

## **Learning Through Life: Balancing Graduate School and Motherhood<sup>1</sup>**

Catherine Leviten-Reid, Brenda K. Parker and Kristen W. Springer\*

\*Authors listed in alphabetical order; Authors contributed equally to this work.

### **IN:**

D. Shulman & I. Silver (Eds.), *Academic Street Smarts: Informal Professionalization of Graduate Students in Sociology*. Washington, D.C: American Sociological Association.

### **Contact Information:**

Kristen W. Springer, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Sociology  
Rutgers University  
54 Joyce Kilmer Avenue  
Piscataway, New Jersey 08854  
e-mail: [kspringer@sociology.rutgers.edu](mailto:kspringer@sociology.rutgers.edu)  
732-445-4015

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank our spouses and children for their emotional and instrumental support while we worked on this project. We would also like to thank Eve Fine, Ivy Kennelly, Mary Ann Mason, Roberta Spalter-Roth, and Eviatar Zerubavel for their advice; Karolin Moreau for her research assistance; and Ira Silver and David Shulman for soliciting this chapter. Myra Marx Ferree deserves special thanks for reading multiple versions of our chapter, connecting us with publishers, and providing concrete organizational suggestions. Finally, we acknowledge the other members of our “mom dissertator” support group (Erika Barth Cottrell, Shannon Sparks, Jessica Shumacher, Andrea Vogel and Pilar Useche); this chapter would not have been possible without them.

---

<sup>1</sup> Portions of this chapter cite "Making Space for Graduate Student Parents: Practice and Politics" by Kristen W. Springer, Brenda K. Parker, and Catherine Leviten-Reid. *Forthcoming. Journal of Family Issues*. <http://jfi.sagepub.com/>

## **Introduction**

There are salient similarities among the cultures of mothering and academia. They both, for example, place harsh demands on one's body and mind. If one were offered a purview into homes across the country in the wee hours of the night, one might find both academics and mothers pacing the floors, searching and pleading for that elusive cocktail of soothing strategies to lull a crying baby to sleep or the rhetorical flourishes needed to complete that vexing chapter. The intensity and reverence with which academics and mothers undertake their respective 'labors of love' is undoubtedly similar. And certainly both vocations can be marked by constant self-scrutiny and a nagging sense of incompleteness and imperfection.

Yet in spite of these ironic similarities, being both an academic and mother is quite incompatible in practice. Women who find themselves precariously trying to balance these two roles often struggle and sometimes fail. The sheer time demands coupled with the unrealistic yet normative conceptions of 'idealized' mothers and '100%' academics means that one can never truly be both. These tensions and contradictions can be particularly explicit during graduate school, when aspiring academics are being 'socialized' into their new vocations, and when many women are experiencing motherhood for the first time.

Although this chapter argues that graduate student parents still remain largely invisible in academia, progress is being made. Indeed, the fact that we, the authors, were actively recruited to write this chapter is one very important indication of progress. The book's

editors learned of us through a publisher who reviewed our book proposal on graduate student parenting. All three of us had children during graduate school at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. We met each other through a self-started interdisciplinary support and writing group, consisting of three to ten mothers. This ‘mom dissertator’ group became a lifeline for us in the struggle to balance dissertations and parenting and we often joked that there should be a ‘how to’ resource for graduate student mothers. We noticed that, while there is substantive literature aimed at understanding and addressing the needs of faculty parents (Armenti 2004; Bassett 2005; Bhattacharjee 2004; Colbeck and Drago 2005; Mason and Goulden 2002; 2004), there is much less available for graduate student mothers. Certainly many of the issues faced by faculty and student parents are similar, such as work/life balance struggles and the need for adequate parental leave. However, there are circumstances often specific to graduate student parents or exacerbated for graduate student parents – including but not limited to relationships with advisors, financial insecurity, career uncertainty, and open or flexible timelines. Furthermore, most institutional and national efforts devoted to retaining and recruiting parents in higher education focus on faculty not graduate students.

Although the idea for this chapter originated as an off-handed comment in a moment of duress, we came to believe that synthesizing the current research on graduate student parenting and sharing our experiences might ease the process of PhD completion for other graduate student parents. We also hoped to make the experiences and needs of graduate students more visible in the literature and to the institutions that are serving them. We wrote this chapter with these goals in mind. While the chapter focuses most

explicitly on mothers, many of the data and suggestions apply to any graduate student parent (mothers or fathers). For ease of reading, we use the terms ‘mother(s)’ and ‘parent(s)’ to signal which populations are being addressed.

In this chapter, we describe a growing population of graduate student mothers and discuss the theoretical and practical tensions between society’s view of idealized mothering and academia’s vision of an idealized graduate student. After conveying the general context of patchwork supports for graduate student mothers, we then offer suggestions on how it might be possible to square the circle of incompatibility between graduate school and parenting. In the body of the chapter we focus on issues and strategies over which graduate student parents have some direct influence, such as building a support network and creating a dissertation plan. We emphasize these individual-level solutions because this manuscript is designed to provide informal professionalization for graduate students, not because institutional and departmental policies are unimportant.

### **A Growing Dilemma: Graduate Studies and Childrearing**

In recent years, women have been entering and completing graduate school in record numbers, particularly in Sociology.<sup>2</sup> Since the median age for women at doctoral degree completion is 33.6, the likelihood that women’s time in graduate school will coincide with their childbearing years is quite high (Hoffer et al. 2006).<sup>3</sup> In fact, 24% of women and 28% of men enrolled in PhD programs have dependent children; and 42% of women enrolled in Masters Degree programs or first professional degrees have children (Mason

---

<sup>2</sup> In 2002, women comprised 60% of PhD recipients (Spalter-Roth and Kennelly 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Among faculty that went on to achieve tenure, the average period for graduate school completion was 9.3 years in 1999, compared to 7.6 years in 1985 (Mason 2006).

