

# How To Survive and Thrive in the Mother-Mentor Marathon

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This article is for women who ask whether it is possible to combine motherhood with academia and still be successful and happy. It is also for those working with, bosses of, or married to such women, giving them a better feel for the challenges mothers in academia face, and the strategies that can be used to survive and thrive in both of these worlds.

Leading a lab in academia is a marathon. The first few steps in this marathon are extremely difficult. Although we have a huge amount of energy and motivation, we find ourselves confused and uncertain; we don't know how to run efficiently, or we are not even sure we are running in the right direction. Building a family at the same time adds enormous pressure. It often feels as if we are running with heavy weights on our shoulders through the steepest and most difficult part of our journey. As perhaps one of the first generation of women combining academic careers with motherhood (as opposed to men, who have done so throughout history), we are carrying something else on our shoulders: the burden of proof—is it possible, and what will it take to make it possible?

Before trying to answer these questions, I would like to start by sharing an important enlightening moment in my career path that affected, and is still affecting, the way I live. Toward the end of my postdoctoral training, and while starting to think about a faculty position, I got scared. When I got an offer from Harvard I was thrilled and excited but got even more scared. I tried to find out what I was so afraid of. At the beginning I thought I was afraid of failing, afraid of not meeting my own (or others') expectations. The more closely I looked at my fears, the more I realized there was something else. My biggest fear was not the fear of failure. My biggest fear was that in 5 or 10 years from now I would look back and realized I paid too big a price for my career. I feared looking back and realizing that I may have sacrificed too many things in

life to fulfill my ambitions and scientific desires—and admitting that I did well in my job but lost something else I held dear in the process, such as enjoying my married life, being a good mother, or just being healthy and happy. I was so terrified by these thoughts, I almost decided to turn down the dream job I was offered. Instead, and mainly inspired by other women faculty around me, I decided to move forward. I accepted the job and made a contract with myself: to do the best I can while nurturing and promoting all the other things I cherish and care for in life. And if, at any point I find this to be impossible, I will search for a new career path.

Today I am an independent investigator and a mother of 2 kids. I have good days and challenging days, but I find joy in what I do and feel very fortunate. It took me some time to find the balance, the truths, and principles that allow me to prioritize my time as a reflection of my own values in order to thrive in this long and demanding journey. Inspired by other women's groups in the US, I have recently established a support and empowering group for mothers in academia. We discuss our doubts and worries, and we share stories and tips. I discovered we all constantly think about the impact of our professional career on other parts of our lives and whether the price we are paying is worth it. I certainly don't have all the answers, but I want to share with you here a few simple and practical principles I have learned during my first years as a mother and principal investigator and from my interactions with other women in academia.

## Discover and Use the “Good Enough” Principle

We want to be excellent—excellent at work, excellent mothers, excellent wives; excellent in every aspect of our life. This is dangerous and can lead to constant frustration and guilt just because it is impossible to be excellent in everything all the time. One of the most helpful principles I have discovered is the “good enough” principle. In many situations we need to decide that a specific task has reached a good enough level and it is time to move on, so as to free time up to work on something else. This applies to all aspects of our lives, whether at work or at home. Implementing this principle requires developing two important skills; one is to decide which tasks can be completed at the good enough level and which ones have to reach perfection. The second skill is to identify when good enough has been reached. This is very difficult, especially for perfectionists who have high standards for themselves. I suggest the following strategy: start by choosing to complete one task a week at the good enough level. Finish the task and move on to the next one, while knowing that you have not completed the first task as well as you could if you had more time. Check how this affects you. Very soon you will discover that it is really OK, and that knowing to stop at the good enough level frees your time and mind for other tasks that need to be completed in a superb, excellent way. Never, however, compromise on the people you hire. Never hire people who are only a *good enough* fit with your lab. This is where excellence is important.

Otherwise, you will not be able to use the next principle.

### **Delegate, Delegate, Delegate ...**

We have the advantage of working with smart, talented people. It is helpful to identify tasks we can hand over to the people working with us. Implementing this principle, like the “good enough” one, requires two main skills: (a) identifying which tasks can be passed on to someone else, while carefully thinking about others’ competence, skills and motivation; and (b) realizing that the task might not be completed in the same way if we were to do it ourselves. However, learning how to delegate and give away some of our assignments can be liberating. Many times it is also a wonderful learning experience for the person given the task and a proof that we trust their performance. The most exciting thing is when someone else completes a task in a way that surprises us—in a way that is better than if we were to do it ourselves. This is a true reward.

