Pregnancy and motherhood in residency: Perspectives from two mothers

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As I write this, I’m 35 weeks pregnant with what is soon to be my second child born during my residency. It is the end of another weekend where, like many other parents, my husband and I had grand plans. We’d planned to set up the baby’s room, transition our toddler to his “big-boy” bed, read parenting books to deal with the recent onset of temper tantrums, and Skype with grandparents. As is often the case, none of these tasks were accomplished amid the chaos of playdates, swim lessons, the aforementioned temper tantrums, and the ongoing management of never-ending toddler URTI.

Many parents share these struggles. But as residents, we may also get to the end of these weekends feeling overwhelmed by the list of residency-related tasks we had hoped to complete. Other times, we’re left feeling guilty because we were away from our kids while on-call, or were too exhausted to play after a long and draining work week. We’re often left wondering whether it’s even possible to juggle the demands parenthood and residency. And while it’s true there are lots of challenges, I couldn’t imagine doing it any other way!!

Being a parent is a wonderful experience. It is a privilege that gives you a whole new perspective not only on your own life but on the lives of our paediatric patients and their families. If you’re considering having children, there is no “right time”; there is only the time that makes the best sense to you and your family. If this happens to be during residency, here are a few things to consider:

How will pregnancy affect your training?

You may need to shuffle rotations around, as there are many that will have non-negotiable call requirements. Depending on your province’s contract, you could be taken off overnight call anywhere from 27 to 32 weeks, or it could be up to you to discuss what you think is appropriate. Just remember: the most important thing is the health of you and your baby, so don’t push yourself physically. Set up a meeting with your Program Director to discuss options, then let the chief residents know so you can help them arrange scheduling. As your pregnancy progresses, be sure to sit down often, drink plenty of fluids, get lots of rest and, most importantly, eat as much ice cream as possible!

How will maternity leave affect your training?

The major decision you’ll need to make is how much time to take off. Six months allows you to come back without feeling like you’ve been gone too long and to write the Royal College exams as scheduled initially. However, it often affects breastfeeding and can be exhausting if your little one isn’t quite into a routine with sleeping and child care. Twelve months gives you additional bonding time with a child who
gets more fun with each passing month, but this choice may leave you feeling a little disconnected from your program. Then there is the option of something in between... It’s a good idea to speak with others and hear different perspectives. Ultimately, however, you’ll need to do what works best for your growing family.

How will parenthood affect your training?

As stated above, there are added stressors around trying to be a great parent and trying to survive residency. Key to achieving both are planning ahead and relying on your support system. Arranging for reliable child care well in advance makes all the difference, whether it’s a live-in nanny, a family home or day care setting with flexible hours, or relatives who understand the unpredictable nature of your schedule. Communication — in the form of shared apps or an old-fashioned fridge calendar — helps to ensure your call schedule or heavier work days don’t come as a surprise. Prioritize the time you have with your wee one, and let go of any guilt you may feel when you need to decline invites to join new committees, projects or social events. Finally, utilize whoever you can — family, friends, coworkers, hired caregivers/babysitters — to help out with daily chores, last-minute glitches and those important but oft-forgotten date nights with your partner.

When I look back at residency years from now, I know that I will have fond memories of my fantastic group of colleagues, wonderful patients and exciting learning opportunities. But I will also smile at the thought of my perpetually pregnant belly (17 of 26 months and counting!) and the amazing support I received from people whose eyes lit up as they rubbed my tummy or listened to the endless (clearly biased) stories of my adorable offspring. There have been challenges along the way, but I feel very fortunate to have enjoyed the experience of being both a resident and a “mommy” at the same time.

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How do you find work-life balance? It is that unattainable goal that drives residents wild. Say you have time to get pregnant. Great!

Pregnant residents have the excitement that comes with growing a baby to balance with a demanding job – usually around sick people. Luckily, programs are increasingly supportive, and your colleagues are your best friends. We have the option of a 1-year maternity leave, making some prospective parents feel that residency is the ideal time to start a family. Planning the return to work, especially keeping up with breastfeeding, limited daycare hours and sick policies (no, the blue stool is because you let him eat felt pens, not because he has rotavirus!) and living with somebody who generates 10 times their body weight in laundry every day is tough. But, these battles can be won.
I started medical school with three small children. By residency the baby was three, and everyone slept through the night – mostly. We are a two-resident family, so had a live-in nanny and day care (expensive, but worth it). Starting residency was challenging. I missed orientation events and parties. It felt like everybody but me knew everyone and everything, and I came home daily to three accusing glares which said “you were out way too long again, Mom”. But in the end, I have friends. The kids can predict homecomings and call by rotation (good for math skills). Even so, I didn’t get the hang of work-life balance until my second year.

During my first senior CTU, my daughter needed surgery. My tentative request for the morning off was greeted by a sharp “No way, senior residents can’t take time off!” from the rotation coordinator. I drew my line in the sand, went to the program director and was backed up “one hundred per cent”. My ward staff were equally supportive.

With my newfound balance, things have never been better. I love my work, and give it my all. It is incredibly rewarding. Colleagues support my commitment to the kids, and allow me enough flexibility to pull my full weight in the program without compromising that. When I get home, three big kids rush to hug me (even the 11-year-old). It is dedicated ‘Kid Time’ until bedtime. My biggest stress reliever? Bedtime stories. There is nothing better. The roughest day just melts away when we climb into bed and crack a good book together. Yes. I stay up late to work, and I miss the kids during call. I miss some great dinners. There are residents out there who are smarter, faster and better. But I am a good doctor and a good Mom, enjoying the best of both worlds.

Motherhood in residency? Go for it! Fatherhood too. Kids are never convenient, but the rewards definitely outweigh the work. If you want to have it all, kids keep your eyes on the prize.