2006). In addition, many women (including sociologists) who want children forgo having them in graduate school due to fears about lack of maternity leave, delayed progress in graduate school, and the perceived incompatibility of academia and caregiving (Mason 2006; Spalter-Roth and Kennelly 2004).<sup>4</sup>

Having a child or raising a family while trying to complete coursework, exams and a dissertation introduces new barriers to an already difficult and often overwhelming process (Detore-Nakamura 2003; Gerber 2005; Jirón-King 2005; O'Reilly 2002). One study found that graduate student mothers spend 102 hours per week on their paid and unpaid duties compared to 95 hours for graduate student fathers and approximately 75 hours for childless graduate students (Mason and Goulden 2006). Furthermore, a study by the American Sociological Association found that many crucial resources—including help with publishing, mentoring, effective teaching training, and fellowships—were less available to graduate student parents, particularly mothers, than other students (Spalter-Roth and Kennelly 2004). Researchers have also found that graduate students with children are less likely to be enrolled in the highest ranking sociology departments and hypothesize that this trend is due to the heavy demands placed on students within these institutions as well as the shortage of female faculty, and hence the lack of role models, in these departments (Kennelly and Spalter-Roth 2006).

---

<sup>4</sup> The choice to delay childbirth has important consequences for women, including declining fertility, constrained reproduction options, and/or ultimately having smaller families than desired (Mason and Ekman 2007). Data suggests that male graduate students and early-career faculty do not defer childrearing at the same rate as women.

Given this data, it is not surprising that there are differences in degree achievement and career paths between graduate students who have children and those who do not. Men and women with children are a smaller percentage of doctoral recipients than those without children (Lovik 2004). While no data is available on attrition rates among graduate school mothers, our experiences and our review of the literature lead us to believe that this is an important 'pipeline leak' for women. In terms of future careers, graduate students with children are much less likely to enter research universities than those without children (Long 2001; Williams 2004) and to cite work/life balance as a reason for shifting away from 'professor with research emphasis' careers (Mason and Goulden 2006). Within academic sociology, gender and parental status differences are evident. In 2001, men who were childless during graduate school held 36% of tenure-track positions in Sociology at research institutions, compared to 26% of men and 24% of women who had children in graduate school (Spalter-Roth and Kennelly 2004).

Graduate students mothers are not only confronted with logistical difficulties, limited support, and eventually constrained career paths, they must also contend with conflicting and powerful ideologies that surround academia and motherhood. These ideologies, described in the next section, often situate graduate student mothers in difficult positions, as they strive but fail to comply with competing norms.

### **In a Perfect World: Idealized Academics and Self-sacrificing Mothers**

Only those who know the supremacy of the intellectual life can understand the grief of one who falls from that serene activity into the absorbing soul-wasting

struggle with worldly annoyances. (George Eliot 1994: N.p.)

The best mothers always put their kids' needs before their own, period. The best mothers are the main caregivers. For the best mothers, their kids are the center of the universe. The best mothers always smile. They always understand. They are never tired. They never lose their temper... they lavish every ounce of physical vitality they have, the monetary equivalent of the gross domestic product of Austria, and most of all, every single bit of their emotional, mental and psychic energy on our kids. (Douglas and Michaels 2004: 8)

Mythology, expectations and ideals surrounding the culture of academia abound. As academics, we are trained to be monkish in our devotion, slavish in our pursuit of knowledge. We are not to be fettered by 'worldly annoyances' which might distract us from our pure and single-minded pursuits. Time demands are high, and pressure to publish is constantly increasing. Graduate students are hardly immune to these pressures. Graduate students are often simultaneously teaching, conducting independent research, writing, working with faculty, and participating in a number of 'informal' obligations, such as networking, attending departmental colloquia, and supporting advisor's research activities. In an increasingly precarious and competitive job market, these normative ideals take on more ominous meaning. If students are to secure elusive tenure-track positions in academia, they are expected to have significant publishing, research, and teaching experience. They are expected to pursue academia with dogged diligence,

subject to uneven power relations and potentially to advisor whims, all the while eating rice and beans and forgoing a personal life.

Cultural ideologies and normative expectations surrounding ‘motherhood’ are even more pervasive and pernicious. If academics are supposed to work around the clock, mothers are supposed to do so with perpetual smiles on their faces and in a stylish pair of shoes. In addition, a mother’s slavishness is supposed to be selfless; her devotion undiminished by lack of financial reward or professional prestige. The pressure to achieve perfect motherhood—referred to as ‘the new momism’ and ‘intensive mothering’ (Crittenden 2002; Douglas and Michaels 2004) is augmented and accompanied by the ongoing media celebration of mothers who are ‘opting out’ (Belkin 2003). Here, affluent and successful women who have made it to the top and who supposedly have access to the vast array of choices available to modern women are now *choosing* to stay home with the children. These women are presented as calm, fulfilled, and in their natural place. The subtext in that staying in the home, and out of the labor market, is what implicitly true and good mothers naturally want when given all the options. Of course, the media idealization of ‘opting opt’ ignores the myriad social and institutional constraints that *push* mothers out of the labor market, namely workplace inflexibility, inadequate family supports, and discrimination against mothers (Correll, Benard and Paik 2007; Williams, Manvell and Bornstein 2006).

The discourse of ‘choice’ implicit in this ‘opting out’ rhetoric also plagues graduate student parents – mothers in particular. Indeed, many graduate student mothers ‘choose’

to take time off school to parent or ‘choose’ to leave graduate school all together. Also, many women ‘choose’ to apply to non tenure-track positions in lieu of other faculty positions. However, choice and discrimination are not mutually exclusive; many women who are ‘pushed out’ of the labor market describe the situation as a ‘choice’ (Williams 2000; Williams, Manvell and Bornstein 2006). Graduate student mothers should not be blamed for their constrained choices or revered as idealized mothers for following a course that may seem to be the only realistic option.

The ‘opt out’ myth is further complicated for graduate student mothers by the invisible and devalued nature of social reproduction within academic institutions. Mothering and parenting is not normative on campus. As student mothers, we have experienced the awkward pauses rendered by our pregnant bodies on campus, and struggled to navigate strollers in classrooms and to find places to nurse our babies (which popular childrearing experts William and Martha Sears (2003) now recommend that we do for at least a year). Although sometimes subtle, there are constant reminders in the social and physical environment of the University that we (graduate student parents and our babies) do not truly belong here.

