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Navigating the Challenges of Being a Student Mom

by Pamela Love

According to The Institute for Women's Policy Research, one in five students is a parent, 70% are women, and 62% of those women are single student moms going to school without the support of a spouse.¹ So if you are a student parent, you are also likely a student mom. Whether you are a young mom with a newborn baby or an experienced mom with a large family, or any kind of mom in between, being a student mom combines two incredibly difficult roles—roles with which I am well familiar. I share my saga, replete with the lows and the highs, along with several strategies that enabled me to straddle the mom-student worlds without losing my sanity, in hopes of helping fellow student-mom travelers climb similar mountains.

Two years ago, my family moved to Provo from Hawaii because my husband's health prevented him from working. Although his employment leave was covered through disability insurance, we thought it would be wise to move to a place with a lower cost of living, especially since we have six children. At the same time, my sister, who is a single mother, was preparing to return to Brigham Young University for her MBA. My widowed mother-in-law was also relocating to Utah and needed a place to live. Additionally, I knew that my husband's disability coverage would expire in a year and it would be wise for me to finish my degree at BYU, a feat that would require a great deal of family support for me as well as my sister.

So, we rented a home near my sister and invited my mother-in-law to live with us in the basement apartment of our home. I applied to BYU, received a scholarship, changed my major to Family Studies, and began classes in Spring 2018—right after my husband miraculously found a job that would allow him to work tentatively and temporarily. It all sounds quite straightforward now, but it was a whirlwind of a year for our family.

In my first classes at BYU, I felt very disconnected from the mothering life I had known as a stay-at-home, homeschooling mother for the past 17 years. With heavy feelings in my heart, I chose to study the association between a mother's time with her children and maternal happiness for my first research paper. In doing so, I discovered the paradoxical conundrum I faced as a student mother.

On one hand, university education has myriad advantages for women—better health and self-development, improved parenting, more balance in family life, higher income, and

greater community involvement.² And, the example that mothers in college set for their children also generates exponential generational power—highly educated mothers tend to have highly educated children.³

However, student mothers also reported “less happiness and more fatigue during activities with their children.”⁴ How unequivocally I related to that study! Yet as my stress level rose and my sleep hours diminished, I continued to research, finding that as long as children have nurturing care away from their mothers, the mothers generally struggle more with mother-child separation than the children do.⁵ I also learned that teenagers benefit just as much as children from quality time with both of their parents.⁶

What I discovered in my research became part of my personal plan to persist as a student and survive as a mom. Here's a look into the strategies I tried that worked for me:

Stay Calm; Your Kids Are OK

First, I regularly calmed myself about being separated from my children. Although they had been used to having me around 24-7, I knew they would be fine if I went to classes while they were at a good school with nurturing teachers or at home with the capable older children caring for the younger ones. I had trained them well and found I did not need to worry about them so much. I also found ample time to study when my children were sleeping since I always woke up before them in the morning and always went to bed after tucking them in for the night.

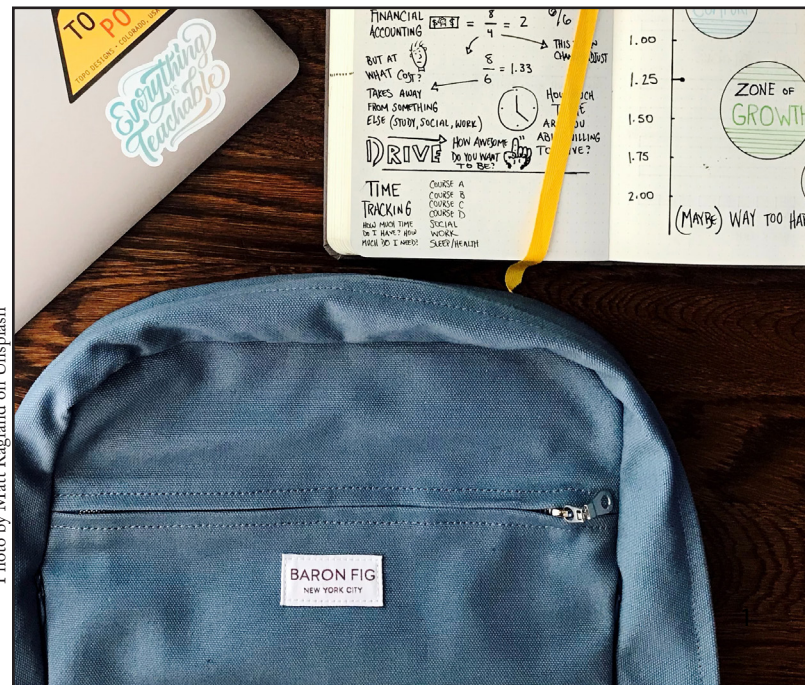


Photo by Matt Ragland on Unsplash

Find a Better Work Balance at Home

Next, inspired by an excellent article on family work that explores the benefits of family members working together to take care of each other rather than the bulk of the housework falling on the mother,⁷ I decided to share more of my home and family responsibilities with my children, a restructuring that reduced household chore time and expanded study time. By working together, we spent more quality time as a family; this arrangement also prepared my teenagers to take on future adult responsibilities. An extra

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bonus was that my children spent less time in front of the TV or on screens. My new family mantra is, “We all eat, sleep, work, study, and play together here!” Honestly, I have not played much since becoming a student mom, but I have enjoyed our family time and my study time more because of an adjustment to a better balance of responsibilities in our home.

