, my support network grew around other academics. Relying on colleagues in my own and other departments in similar career and family formation stages helped me to navigate many local, institutional idiosyncrasies – from administrative procedures for parental leave to local paediatricians and childcare choices.

*I leaned on my partner*. I am fortunate to be part of an "egalitarian" academic couple (Vohlídalová 2017). This is likely not the modal case for most parents, academic or not (Bianchi et al. 2012). However, I cannot imagine my career progression, family happiness, or my own mental sanity without sharing the day-to-day work, joys, frustrations, plans, and fears. For us, being "egalitarian" means that household and professional responsibilities are not gendered, and we share them as fairly as we can. In practice, this means that my partner and I have "lead parent days" in which one oversees all children's and household needs (from school drop-off to meals and appointments) and takes care of any emergency, leaving the other the freedom to organize their day around non-household needs. Breakfasts, most evenings and weekends, are normally family time with both parents. This arrangement implied that my partner also shared the "parenting penalty" (Derrick et al. 2021). Yet, schools, doctors, the families of my children's friends, and even colleagues often did not adjust their expectations to our egalitarian view. They expected the mother to take care of the children's needs or activities – reinforcing the unequal load of parenting and household management even in egalitarian couples.

[1] Recent work in this direction (Crawford and Windsor 2021; Hardin and Pennell 2022) and spaces of reflection within the profession (e.g., the ISA's Women Caucus' or EPSA's diversity panels) are contributing to fill this void.

Alternative arrangements must work, of course. Others may be able to lean on their families or friends. Being away from my country since graduate school, that was not a choice for me. Many single and lead parents succeed in their professions. However, I cannot imagine how being a single or principal carer would have affected my career or my wellbeing – other than everything being much harder (Bianchi et al. 2012; Derrick et al. 2021).

*I learned the rules.* State and institutional rules and informal practices matter enormously. Knowing the extent of my rights and fighting for them was key for making my parental leave and other arrangements possible. For example, how many days of leave am I entitled to have due to family health issues? What kind of documentation is required to request leave? Has the institution allowed special arrangements in similar cases? Is there a formal prohibition to bring children to work or to a conference site? Does the reimbursement policy explicitly exclude childcare or an extra bed in hotels for conferences? Certainty regarding the extent of my rights and obligations, and what institutional expectations might lack legal grounds, helped me manage my own expectations and time.

*I compartmentalized.* As much as possible, I have tried to separate and protect work time and family time from each other. Setting "lead parent days" for the term helped clearing 2.5 days to focus on work without worries – and limits juggling work and family to half of the week. Of course, reality seldom matches the plan. But the sense of being able to devote full attention to each world, even if in narrower windows of time, has helped me to not feel guilty for focusing on my work or my family, and to enjoy both worlds.

*Adjusted expectations.* For me, the hardest part has been accepting that I cannot be as good of a parent as people who "only" parent, or as good of an academic as people fully devoted to their work. Not meeting these ideals has been a source of stress and frustration for years. Shifting to celebrating the smallest achievements has helped a lot: Grades sent! Submission! Clean, fed kids! That reminds me how hard things can get in the process, while focusing on the long game. Forgiving myself for not meeting – quite often my own – intermediate goals keeps me connected with what gives me joy in parenting and in my work. Because I love being a mom, and I cannot think of another profession I would enjoy more.

With some hiccups – and substantial sleep deprivation – along the process, my family life and work demands [sort of] worked together in a healthy way. Collectively, as parents, we forfeited or postponed some professional opportunities, particularly those related to networking –

conferences, talks, dinners (Tower and Latimer 2016) – and "riskier" research projects (Covarrubias, Newton, and Glass 2022). We concentrated family time around breakfast, dinners, and weekends, and work steadily progressed – although at a slower pace than I would have wished for.

*All this works, until it doesn't: Dealing with internal and external shocks*

Since a very young age and for many years, our second child had recurrent febrile seizures – convulsions triggered by fever. This is not a life-threatening condition, but it requires close supervision. For him, seizures would happen with an almost-normal body temperature, which made the seizures unpredictable and rather frequent. This was overwhelming. We were fortunate to have institutional support to accommodate our teaching obligations on different days of the week, so either my partner or I would be "on call" without needing to cancel classes – matching the "lead parent" model. This informal arrangement was key to avoid additional stress and disruptions. It made dealing with emergencies easier, allowed us to fulfil all teaching obligations, and made the shared responsibility more "egalitarian," depending on the day of the events. Without this institutional support, one of us might have not been able to keep a full-time job. Yet, in those years it was hard(er) to maintain my focus on work while at work. Again, compartmentalization to focus exclusively on a task was very helpful for me to remain productive and relatively sane. Getting tenure mitigated stress, but these health issues took a toll on my research productivity and wellbeing.