Of course, the culture of idealized parenthood, while increasingly affecting men, remains largely about mothers and our cultural identities as women and caregivers. Women with children, including graduate students and academics, spend much more time on tasks related to care giving and the household than men with children (Crittenden 2002; Hays 1996; Mason and Goulden 2006; Williams, Manvell and Bornstein 2006). Furthermore,

it is mothers who are the objects of discourses about ‘opting out’ and whose decisions are regularly glorified and demonized (Williams, Manvell and Bornstein 2006). As Douglas and Michaels, authors of *The Mommy Myth*, wryly point out (2004, 8) “After all, a dad who knows the name of the kids’ pediatrician and reads them stories at night is still regarded as a saint; a mother who doesn’t is a sinner.”

When placed side-by-side, the archetypes of ideal graduate students and ideal mothers are clearly incompatible. For graduate student mothers situated amidst these impossible ideologies and institutions, the challenges are vast. It is to these challenges – and possible solutions – that we now turn. We first discuss and critique the institutional and departmental supports that are currently made available to graduate student parents. We then offer some individual coping strategies for graduate student mothers based on our own experiences and the research. We qualify the latter with an implicit cultural critique of gendered institutions, ideologies and constrained choices faced by all mothers who navigate their paid and unpaid labors of love (Crittenden 2002; Mason and Ekman 2007; Williams 2000; Williams, Manvell and Bornstein 2006).

### **Patchwork Supports**

In her book, *Women on the Fast Track*, Mason and Ekman (2007, 15) report that “Women in PhD programs, especially science and engineering, perceive a ‘no children allowed’ rule in the prevailing climate.” Based on existing research and our own survey of sociology departments, we understand why this perception stands. What we found in the data are three underlying patterns: that there are few formal institutional supports

tailored to the needs of graduate student parents, that there is limited knowledge on the part of faculty regarding supports that may exist for graduate students with children, and that departments deal with graduate student parents on a flexible, case-by-case basis. All three serve to create a message that children are not a standard feature in the lives of doctoral candidates.

In the spring of 2007, we conducted an on-line survey that was sent to the graduate program advisors of the top 63 US sociology departments as ranked by US News and World Report; our response rate was 63%. The goal of the survey was to find out what supports were available to graduate student parents both at the departmental level and at the institutional (campus-wide) level. As the table indicates, departments provide limited resources and programming tailored to the needs of these graduate students. Fewer than 15% of departments offer any of the following: family-friendly space, dissertator support groups, child care subsidies or faculty training on the issues faced by graduate student parents. Only slightly more (17.5%) provide professional development opportunities tailored to graduate student parents, such as a session on going on the job market while pregnant or with an infant. Holding family-friendly social functions was the anomalous item, with over three quarters of respondents stating that such events were held by their departments.

**Table 1: Supports for Graduate Student Parents**

<b>Offered at the Departmental Level</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Don't Know</b>	<b>No Answer</b>
Training for faculty on how to support graduate student parents	0%	92.5%	0%	7.5%
Professional development opportunities tailored to the	17.5%	62.5%	2.5%	17.5%

circumstances of graduate student parents				
Dissertator support groups specifically for graduate student parents	2.5%	80%	7.5%	10%
Social activities where graduate students' children are encouraged to attend	75%	17.5%	5%	2.5%
Family-friendly space (such as lactation rooms)	10%	67.5%	5%	17.5%
Subsidies for child care	5%	80%	0%	15%
<b>Offered at the Institutional Level</b>				
Training for faculty on how to support graduate student parents	0%	47.5%	35%	17.5%
Professional development opportunities tailored to the circumstances of graduate student parents	5%	35%	45%	15%
Dissertator support groups specifically for graduate student parents	7.5%	20%	47.5%	25%
Social activities where graduate students' children are encouraged to attend	35%	7.5%	32.5%	25%
Family-friendly space (such as lactation rooms)	30%	15%	40%	15%
Subsidies for child care	25%	25%	32.5%	17.5%

Source: Survey conducted by authors of top 63 Sociology Departments in the U.S. (N=40).

A slightly different picture emerges with supports present campus-wide. Child care subsidies and family-friendly space become more prevalent, with 25% to 30% of institutions reporting that these are available to students. This signals that while sociology departments may not, for example, have their own space available to create a lactation room or financial resources to help contribute to their students' child care fees, these supports may still be part of the campus infrastructure. Similarly, sociology

departments may defer the organization of peer support groups to the Graduate School or a campus body that provides health and wellness or writing services for students.

If it is indeed the case that some supports fall under the purview of campuses and not departments, what becomes problematic is not only the large number of institutions that are not offering these resources, but the lack of knowledge respondents had about what supports were available at the campus level. Almost thirty three percent reported not knowing about child care subsidies, and 40% stated they did not know whether lactation rooms or other child-friendly spaces were available on campus. Further, at least 45% of respondents did not know about dissertator support groups or professional development opportunities for graduate student parents. These figures may be even higher if some of the missing responses were due to lack of knowledge about the campus supports available. This means that students may have difficulty accessing information about policies, take-up rates might be unnecessarily low, and—in a worst case scenario—students may actually leave their program perceiving no way to accommodate their parental and student status. Moreover, the fact that many supports are ‘unknown’ suggests that institutions, departments, and faculty do not have the level of recognition necessary to help address the growing population of graduate student parents.

It is less clear whether and what kinds of maternity, paternity or parental leave policies are available to graduate student parents. In a recent review of the resources available to graduate student parents attending institutions belonging to the American Association of

Universities<sup>5</sup> (AAU), it was found that 26% of these institutions provided a maternity or parental leave policy, while only 10% of members had paid maternity leave policies (Mason 2006). A survey conducted by the American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics to gauge the presence of 'female-friendly climates' for graduate students in physics found that 37% of respondents (49/133) reported having a family leave policy in place.<sup>6</sup> Upon closer examination of the data, however, it became clear to us that several representatives from physics departments answered yes when what was in fact available to students was the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and little or nothing more. For example, one respondent wrote that *"For the typical student on a half-time appointment, up to 5 days (20 hours) of sick leave may be used per year for attention to the medical needs of immediate family members. All employees are covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act."* Another, also responding positively to the availability of a parental leave, wrote that they provided *"Nothing beyond what is required by the Family Medical Leave Act"* while a third respondent wrote that *"Graduate students are covered by the Family Medical Leave Act. Up to 12 weeks of unpaid medical leave is guaranteed to all graduate students with at least 1250 hours of work in the previous year."* This last quotation is, in fact, incongruous, and points to the limitations of the FMLA as a meaningful support for graduate student parents since few are likely to work the 24 hours per week necessary to meet the eligibility requirements.