### **Learn To Say “No” and To Feel OK about It**

Translating your values to priorities not only means deciding what to do first and how much time to spend on it, but also deciding what *not* to do. As new mentors we are constantly being asked to contribute our time and brain for many different tasks. Many women have a natural tendency to help others, to please others, and to agree to take on new duties even if these new duties do not contribute directly to their own success. It is of course important to be good citizens and contribute to our department, university, or scientific community. However, it is helpful to know that sometimes you can say “Sorry, I can’t.” You clearly don’t have to serve on every committee, you don’t have to review another paper if you are currently reviewing three other manuscripts, and you don’t have to go out to dinner with all faculty candidates or to agree to all the invitations you get to present your work in scientific meetings (even if you find these invitations to be extremely flattering). When someone is asking you to do something, first ask for specifics: When do they need it back (deadline)? How many times a year is this committee going to meet? How much trav-

eling is involved? Is this particular area one where you have unique insight? Don’t give an impulsive answer. Take a short time to think about it and check your calendar. If you can’t comfortably fit it in between all the other commitments you already have, don’t add it to your list. Instead, give a confident negative answer and learn to feel OK about it. You are not refusing because you are lazy or because you don’t care. You are refusing because setting limits and boundaries is crucial for protecting your time and for maintaining your values. Everyone understands that.

### **Break Big Dreams into Small Practical Tasks and Reward Yourself for Achieving Them**

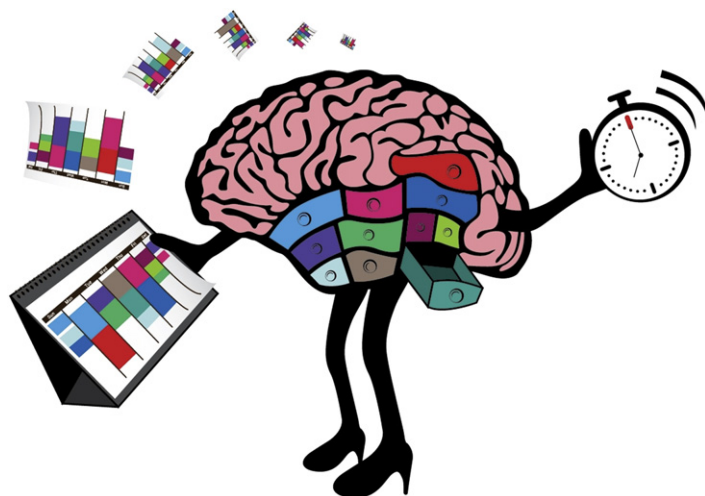
Think back to your first week as a new principle investigator. You wanted to find excellent people for your new lab, to write your first R01 grant, to collect new data, to publish well, to develop new courses ... and all this while having a family and keeping yourself happy and healthy. How overwhelming! Having such a long list of big assignments can be paralyzing. I found it helpful to choose one big goal, and break it into small practical tasks that can be achieved in a short fraction of time such as one hour, or a day. For example, your goal is to write your first R01. This can be broken into small achievable tasks like (1) scheduling a meeting with the grant office to let them know you plan to apply and need their help, (2) writing an email to a colleague who recently won an R01 in order to see what a successful application looks like, (3) drafting a paragraph of your first aim and discussing this with someone whose input you appreciate. Focus first on completing these tasks and only then move on to the next ones.

This principle has an important second part. Once you have completed a set of tasks, make sure to reward yourself. A reward means setting out some time to do something you love, something you enjoy for yourself. It can be taking the time to read a book, go on a date with your partner, join a yoga class—anything that feels rewarding to you and is not related to your work. We, mothers in academia, are so busy nurturing our lab, our kids, and our family, that we tend to forget to nurture ourselves. Many mothers in academia give up their own

hobbies and keep running the marathon without taking any breaks. This is dangerous. It might sound ineffective for you to use your free time for things not related to your work, especially since our scientific culture tends to idealize people who are exclusively devoted to science. There is some idea that those who are truly great only want to do science, and so we somehow feel like a lesser scientist for prioritizing other things. But if that way of working is depleting for you, then it is not your route to becoming a great scientist. There are other ways of working. Throughout the years I have found that taking breaks and self-rewarding moments is crucial not only for my happiness and health but also for my creativity, brainpower, and scientific appetite.

