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Don't Ask the Baby to do Calculus: Thoughts From an Early-Career Math Mama

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Synopsis

I very recently became a math mama. In my desperate search for patterns and structure in those first few weeks, my husband told me, "She's only three weeks old; we can't expect her to be doing calculus homework." I suppose he was right. I am working towards tenure and finding a new balance between teaching and family, all while trying to not lose sight of who I am. My personal challenges range from the logistics of being a nursing mother in a shared office to feelings of being seen as less adequate in my job if I present myself as a mom. In this essay I share my struggles and successes in settling into my new identity as a mathematician and mom and why I feel it is so important for me to have both a career and a family.

I very recently became a math mama. My husband and I are both assistant professors and were lucky enough to have our baby during the summer break. As any good academic would, I diligently prepared for her arrival. I studied. I read. I even brought a notebook to our hospital tour (though I was entirely too embarrassed to take it out of my bag). Our little one made her entrance promptly on her due date at the end of June. This mama appreciated the punctuality, especially since being on time is now a luxury. I spent the first few haze-filled weeks searching for patterns and solutions. What is her schedule? What does she like? And the classic, why the heck is she still crying? It took some time for me to accept that I won't always find the answer, if there is even one at all. At one point, my husband said "She's only 3 weeks old, we can't expect her to be doing calculus homework." It's all about perspective, I suppose.

I am in my second year as an assistant professor. Although I was not comfortable taking a semester off so soon after being hired, we are fortunate enough to have my mother taking care of the baby while we work. At the end of August she came to help out so that my husband and I could go to our offices and prepare for the semester. Just before leaving the house, I chickened out and spent the day working upstairs in my home office; I just could not seem to step out of the house.

Those waning summer days left me anxious and uneasy, but the truth is I couldn't wait to go back. I crave structure and routine, and in the classroom I am confident in a way I never knew was possible. That first semester I had a new course and squeezed too much into my three days on campus. As a nursing mother, I also needed to take time during the day to pump, which posed its own set of challenges since I don't have my own office. Though the university has a room available, it's not in my building, and I didn't have much time between classes. I was overwhelmed, to say the least. The colleague I share an office with has been wonderful however, and we have been able to make a schedule that works for both of us.

The struggle to find a balance is real; you are constantly changing variables in the hopes that the scales may tip in your favor. I had this naive image of taking the baby for walks on the days I was not teaching and working while she slept. Remember those dolls whose eyes would open when you held them up and would close when you laid them down? What a cruel joke. Cue the baby sling—strap that little one in nice and snug and commence typing precalculus notes. When that wasn't working we decided we needed my mom's help an extra day a week. My parents have played a crucial role in my education and the realization of my career goals, and they were afraid at that point that I would quit my job, so my mother was more than willing to help out more.

By the end of the fall semester when things slowed down a bit, I learned to embrace those days home with my daughter. During the spring semester, my husband and I were each able to work from home one day a week. This has allowed each of us some special alone time with the baby.

Societal pressures made me feel like I was supposed to love my daughter so much that I wouldn't want to go back to work. Seeing her chubby, dimply smile when I come home is indeed the best part of the day, but I also thrive on the energy from my students.

I do struggle with the fact that I feel I have to keep my job and my family separate. If childcare falls through, I don't want to have to bring my daughter to my office, to a meeting, or have to cancel class. For some reason, I feel like I will be perceived as less adequate in my job if I present myself as a mom. What makes me feel this way? This is an entirely internal dilemma; no one has outwardly made me feel like less of a mathematician for being a mother. Many of my colleagues have kids, they are fabulously supportive, and my university is very family-friendly. Perhaps these feelings stem from being in a historically male-dominated profession, though I'm not entirely sure.

Confidence is something that comes easy for me, but that was certainly not the case when I was growing up. I was uncertain, introverted, and didn't like talking to people—not even the waitress in a restaurant. A crucial part of my role as a mother is to set the stage for my daughter to be confident, successful, and able to advocate for herself. On my first day of graduate school a male colleague made a remark about how surprised he was to see attractive women in the program. I was offended and baffled by his comment, especially since the women outnumbered the men that year and the department chair was a woman. I have hopes that we can do better by our girls and that my daughter won't have similar experiences. However, it can be hard to have faith that our efforts will succeed. For now, we wear spaceship jammies as well as ballerina jammies; we read *Rosie Revere, Engineer*, *Ada Twist, Scientist*, and of course, books about very hungry caterpillars.

My hope is that this short essay will encourage other women to pursue their career and family goals. Though I am still very early in my journey as a mother, I have a few principles that have helped me fare well so far. I share these in the rest of this piece.

Family comes first.

For our family this means being flexible and sensitive to everyone's needs. My husband and I each work from home once a week and we make sure each has time to devote to ourselves and our hobbies. We are both working towards tenure and we want to support each other's travel to conferences and research time. We share meals when we can, we make sure to give the family extra attention before the baby's bedtime, and nearly every weekend is filled with visits from grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

In my teaching “family first” is actually not new for me; it has been part of my teaching philosophy from the beginning. I always try to keep in mind that my students are human and that my expectations of them need to be appropriate. I teach at a state university with a large population of first-generation college students who work and have family obligations. This week’s homework assignment in my class will likely not be the most important thing in their lives. From the young woman who apologizes profusely for missing class because she is the only translator in her house and needs to accompany family members to doctor appointments, to the veteran who has to stay home with his sick son, to the young woman working to get her grandmother out of Puerto Rico after hurricane Maria, my students are responsible adults with many different roles other than just being my students.

Speak up for yourself.

It is important to let colleagues and administrators know how they can help us succeed. Whether it’s a place to pump or a different schedule to accommodate for childcare, don’t be afraid to ask. It truly does take a village to raise a family. I have incredibly supportive colleagues, but I was surprised at just how far they were willing to go to help me when I returned to work; speaking up and asking for what I specifically needed helped things move more smoothly.

Set realistic expectations for yourself, your spouse, your kids, and your students.

At the beginning I felt like a failure. I came home from the first department meeting of the semester in tears, thinking I hadn’t written my name in for enough committees. I didn’t think I could do it all, and honestly, I can’t. I am giving it my all and at the end of the day that has to be enough. My best is enough.

Don’t rush the days.

I have always had a hard time with this one. I am constantly planning a week in advance; this makes it near impossible to live in the moment. Suddenly another week has gone by and I’m still thinking of what needs to be done

by the end of the next one. Unfortunately I can't speed up the semester and slow down the time at home with my family. So all I can do is try to live day to day and appreciate the days as they go by.

Get family support when it makes sense for your situation.

Having my mother in my home on a regular basis has allowed me to see motherhood come full circle. I see her in an entirely new light and have a deeper appreciation for how much of a caregiver she really is. She is taking care of my baby, me, and her own mother all at the same time. When she is here, the laundry gets done, the beds get made, and the baby gets kissed. And amazingly, she thinks she is the lucky one in this arrangement.

You can have it all.

I am blessed to have earned the title of mama. I am slowly finding my new identity as both a mathematician and a mom. My expectations for myself and those around me will continue to be adjusted, and I am working hard to live more in the moment. Twenty years from now, there will still be exams to grade, emails to answer, and laundry to fold, but right now there is a baby to snuggle and a family to tend to.

To those of you who are unsure about starting a family or are thinking of waiting until after tenure, I encourage you to jump in. Having a career and a family is achievable and rewarding, and it has been so much fun for me!