---

<sup>5</sup> This review was done by looking at the web sites of these institutions and so may not paint a complete picture of the policies and programs available.

<sup>6</sup> Respondents were department chairs or designated departmental representatives. Further, we examined the data when 133 responses were available, although at the time of submitting this chapter there were 142 survey responses.

We also found this lack of clarity surrounding leave policies in our own survey. While we found that 40% of respondents stated that a maternity leave policy was available either at the department or university level, we do not know whether this includes paid or unpaid leaves, or whether respondents were referring specifically to the FMLA.

The last pattern that emerged from our own survey data concerns the flexible approach used by sociology departments to support graduate students. Over two-thirds of responding sociology departments indicated that they had research and teaching assistant positions with flexible deliverables and hours, which could conceivably be held by graduate student parents. An open-ended question at the end of the survey resulted in comments such as the following “*The Sociology Department makes an effort to accommodate graduate student parents on a case-by-case basis and prides itself on being as flexible and supportive as possible.*” and “*Our department policies are very flexible and we try to accommodate all special issues graduate students have, including parenthood.*” Based on our personal experiences, departmental flexibility in timelines and assistantships are critical and can make the difference in a graduate student mother’s desire and ability to complete her program. However, informal, flexible arrangements can go awry leaving the student in a precarious position with no official avenue for recourse. For example, after negotiating an informal maternity leave of six weeks from her assistantship, one student in our group was later asked by her advisor to make up those hours in the summer without pay. Clearly, flexibility is a necessary but insufficient strategy to support graduate student parents.

It is not unreasonable to think that the needs of graduate student mothers can be met. Universities already do put policies and programs in place to accommodate specific subgroups of students. Examples include creating resource centers for people with disabilities, as well as providing these students with auxiliary aids, such as wheelchair accessible classrooms, and adjustments to academic requirements (Wolanin and Steele, 2004). Student athletes comprise a second subgroup acknowledged by campus communities: they are offered supports ranging from academic assistance (which can include tutoring and liaison services between the athletes, coaches and faculty) to counseling services (Gabbard and Halischak, 1993; Jordan and Denson, 1990). We are neither stating that the needs of graduate student mothers are similar to students who have a disability or who participate in athletic activities, or that the structures currently in place to assist these other two subgroups are fully adequate or standard across universities. Our point is simply that academic environments are malleable and can be tailored to different kinds of students.

### **Graduate Student Parent Strategies**

Notwithstanding the lack of institutional supports, graduate student parents must find ways to navigate departments and academic institutions. In the following sections, we offer suggestions based on existing research and personal experiences. We offer these strategies with the hope of providing some guidance and support, yet we recognize this is an incomplete overview of all possible coping techniques. The sections are organized loosely in sequential order beginning from gathering information on parental supports and ending with going on the job market. We have tried to make the information in this

section pertinent to parents of both sexes. However some points of discussion – such as those related to pregnancy or nursing – are specific to women (or women who are biological mothers).

### **Collecting Information**

It is important for prospective and current students to understand in what ways department and university are family-friendly. We suggest that student parents (or parents to be) ask their graduate program director, women's center, teaching assistant union, and other graduate students about the existence of family-friendly programs, policies, and social norms within the department and the university. Specific questions may include whether there is a maternity or parental leave policy in place, whether health insurance packages include coverage of dependents, whether there is family-friendly graduate student housing available, and whether there are child care tuition assistance programs and child care centers on campus. It is also important to assess potential implications of taking a semester leave for childrearing. At some universities, students may lose access to campus housing, childcare, library privileges, and/or student visa status while on leave.

Student parents should also make sure to ask multiple people about parental policies and supports, especially if people report that they do not know or do not believe any policies exist. Approximately 15% of graduate student directors who responded to our survey did not know if there was a maternity leave policy at their institution; an additional 12.5% of directors did not answer the question and also may not have known. In our situation, it

was only through our mom dissertator group that many of us learned about particular resources, such as grants available for child care. Furthermore, in a survey of family leave policies offered by physics departments, many respondents indicated that students would be granted leave without penalty, *if requested* (American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics, N.d.). Also, even if paid leave is not available through the University or department, students paid through a federal grant may still be eligible for paid parental. In sum, it is very important to find out what services are available and ask for them!

### **Developing a Career Plan**

As parents, we spend hours learning about child rearing and child development. Before our first child arrives, many of us prepare for parenthood by reading about child birth, making a birth plan, and taking various baby-related classes. However, very few of us develop a career plan for successfully getting through graduate school and finding a job with a child (or children) in tow. We suggest that student parents draw from all possible resources (i.e. chapters in this manuscript, mothering in academia books, and other graduate student parents) to set specific, realistic academic and career-advancement goals. It might also be helpful to share these goals with advisors, friends, or some other person to whom you will feel accountable. *Consider this preparation as a type of birth plan for dissertation completion and future career success.*

### **Spilling the Beans – Whom to Tell and When**

When starting a family during graduate school, it is important to determine whom to tell about your pregnancy and in what order. Part of learning to be a successful sociology graduate student is figuring out how to present a professional and collegial persona. As Shulman and Silver (2003) point out – we all feel insecure, incompetent and inferior at times – and so all students must figure out who to confide in and when to put on a confident mask. These issues are even more salient for pregnant students trying to figure out when, how, and whom to tell. We suggest that graduate student parents ask other students about the formal expectations and informal norms for the department and specific advisors. After talking to students, think about what *you* want, and ask for it specifically when you meet your advisor. Also think about the order to tell people and the timing of telling. In general, we recommend first telling advisors and person(s) who provide funding.