### **Compartmentalize Your Brain and Calendar**

To successfully combine motherhood with an academic career, one needs to separate these two roles, both in time and in state of mind. While spending time with the family, put aside your email and the long list of tasks waiting for you. While working in your office or traveling to a conference, don’t call every hour to make sure the kids are fine. Make sure they are under good and safe care and then let go. Let go of issues at work while being a mother and let go of worrying about the family while preparing a talk or writing a grant. For many women this is not an easy task. Many women tend to spend “brain time” on their kids even when they are without the kids: *Did I dress them warmly enough for school? I wonder how my daughter’s soccer game is going.* Having such constant concerns and thoughts, while needing to perform flawlessly at work, is exhausting. I found it helpful to divide this “family brain time” into two main categories: things that require my attention and action (e.g., *I need to find a babysitter for tomorrow*) and worries that can’t be solved by taking a simple action (e.g., *I hope my son is doing OK with his new teacher*). In cases where an action is needed, block a time on your calendar to take care of this family task. You will find it easier to focus on your work since you have some protected time later in the day to translate your “family brain time” to actions. In cases where no actions are needed or possible, you

**Figure 1. Compartmentalize Your Brain and Calendar and Focus on One Task at a Time**

Imagine your brain as a collection of drawers. Each drawer represents a specific work or family-related task or duty. Translate the size, importance, and urgency of each drawer to a protected time on your calendar. Secure specific time slots for opening future drawers. This will help you at any given time to devote yourself exclusively to one of these tasks, without worrying about the others. (Illustration by Fay. K Pal.)

need to practice letting go of these family-related concerns.

I have found an imaginary useful tool that helps me implement this principle. I envision my brain as a collection of drawers (Figure 1). I have a separate set of drawers for work and family. After picking up the kids from school, I completely close my work drawers. Some days this is very difficult. For example, a few minutes before I need to pick up my kids from school, one of my students shows me an exciting result that completely changes the way we think about her project. All I want to do at this stage is to talk with her, read, and think about the next step. But, all this has to wait. I am now dedicated to having a special time with the family. No work. My work drawers are closed and will be open again in a few hours, or maybe only tomorrow. It is helpful to use the same method while coping with multiple tasks at work. I have a separate drawer for each of the projects in the lab, for each grant I am writing, and for each course I am teaching. I translate the importance of, and effort required to achieve, each of these tasks to the size of the drawer and the size of each drawer to the amount of time I block on my calendar. I am able to open one drawer at a time (and lock all others) since I know I have protected time later that week or month to open the others. This is especially helpful when worrying about

future tasks; for example, close the drawer with the worries about the NIH grant you need to submit in a few months and mark your calendar with the time this drawer will need to be open. Then focus only on the small number of achievable tasks that need your attention today. Tomorrow, or next week, you will be ready to open the next set of drawers while others are already closed.

**Discover the Things that Make It Worth It**

If it were only difficult, complicated, and challenging to combine motherhood with academia, no one would have chosen this path. The truth is that beyond all these difficulties there are many advantages and rewards that make it worthwhile. For me, freedom and flexibility are the two main rewards that keep me going. As group leaders we have the freedom to choose the people we want to work with in our labs. We can be selective and choose not only the most creative and brilliant ones, but also people we get along with—people whose personalities fit with ours and with the rest of the group. These are people we will be happy to mentor, to teach, and to learn from. What a reward! I am thrilled when I learn new things from my lab members, when my student gives a brilliant talk, when my first postdoc is offered an academic job, or when my graduate stu-

dent finally feels confident enough to disagree with me. These are the moments I know I am doing things right. As lab heads, at least when we are not working on the bench, we have the flexibility to work anywhere and anytime. For those who have young kids, the ability to arrive home early, spend time with the kids, and continue working after the kids are asleep is a huge advantage. Last, and perhaps most importantly, we have the freedom to choose our scientific direction, to pursue our own curiosity, to ask questions we find interesting, and are unique to us. These are the things that brought us here in the first place. We should remember them.

**One Last Note ...**

So, is it possible to thrive while combining motherhood and academia? Yes, I believe it is. I even believe that being a mother makes me a better mentor and being a mentor makes me a better mother. I take the skills I learn from being a mother—patience, trust, and kindness—and use them in my work environment. The example I provide to my kids, as a working mother in academia, helps them appreciate the importance of self-fulfillment and helps them believe in themselves and in their abilities. I truly believe that combining these two jobs enriches my life and makes me a more complete and satisfied person.

If you debate about your choices or find it too difficult to be a mother in academia, search for advice, support, and tips from other women in similar or higher ranks. Bonding with people in similar situations helps reduce stress. Make sure you have such bonding and support. You'll be amazed how much we can learn from and inspire each other. Yes, it is a marathon, and clearly a long and exhausting one. Remind yourself the things that brought you here; celebrate your achievements and don't beat yourself up for not running fast enough. Remember your values and make your choices according to them. Remember to breathe, to live and to smile. After all, if you run without joy, it really doesn't matter if you are the first to get to the finish line.

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