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Giving Birth in Graduate School

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By ANN STEELE

BALANCING ACT

How to find a balance between work and family

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July 2002: Motherhood and dissertation writing are incompatible.

That is my thought as I arise from a fitful slumber to respond to my 2-year-old's cries. It is 3:35 a.m. and my son has had a bad dream. I tuck him back into bed, returning to his arms the bear and blanket that possess the power to ward off all things evil. I stumble back into bed. The interruption would not normally be so bad, but at seven months pregnant, I have already been awakened by my bladder at 1:30 a.m., and my dissertation kept me at my computer until 11:45 at night.

In a week I must fly out to the West Coast for a job interview. I have yet to finish my interview presentation and am scrambling to complete some last-minute analysis that my adviser deemed necessary. Never mind that we had already agreed that the analysis was complete two months ago. The additional analysis is a good idea, of course, but I am rapidly approaching the I-just-want-to-be-done stage.

I chose to have my first child during my graduate studies for several reasons. One is my biological clock, but an even stronger one was the desire not be pregnant and on maternity leave during my first years as a tenure-track faculty member. It turned out to be a good choice. I had my son at the end of the coursework phase of my program, took my written and oral preliminary exams shortly after and then started slowly into the research phase of my program. I never really had a maternity leave, but my schedule afforded me a lot of flexibility, and I was able to do a lot of work when my husband could be home with our baby. We were lucky to hire Mary Poppins as our part-time nanny, which saved me tremendous amounts of anxiety and lessened the load.

As we were contemplating having another child, the same issues arose: Do I have a baby now and juggle it and my dissertation? Do I start my new job "prego" or do I get pregnant during my first year as a faculty member?

Our decision was to try to have the second child as soon after my dissertation defense as possible. Fortunately for us we almost seem to be able to conceive at will. We wanted an October birth, and this one is due October 4th! The problem is that it's July, and I thought I would be done with my graduate work by now, instead of in the throes of the most intense stress I have ever experienced. Currently on my plate is the reanalysis of my data, finishing my thesis, preparing and teaching a summer course, going on job interviews, and trying to coordinate the schedules of five committee members so that we can all be in the same place (preferably not the delivery room) for my defense.

education, or academe.

There *is* a difference between the role that most women play in their children's lives and the role that most men play. Does that mean a woman shouldn't have any job she desires? No, of course not. Does it mean that it was appropriate to suggest that my family situation might impair my ability to perform in a job? Again, of course not.

But it does mean that each woman needs to assess her own ability and desire to give up a part of her mothering role if she is going to have a demanding full-time career. This is a personal assessment that needs to be done internally over the course of a very long time. Perhaps the decision cannot even be made until you have lived the life for a while.

Personally, I know that I have a strong desire to follow my professional goals of teaching and research, and that failing to take a tenure-track position now could eliminate the possibility of that career path forever.

I also know that I love my children more than anything and that they will always be my first priority. So I approach my new job with excitement and a little bit of dread. I know that I must live this path and see where it takes me.

Ann Steele is the pseudonym of a Ph.D. in neuroscience who is starting her first tenure-track job at an Eastern research university.