If your advisor reacts unfavorably to your news, share your struggles with a trusted faculty member, the director of graduate studies, the student union and/or a campus' women's association. This sends signals to your department and institution that graduate student parenting is an important issue. Choosing to talk with representatives from a campus women's center or student union can provide some anonymity if you feel vulnerable talking to someone in your department. If your departmental culture is one that welcomes student input, you might see more immediate results if you communicate your concerns with the graduate program advisor or the chair. If you face discrimination, your campus should also have an office that deals with equity and diversity.

## **Establishing a Support Network**

We strongly encourage participating in a peer-support group of graduate student parents. To help us get through our PhDs, we formed a ‘mother-dissertator support group’ consisting of women expecting or raising children from graduate programs across campus. To get it started, one mother posted a message on a campus-based parent list serve and then organized a first meeting to discuss group objectives. We then met on a bi-weekly basis in a child-friendly coffee shop. Although the primary goal was to create writing-related milestones, we invariably brainstormed about many problems related to our academic progress and our families. This mom dissertator group was also vital in that it created a space in which we all felt we fit; none of us considered ourselves full-time parents, yet none of us were really full-time students, nor were we participants in the labor force. The connections made in this peer support group also led to other invaluable ‘spin-offs.’ For example, we shared childcare providers, gave statistical help to each other, and studied together outside of the group. Our group remains a support even after members started graduating.

It is worth noting that this kind of peer support is also advocated by authors writing about women in the academy. Carli (1998) recommends informal mentoring as a solution to the stress female faculty members face; she writes that connecting with a group of women academics can provide each other assistance with a range of problems, including advice on publishing, preparing a grant proposal, and teaching. Caplan (1993) makes the same recommendation for both students and professors, and describes these networks as

places to talk about both the instrumental and emotional aspects of surviving the academy. Further, both Carli and Caplan see peer support as a way to address feelings of isolation.

### **Staying Connected to Your Graduate Program**

Although we encourage the development of a cross-disciplinary peer support group, it is also very important for student parents to stay connected to their graduate program.

Research on graduate student attrition has shown that integrated students are less likely to drop out, due in part to minimized isolation and a better understanding of the politics and mores of graduate school (Lovitts 2001). This integration can come through academic appointments, like teaching and research assistantships, or through participating in colloquia and social events.

Student parents' ability to stay connected to their department depends in large part on the structure of parental leave. For example, students in departments and universities lacking a formal parental leave policy may take a formal leave of absence. Unfortunately, this leave may mean that the student loses some privileges of official enrollment such as office space and library access – clearly making it difficult to remain integrated.

Nonetheless, if possible, we suggest that graduate student parents and institutions strive to keep institutional ties during parental leave. These connections may be weak and sporadic for some time after a birth or adoption. This is normal. Every one of us was emotionally spent and physically exhausted for weeks (or months) after birth and had a

very hard time focusing on any work for at least several weeks. Nonetheless, it is important to maintain whatever departmental ties you can muster.

### **Managing Your Time and Multiple Roles**

Dissertations take time and resources. Having dependents, of course, means fewer hours to devote to research and coursework. Below we discuss three of the most critical aspects of managing multiple roles: finding adequate child-care, negotiating roles and duties with a partner if necessary, and committing to specific writing times and goals.

#### *Child Care*

Finding adequate child-care is an essential step in finding time to make progress on degree completion. Furthermore, finding quality child-care will ensure the peace of mind needed to fully engage in dissertation writing, studying for preliminary exams, and/or completing coursework. Countless hours of our mom dissertator meetings were devoted to solving dilemmas related to child-care. We each found it tremendously difficult to focus and move ahead in our work if we had concerns or uncertainty about our child-care arrangements.

Finding spaces at an affordable cost is a struggle across US households and is not unique to graduate student parents. Graduate student parents often struggle with limited budgets, but may also have access to campus resources, including financial assistance for child-care. For example, 25% of institutions that responded to our survey had child care

subsidies available to graduate student mothers.<sup>7</sup> Our own institution provided child-care grants that covered a portion of the cost for certified child-care provided by a center or home-based provider. The application process was simple, and many of us took advantage of this extremely helpful benefit. Unfortunately, however, the funding was not available to students who hired providers to work in their home. In a city where center- or home-based care for infants was hard to find, this was an unfortunate limitation.

In addition to funding child-care, finding quality care can be challenging. Often campuses have excellent centers, but they are hard to access and include long waiting lists. Students interested in center-based care on or off-campus should get on waiting lists as early as possible, and contact the centers often. Actually – some of us put our names on waiting lists before telling anyone else we were pregnant! Students interested in hiring someone privately often successfully employ undergraduate students recruited through bulletin boards and campus job banks. Alternatively, parents may wish to share a daycare provider creating their own ‘in-home’ daycare. Furthermore, student parents should check with parent resource services or a women’s center for information about childcare opportunities.

### *Negotiating with Partners*

For students with partners or spouses, securing time to focus on graduate work requires proactive negotiation. A study on doctoral students at the University of California at Berkeley found that female PhD student parents spent about eight hours less per week on

---

<sup>7</sup> The number may be much greater, as a large number of respondents did not know if their department or institution offered child care subsidies.

their doctoral work than their male counterparts (Mason and Goulden 2006). While time spent on employment was almost equal (17.5 versus 18.2 hours), women spent over 15 hours more per week either caregiving or doing housework than male doctoral students. This divide may be especially acute after the arrival of a new baby, particularly if breastfeeding. Unfortunately, campus policies and social norms that allow for maternity and not paternity leave may help entrench this pattern.

In families where the mother was the only academic, we found that her ‘flexibility’ as a graduate student was sometimes exploited (often unintentionally) by her partner. In two-academic families, there were struggles about whose work took precedence and priority. There is no simple solution to navigating household and academic work duties under the dominant gender norms and given the biological requirements of pregnancy and nursing. These issues arose even in the most ‘progressive’ heterosexual partnerships, in same-sex families, and adoptive families. Our most potent recommendation is to clarify responsibilities for both partners before starting a family, and to continually revisit and potentially revise plans as needed.

