**The No-Matter-What Rule of Academic Motherhood**

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[Image:](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090605/?ref_=fn_al_tt_1) Sigourney Weaver in Aliens (1986)

When I was little, my academic mother used to say that children and career don’t go together. She had tried to combine the two and failed, she said. I disagreed then, and I disagree now.

My parents worked at the Institute for Balkan Studies, a research-only institution within the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. They had no teaching obligations and few service commitments. They had to show up at the institute only on Tuesday afternoons. That is what I call a dream job. My father eventually became a full professor and department chair of the post-WWI history department, and my mother was an assistant professor in 19th-century Balkan literature and culture.

How often I scoffed at my parents’ desire to write narrow analyses for a few hundred people. And here I am, a few decades later, doing the same.

In spite of the copious time my mother had for research, she never advanced up the ranks. My parents divorced when I was 6, and she mostly raised me by herself. I was a sickly child, diagnosed with gastritis and requiring a special diet, but I was hardly any trouble otherwise. My mother often stayed up late to work. She complained about horrible office politics and academic envy (thanks, mom, at least you prepared me for that). But she was never getting ahead, and I couldn’t understand why. Even as an empty nester, she never finished her book. She died in 2011.

Decades later, I now realize she was discouraged by subtle gender biases. She was emotionally exhausted, had no support, and did not believe in herself. In those dark ages before online access to full text, she should have been spending days and nights at the library, which was hard to do with a child. She never got into the habit of committing to her work. Still, I’m not sure whether that is a fair depiction because I only inferred all of those things. She never told me the big-picture story of her failed career. Whenever I asked, I got mostly stonewalled or heard flimsy excuses.

And now here I am, trying to do something at which my mother only partially succeeded. I am the single mother of two boys, ages 9 and 3. I just got tenure. In theory, the odds were against me because academic mothers (apparently not only in Bulgaria) are [less likely to advance](http://www.chroniclecareers.com/article/The-Baby-Penalty/140813/) up the ladder than academic fathers.

The odds were especially against me because my second son was born in my third year on the tenure track. I did not stop the clock, and took only four days of sick leave because there was nobody to cover my classes and I did not want to let my students down. And, also, I did not want to be seen as an academic lightweight who leans back because she just had a child. (If I am ever in an administrative position, I would do anything to ensure that no new mother on the tenure track feels so harried and unsupported.) Having the option to use the Family Medical Leave Act, which grants up to 12 weeks of unpaid absence, is not the same as knowing for sure that someone will teach your classes and that nobody would see you as lazy.

Having beaten the odds, I am not about to offer a magic way to succeed in academe.

Rather, I am about to say that any gains I made on the academic motherhood path came at a high price, including personal disappointments and utter exhaustion. But if you are willing to pay the price, a payoff is possible.

**In the Beginning**

I was working for a daily newspaper and working on my master’s when I was able to get pregnant at last. That gave me the jolt to schedule my master’s thesis defense. With my revisions finally in place, I defended two days before my due date. The committee members joked about making the questions easy lest they start my labor.

When I left the conference room, I was relieved and elated.

Little did I know that triumphant glowing is not a staple of academic life. A month later, as a new mother under the typical fog of exhaustion, I was at it again. While my son took naps, I sat at the computer and slowly began to revise my thesis into a conference paper. When he woke up, I hit “save” and got up. When he fell asleep, I started again. It was a painful, zombie-like existence, and I had little hope that my paper would be accepted. But my thesis adviser had encouraged me to try, and my journalistic past made me strive to reach an audience. The result was my first conference presentation in 2005, which led to an invitation to apply for admission to a doctoral program.

In graduate school, the biggest challenge was working between interruptions—filling up sippy cups, managing tantrums, and wiping up spills. The couch became my office. Leaning back on a pillow, glued to my laptop, I ignored the baby videos blasting on the TV and responded to mommy cries as if on autopilot—my mind still filled with connections I was trying to make in a literature review or from a dataset. Most of the work happened during the precious work hours when my son was in daycare, after he went to bed, or on nights he spent at his father’s home.

Few of my peers had children. When they met for happy hour, I usually stayed home with my son, who was too much of a distraction in restaurants. I missed out on much of the invaluable networking that takes place in graduate school, and also felt like an outcast.

In retrospect, I was living day by day, too exhausted to think about my big academic goals. That continued after I landed a tenure-track job. A friend from graduate school who also has two sons, told me that everyone feels like a zombie in their first year as a faculty member. “You think you can’t do it,” he said. “It’s like having a baby and waking up every night several times and going to work next day thinking ‘I just can’t do this.’ But you can. And one day it will be behind you.” Adopting such an attitude is not easy when you feel you are about to hit the rocks at the bottom of a waterfall, but it can be achieved over time—especially when you see firsthand that children do grow up, just like everyone told you they would.

**The No-Matter-What Rule**

The really difficult (but in the long run rewarding) thing I have done for the last nine years is that I have worked—no matter what. That is hard to do because it greatly annoys people around you. It is also not a resonant cultural narrative. I know two women in senior academic positions, each a mother of three, and I believe they did the exact same thing to get where they are. But they quickly change the subject if asked—I think because, like me, they are afraid of being judged as neglectful mothers, even though they are anything but. And also judged as scholars because even mentioning one’s children can implicitly erode academic credibility.

How does the no-matter-what rule of work apply in practice?

First, it means limited fun. As Emily Grosholz, a mother of four, suggested [in a previous Chronicle article,](http://wiredcampus.chronicle.com/article/Is-Having-More-Than-2-Child/47015/) combining parenting with academic success calls for no bar hopping and no movies. Second, it means putting children above your work, and then putting your work above your tiredness (although overworking to an extreme can be counterproductive). For example, if a child was sick all night, I was an all-night caretaker (surprise, surprise). Then I got up and tried to work in the morning.

It wasn’t spectacular, but sometimes it resulted in semi-coherent output, to be edited later. When my children came home after 5 p.m., I attended to their needs, but then did a bit more work as they played or watched TV (selected educational shows, no cable).

We have some fun times, but I know they have wished for more attention from me, and I also know what that feels like. My mother sometimes ignored my pleas for attention while she perused books and notes or endlessly retyped scholarly papers. I learned to sleep with the lights on because she liked to stay up late to work. In a tiny Eastern European apartment, a mother’s office was also a child’s bedroom.

This lifestyle is far from ideal. I feel luckier than my mother because my children at least have their own bedrooms, so I do not keep them awake when I stay up late to work. It is painful, but it is also the best thing for me and my family in the long run.

Academic motherhood also has some unexpected benefits intellectually. For instance, a long experience of working with interruptions hones one’s ability to concentrate.

If the no-matter-what rule seems too harsh, it is important to remember that, historically speaking, seemingly impossible things can and have been done. As Churchill (who saw much darkness in his life) said, “If you are going through hell, keep going.” A cute froggy poster at my son’s school proclaims: “You just can’t beat someone who never gives up.” These cheesy quotes sometimes get me through the day, although I laugh at my susceptibility to such empty generalizations.

Is it unfair for academic mothers to have to work so hard? Yes. Is it worth wasting the time to complain? No. Should we all do whatever it takes to change the system for future academic women? Absolutely.

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https://chroniclevitae.com/news/738-the-no-matter-what-rule-of-academic-motherhood#sthash.GmH9K3Am.dpuf