Reach Out and Accept Support from Family and Friends

Research by Scharp and Dorrance Hall confirmed to me that having a strong support network of family and friends is vital to the psychological and physical health of student mothers.⁸ I quickly learned to overcome the stigma of asking for and receiving help from family and friends. When I found myself in a scheduling pinch, I asked my mother-in-law to help give my children rides to their various activities and occasionally help with childcare. My oldest daughter was always willing to pick up those few things I missed in my weekly shopping when she went to the grocery store; and when my sweet neighbor offered to bring me a meal every Wednesday night during a semester when I had an evening class, I said, “Yes, please!” and “Thank you!”

Creatively Mesh Motherhood and Scholarship

I also learned to trust and follow my “mother’s intuition” in creatively combining motherhood with student responsibilities, frequently choosing classes that would benefit both my family and professional goals. As often as possible, I worked my class schedule around my family schedule. Once I chose the same research topic for assignments in two different classes—with enough differentiation and overlap in the assignments to learn more about the topic *and* maintain my sanity as a student mom. I later created an internship from volunteer work I was required to do at my children’s school, which fortunately was directly relevant to my education. I eventually discovered I could petition, based on my family circumstances, to take fewer credit hours in a semester and still maintain my scholarship. When I took Creative

Writing last summer, I read poetry, nonfiction, and fiction pieces to my children each evening.

In short, I drew on every resource I could think of to maintain a good balance between family life and student life. In fact, the more I tried to mesh scholarship with motherhood, the more I saw how these two seemingly distinct roles began to complement each other. True, our house was messier than usual, and I slept less than usual. Yet I also knew that these difficulties were temporary, and the benefits to me and my children would be well worth the sacrifice.

Somehow, I made it through. Somehow, I improved my relationship with my husband. Somehow, I made time to talk to my teenagers about the important things in their lives. Somehow, I helped my kids with their math homework and sang lullabies to my little girls each night as I rubbed their backs before they went to sleep. Somehow, in those desperate and trying times, I learned that I could be both a nurturing mother and an excellent student.

Pamela Love is a wife, mother, and student of Family Studies and Global Women’s Studies at Brigham Young University. Passionate about women’s nurturing power in family life, she writes in her limited spare time—usually early in the morning or late at night when her husband and children are sleeping.

Endnotes

¹ Cruse, L. R., Holtzman, T., Gault, B., Croom, D., & Polk, P. (2019, April 11). Parents in college by the numbers. *Institute for Women’s Policy Research*. <https://iwpr.org/publications/parents-college-numbers/>

² Utah Women & Leadership Project. (2011, January). Utah Women’s Stats: Research Snapshot. *Utah Valley University*. <https://uvu.edu/uwlp/docs/snapshot/1.pdf>

³ Monaghan, D. (2017). Does college enrollment and bachelor’s completion by mothers impact children’s educational outcomes? *Sociology of Education*, 90(1), 3–24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040716681054>

⁴ Augustine, J. M., Prickett, K. C., & Negraia, D. V. (2018). Doing it all? Mothers’ college enrollment, time use, and affective well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 80(4), 963–974. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12477>

⁵ Hibell, L. C., Trumbell, J. M., & Mercado, E. (2014). Work/non-workday differences in mother, child, and mother-child morning cortisol in a sample of working mothers and their children. *Early Human Development*, 90(1), 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.earlhumdev.2013.11.007>

⁶ Milkie, M. A., Nomaguchi, K. M., & Denny, K. E. (2015). Does the amount of time mothers spend with children or adolescents matter? *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 77(2), 355–372. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12170>

⁷ Bahr, K. S., & Loveless, C. A. (2000, Spring). Family work. *BYU Magazine*. <https://magazine.byu.edu/article/family-work/>

⁸ Scharp, K. M., & Dorrance Hall, E. (2017). Examining the relationship between undergraduate student parent social support-seeking factors, stress, and somatic symptoms: A two-model comparison of direct and indirect effects. *Health Communication*, 34(1), 54–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2017.1384427>; see also Dorrance Hall, E. (2018, June 30). The challenges of parenting while in college. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/conscious-communication/201806/the-challenges-parenting-while-in-college>