#### *Prioritize Work Time and Be Efficient*

It is also essential to create and preserve time for academic work. This is an issue for all students, however we emphasize this issue for graduate student parents because the potential distractions seem countless – time set aside for writing can easily be interrupted by a crying baby, children with homework questions, sheer exhaustion, or housework that looks surprisingly tempting compared to your keyboard. Carli (1998) recommends using

your most productive time of the day to write. Cone and Foster (1993) point out that we religiously prepare for and attend to our teaching commitment and should therefore be equally diligent about honoring our commitment to writing. Many women in our group found that writing outside of the home was necessary to avoid the potential distractions and demands of parenthood, partnership, and domesticity. However, given limited childcare coverage, we would often work at a nearby coffee shop rather than commute into school. It was also helpful to identify work-related goals and share them with our support group.

Finally, our last piece of advice in this section concerns balancing the number of roles graduate student parents may face — caregiver, student, worker, partner, and/or job market candidate. Try to be as efficient as possible by making decisions that meet several needs at once. For example, it may be possible to write course papers that will feed into a dissertation literature review or that draw from research assistant work. While in the final stages of dissertation writing, it might be helpful to decline a research or teaching assistantship if financially possible. The uninterrupted time was crucial for some members of our group.

### **Making the Difficult Decision: Staying or Leaving your Graduate Program**

As we all know, many graduate students who start PhD programs do not finish. People leave for a variety of reasons and not finishing is undoubtedly a good decision for many students. Although little data exist on the matter, we suspect that graduate student mothers drop out at numbers higher than other doctoral students. In fact, every graduate

student mother we know, including the authors, has considered leaving their doctoral program. As already discussed, combining the demands of a family with graduate student life can be overwhelming. In these moments of being overwhelmed, we found it helpful to remember that a desire to quit is normal and is not due to individual inadequacy but rather institutional and cultural problems that intensify the difficulty of balancing motherhood and graduate school. It is essential to remember, however, that graduate student parents can – and do – complete their PhDs and go on to find fulfilling employment.

Before seriously considering dropping out, we strongly suggest that you explore all other options. Ask for help from your friends, partner, or a parent; consider talking to your advisor about what you need to help alleviate stress; find a good therapist; and/or find a few more hours of childcare and allow yourself to take a break. Many University Health Services can grant a ‘mental health’ leave of absence which can be taken without penalty. Rather than completely leaving school, it may also be possible to remain enrolled on a limited, part-time basis. Within our mom dissertator group, some participants did slow down – taking 10-12 years to complete their PhD. Spending a decade in graduate school does not sound particularly appealing, but it was a good choice for some of us who wanted to spend significant time with our children without completely abandoning school. In the end, slowing down did not compromise our ability to finish and secure academic jobs and postdoctoral positions.

## **Moms on the Job Market**

It seems somewhat awkward to talk about going on the job market immediately following a discussion about dropping out. However, we hope that the order of these sections presages the pathway for student parents who consider dropping out. Other sections of this book manuscript discuss important general strategies for job searches and we therefore will only discuss issues specific to parenting on the job market.

Pursuing an academic job while pregnant, nursing an infant, or with young children at home can be difficult. Academic job interviews normally require travel, are exhausting and demanding, and involve a number of informal events (such as dinners) where the topic of family and children can arise. As a result, graduate student parents need to think about whether to disclose their parenthood/family status. Unfortunately, telling departments about children can be viewed negatively, especially in academia where the unwritten expectation is complete, unadulterated devotion to the craft. Indeed, research shows that implicit biases exist against mothers seeking employment. In actual and laboratory settings, mothers were offered fewer jobs, perceived as less competent, and offered lower starting salaries than were non-mothers (Correll, Benard, and Paik 2007). The same biases have not been found to operate against fathers seeking employment. In fact, their status as a male parent may mean that they are viewed as more reliable and stable.

While these studies have not specifically targeted academic work places, it is reasonable to assume that these underlying biases may be at work while you are interviewing for a

job. Most hiring committees understand it is not appropriate to ask about marital status, children, pregnancy, or child care plans during any stage of an interview. However, committee members do still ask directly. For example, a hiring committee member broached the subject with one of the authors by saying “I know it is illegal to ask about marriage and family, but I just want to be friendly – do you have any kids?” Even if not asked directly, informal conversations almost always include opportunities for candidates to share about their personal lives. Furthermore, some interviewers ‘fish’ for information about families. A friend of ours was repeatedly told about how great the school system was and was asked if that was an important consideration for her. Although in theory she could have directly refused to answer this question, like most people, she wanted to avoid such confrontation. Evasiveness or general statements about ‘families’ sometimes are useful in these situations. For example, our friend responded to the school query with a statement something like “Sure – it is always important to have great school systems.” Although discrimination against mothers is real, it is also important to emphasize that these inquires can be – and often are – good faith attempts to tell candidates about supports for families.

Some students prefer to openly discuss their child(ren) to gauge the family-friendliness of their prospective department. The members in our group made varied decisions about discussing their families. One author found it difficult to sustain several two-day interviews *without* mentioning her family and she therefore made general references to her family in select informal conversations (but chose not to reveal that she was pregnant). Another author was fortunate enough to have several competitive interviews

and early tenure-track offers, so she felt confident inquiring openly about maternity and family policies during conversations with faculty and department chairs.

On some occasions, being a mother may affect interview logistics. For example, if breastfeeding it will likely be necessary to schedule breaks for pumping or nursing. Parents may also prefer the shortest possible interview length to minimize disruptions at home. These logistics are best handled in advance with the departmental secretary or person arranging your interview. While many departments will be happy to accommodate these requests, some departments may judge these ‘special requests’ negatively – as an indication of parenting demands in the future. While this latter reaction is clearly unjust, a negative reception to reasonable parenting accommodations provides invaluable information on the family-(un)friendliness of the department.

In addition to indirect information gathering, most parent candidates will want to specifically inquire about official parental leave policies and departmental norms. In general, the best time to explore these questions in detail is after you have received an offer, as you are then in a less vulnerable position. Indeed, one author was able to negotiate a paid semester maternity leave as part of her hire package. In ascertaining the family-friendly nature of the hiring department and college, it is important to assess not only the formal policies, but also the familiarity of these policies by department administration and prior use of these policies by faculty members. This will give you a sense of how often these policies are actually used and how supportive administrators are of them. For example, one author of this article was told by a prospective administrator

that he was keenly aware of and supportive of gender issues on campus. Delighted to hear this, she inquired directly about family policies. In response, the administrator stammered that he wasn't really sure but he thought possibly there was a child-care center on campus.