We kept this "system" in place for over four years and found an equilibrium that involved adjusting (again) expectations both regarding productivity and parenting, but that also allowed me to focus and enjoy the family and professional sides of life. This also left room for actual self-care, which for me meant carving time out for a couple of hours of yoga a week, and some socializing outside work and home. We eventually changed institutions, and I went through another tenure process. And then, Covid-19 hit, and massively altered the arrangement we had in place.

Beyond the emotional toll of witnessing the pandemic unravelling, the fear of infection, and the feeling of impotence and isolation, the workload increased while childcare and schools closed. Adapting to this uncertainty was the hardest challenge – as for most academic mothers (Sills et al. 2020). Moving to home-based work was diametrically opposed to my "strategy" to balance family and work. I was not able to compartmentalize roles, times, or spaces, or to focus on

individual tasks. And unsurprisingly, I crashed under the pressure. Shifting to survival mode meant covering basic parenting tasks – clean, fed kids who did most of their school homework – and eventually, adjusting priorities to include taking care of myself. My support network and role models changed during the pandemic. A few middle-career academic moms became much closer, and I shifted my attention to people who prioritized family and their own wellbeing over those who highlighted their sustained work productivity. I embraced the department's "clear the decks" policy for non-essential tasks,[2] but eventually needed to *take a break from work* – thanks to the British flexible annual leave option – to refocus, to re-set. This was not an option for academics in other countries or institutions with less generous policies.

*What I learned*

The same strategies that worked for normal times helped our family to adapt to "internal" shocks. However, institutional support and flexibility for our in-person obligations were key to taking care of our family, keeping two full-time jobs, and finding some space for self-care. Yet, research and networking suffered significantly. The circumstances in pandemic times did not allow for much flexibility to organize parenting or work, and wellbeing took the hardest hit. "Survival mode," by definition, is a temporary but not sustainable strategy. Parenting requires long-term, sustainable strategies – building support networks, compartmentalizing, adjusting expectations – but also a great deal of flexibility, especially because crises are likely to arise.[3]

Flexibility does not need to be at odds with the academic workplace: engaging, creative intellectual work is not a function of only long hours and 7-day weeks. However, retention and promotion of parents, and especially mothers, in academia is unlikely without formal and informal support (Crawford and Windsor 2021). Some of this support may require difficult reforms – e.g., longer paid parental leaves – but significant changes can be encouraged through fostering a culture of solidarity in the workplace and in professional associations, from which I have benefited. The gains from (more) flexible scheduling of teaching and meetings likely

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[2] Clearing the decks entails quickly resolving less important tasks to be able to concentrate on more important projects. As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, the clearing the decks policy is useful beyond "survival" mode. It is consistent with the idea of compartmentalizing the work time, and allocating windows of time to some tasks that may hinder focus on research, for example.

[3] Omitted in this discussion is the fact that, with time, the kind of attention children need changes and may allow for more planning or less hands-on attention. Yet, new caring responsibilities may arise as well, as the literature on the "sandwich generation" documents (e.g., Grundy and Henretta 2006).

outweigh costs. They foster a more inclusive work environment and contribute to the formative mission of universities.

I realize my situation is in many ways unique. In some institutions, the informal arrangements I described may not be authorized, and are not likely a possibility for academics in more precarious work conditions. Single parents and people in less-egalitarian partnerships may find it difficult to lean on others and receive their help. But it is possible that some of the strategies that worked for me may be useful for others.

I am still working to keep this new precarious balance that lets me enjoy my family and my work, while being healthy. Scheduling breaks for self-care as part of my daily commitments is helping me to integrate self-care as part of a broader routine. I keep adjusting expectations and targets and try to forgive myself more often (Neff 2003). I learned from my mistakes and from others, and I try to pay it forward, especially after tenure. I do not think that it is too naïve to believe that, despite difficulties, we can have a community that supports parents across institutions, and lobbies for changes.

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