## **Conclusion**

I look at my conventional neighbors who have kids and I am a little jealous, but at the same time, I realize I'm not them. I didn't choose a conventional career. Trying to have kids as a graduate student seems to me to be an attempt to have it all, rather than make some of the sacrifices required by some careers.

(Female graduate student, no children, 2007)<sup>8</sup>

Given the changing demographics of sociology PhD programs, it not reasonable to punish or ignore graduate students with children or to treat childbearing in graduate school as a private matter. Nor is it responsible to sanguinely suggest to women that graduate school is the 'best time to have a baby.' The reality is that more and more women are simultaneously and successfully balancing motherhood and graduate school. Yet they often do so with a lack of departmental and institutional supports and amidst a chilly climate toward childrearing (still described as 'trying to have it all'). As we did, they find themselves constantly caught between two ideals: the constant academic and the constant mother. In other cases, women who desire children forgo having them during graduate school, wary of

---

<sup>8</sup> Chronicle of Higher Education Online Forum.

the strain of fulfilling both roles. Quite possibly, this decision will result in future fertility difficulties and a smaller family size than desired.

As a matter of principle and gender equality, women should not be forced to choose between the families that they desire and academic careers, nor should they suffer in isolation and in hostile climates when they attempt to do both. This chapter is our humble attempt to help redress this problem. Drawing from the literature and our own data, we have discussed the cultural and institutional constraints faced by graduate student mothers, as well as available resources and supports. Sharing from our own experiences, we have tried to offer advice to those who are currently navigating graduate school and parenting, or are considering doing so. While this chapter has focused on the particular circumstances of graduate student mothers, when possible we have tried to shed light on the experiences of graduate student parents more generally. To our knowledge, there are no studies that focus explicitly on the experience of graduate student fathers, but research suggests that fathers may not confront the same overall work burdens, biases, and lack of mentoring that graduate student and working mothers do (Correll and Benard 2007; Keller and Spalter-Roth 2006; Mason 2006). However, graduate student parents of both sexes are less likely than non-parents to complete their degrees, to earn tenure, and to eventually work as faculty at top research universities (Kennelly and Spalter-Roth 2006; Lovick 2004; Spalter-Roth and Kennelly 2004; Williams 2004). Also, our survey of sociology programs showed an overall lack of institutional supports for both graduate student mothers and fathers. In this chapter we have tried to offer suggestions that could apply to both mothers and fathers who are struggling to balance graduate school and parenthood. We also hope that

institutions see the importance of providing adequate mentoring and support for *all parents* as they pursue their graduate studies. As Joan Williams and other feminists have argued, the path to both broader gender equity and reduced family/work conflict will necessarily involve a shift in roles for both men and women, including greater involvement in parenting by men (Williams 2000).

Finally, despite the social critiques embedded in this chapter and our call for enhanced institutional supports, we are optimistic about the potential for combining motherhood and graduate school. We (the authors) are fiercely passionate about both our children and our careers, and cannot imagine having had to choose between them. As it did for us, graduate school can conceivably offer women and men the rare option of ‘slowing down’ and spending time with family while still remaining focused on chosen career paths. With changes in policies and supports, graduate school and sociology departments in particular can be places where more women combine their dual roles as mothers and academics without being subtly pushed to ‘opt out.’

We are also encouraged by the promising practices that are emerging at Universities and by the recent attention given to attracting, supporting, and retaining graduate student parents (Balakrishna 2007; Cockrell 2007). One law department recently experienced the benefits of doing so after one of its students was awarded a rare honor of clerking for a Supreme Court Justice, bringing prestige to the department (Weier 2007). The student, a mother of five, described a parent-friendly department and a cohort of fellow student parents as crucial to her success. She also attributed her initial decision to join this particular

department to the changing tables in the bathroom. Her story echoes our own experiences that symbolic and material resources, combined with peer support and other individual-level strategies, were crucial to our success in completing graduate school and securing academic positions. We are convinced that graduate student parents who receive these resources and who follow some of the strategies presented above can achieve in graduate school, in academic positions, or in other chosen careers. We also feel certain that institutions that offer such support will be rewarded with diverse and intellectually rigorous student bodies.

## References

- American Physical Society's Committee on the Status of Women in Physics. N.d. Female Friendly Physics Graduate Programs. Retrieved July 16, 2007 (<http://www.aps.org/programs/women/female-friendly/>).
- America's Best Graduate Schools: Sociology (Ph.D.). 2007. *U.S. News and World Report*. Retrieved March 20. (<http://grad-schools.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/usnews/edu/grad/rankings/phdhum/brief/socrank.php> )
- Armenti, Carmen. 2004. May Babies and Posttenure Babies: Maternal Decisions of Women Professors. *The Review of Higher Education* 27 (2): 11-31.
- Balakrishna, Kanya. 2007. "Doctoral Candidates to Receive Support from Grad. School after Childbirth or Adoption." *Yale Daily News*, April 23. Retrieved July 30 2007 (<http://www.yaledailynews.com/articles/view/20888>).
- Bassett, Rachel Hile. 2005. *Parenting and Professing: Balancing Family Work with and Academic Career*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Belkin, Lisa. 2003. "The Opt-out Revolution." *The New York Times Magazine*, October 26, 42.

- Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit. 2004. Family Matters: Stopping Tenure Clock May Not Be Enough. *Science* 306 (5704): 2031- 2033.
- Caplan, Paula J. 1993. *Lifting a Ton of Feathers: A Woman's Guide to Surviving in the Academic World*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Carli, Linda L. 1998. "Coping With Adversity." Pp. 275 to 302 in *Career Strategies for Women in Academe: Arming Athena*, edited by L. H. Collins, J.C. Chrisler and K. Quina. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Chronicle of Higher Education Online Forum. 2007. Retrieved July 16, 2007 (<http://chronicle.com/forums/>).
- Cockrell, Cathy. 2007. "Campus Will Grant Paid Maternity Leave to Women Doctoral Students. *Berkeleyan Online*. March 7. Retrieved July 30, 2007 ([http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2007/03/07\\_maternity.shtml](http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2007/03/07_maternity.shtml)).
- Colbeck, Carol L. and Robert Drago. 2005. Accept, Avoid, Resist: Faculty Members' Responses to Bias Against Caregiving . . . And How Departments Can Help. *Change Magazine* 37 (6): 10-17.
- Cone, John D. and Sharon L. Foster. 1993. *Dissertations and Theses from Start to Finish: Psychology and Related Fields*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

- Correll, Shelley J., Stephen Benard and In Paik. 2007. "Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?" *American Journal of Sociology*. 112: 1297–1338.
- Crittenden, Ann. 2002. *The Price of Motherhood: Why the Most Important Job in the World is Still the Least Valued*. New York: H. Holt & Co.
- Detore-Nakamura, Joanne. 2003. "Dissertation Distress: A Room of One's Own with a Crib and a Computer." *Mothering in the Academy* 5: 57-61.
- Douglas, Susan and Meredith Michaels. 2004. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*. New York: Free Press.
- Eliot, George. 1994. *Middlemarch*. New York: Penguin Classics
- Gabbard, Clint and Kate Halischak. 1993. "Consulting Opportunities: Working with Student-Athletes at a University." *The Counseling Psychologist* 21: 386-398.
- Gerber, Nancy. 2005. "Pregnant with Meaning: A Mother's Sojourn in the Academy." Pp. 113 to 121 in *Parenting & Professing: Balancing Family Work with an Academic Career*, edited by Rachel Hile Bassett. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Hays, Sharon. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hoffer, T.B., V. Welch, Jr., K. Webber, K. Williams, B. Lisek, M. Hess, D. Loew, and I. Guzman-Barron. 2006. *Doctorate Recipients from United States Universities: Summary Report 2005*. Chicago: National Opinion Research Center.

Jirón-King, Shimmerlee. 2005. "La estudiante caminante: My Motherwork is Here, My Otherwork is There." Pp. 21 to 33 in *Parenting & Professing: Balancing Family Work with an Academic Career*, edited by Rachel Hile Bassett. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.

Jordon, Janice and Eric Denson. 1990. "Student Services for Athletes: A Model for Enhancing the Student-Athlete Experience." *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 69: 95-97.

Kennelly, Ivy and Roberta Spalter-Roth. 2006. "Parents on the Job Market: Resources and Strategies That Help Academic Parents Attain Tenure-Track Jobs." *The American Sociologist* 37: 29-49.

Long, J. Scott. 2001. *From Scarcity to Visibility: Gender Differences in the Careers of: Doctoral Scientists and Engineers*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Louis, Lucille. 2006. "Life as a Mother-Scientist." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

December 1. Retrieved June 15, 2007

(<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2006/12/2006120101c/careers.html>).

Lovik, E. 2004. "Advising Graduate Students: Understanding the Influence of Family on Graduate Education." *The Mentor: An Academic Advising Journal*. April 4.

Retrieved June 15, 2007 (<http://www.psu.edu/dus/mentor/041020el.htm>).

Lovitts, Barbara E. 2001. *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study*. Lanham, MA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Mason, Mary Ann. 2006. "Graduate Student Parents: The Underserved Minority."

Presented at the Council of Graduate Schools, December 9, Washington, DC.

Retrieved June 15, 2007

([http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg\\_am06Mason.pdf](http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg_am06Mason.pdf)).

Mason, Mary Ann and Eve Mason Ekman. 2007. *Mothers on the Fast Track: How a New Generation Can Balance Family and Careers*. New York: Oxford

University Press.

Mason, Mary Ann and Marc Goulden. 2002. "Do Babies Matter? The Effect of Family

- Formation on the Lifelong Careers of Academic Men and Women.” *Academe* 88: 21-27.
- Mason, Mary Ann and Marc Goulden. 2004. “Marriage and Baby Blues: Re-Defining Gender Equity.” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 596: 86-103.
- Mason, Mary Ann and Marc Goulden. 2006. “UC Doctoral Student Career Life Survey.” Cited in “Graduate Student Parents: The Underserved Minority.” Presented at the Council of Graduate Schools, December 9, Washington, DC. Retrieved June 15, 2007 ([http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg\\_am06Mason.pdf](http://www.cgsnet.org/portals/0/pdf/mtg_am06Mason.pdf)).
- Murphy, Brenda L. and Denise Cloutier-Fisher. 2002. “Balancing Act: Graduate School and Motherhood.” *Great Lakes Geographer* 9: 37-47.
- O’Reilly, Andrea. 2002. “What’s a Girl Like You Doing in a Nice Place Like This? Mothering in the Academy.” Pp 183-188 in *Women in the Canadian Academic Tundra*, edited by Elena Hannah, Linda Paul and Swani Vethamany-Globus. Montréal and Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press.
- Sears, William and Martha Sears. 2003. *The Baby Book: Everything You Need to Know About Your Baby -- from Birth to Age Two*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company.

Shulman, David and Ira Silver. 2003. "The Business of Becoming a Professional Sociologist: Unpacking the Informal Training of Graduate School." *The American Sociologist* 34: 56-72.

Spalter-Roth, Roberta and Ivy Kennelly. 2004. *The Best Time to Have a Baby: Institutional Resources and Family Strategies Among Early Career Sociologists*. Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association.

Weier, Anita. 2007. "Supremely Qualified UW Grad and Mom of 5 Will Clerk for Justice Stevens." *The Capital Times*, July 6, N.p.

Williams, Joan. 2000. *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Joan C. 2004. "Singing the Grad-School Baby Blues." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 20.

Williams, Joan C, Jessica Manvell and Stephanie Bornstein. 2006. "Opt Out" or Pushed Out?: How the Press Covers Work/Family Conflict—the Untold Story of Why Women Leave the Workforce. UC Hastings College of the Law.

Wolanin, Thomas R. and Patricia E. Steele. 2004. *Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Disabilities: A Primer for Policymakers*. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy.