

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

Give Yourself a Break: Parenting as a Physician

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For most people, having a balanced life consists of some combination of meaningful relationships, satisfying work, and time for hobbies and self care.



I am often asked about balancing professional and personal life, especially about balancing work with children. I suppose this is because I have somehow managed to develop my career while raising three children. I respect the fact that some choose not to have children. But for me, childrearing has dominated my time away from work during most of my career. Children are incredibly different from each other, and I would never suggest that my way of balancing children and career is the way that anyone else should do it. Nonetheless, now that my children are ages 15 to 25, I have gained a bit of perspective on this issue, which I hope might be helpful to those with younger children or considering the option.

As I write this column, I have just an hour ago survived a fun-filled session of biting my tongue in the passenger seat while my youngest practices driving. Apparently I didn't bite my tongue quite hard enough, as my teen informed me that he was indeed going slowly enough around that corner near our house and, moreover, if I cannot give him better advice, he won't be able to let me supervise his driving any more. That's an incredibly tempting proposition, but I cannot leave his driver's education solely to my husband without inviting a divorce, so I look forward to another session tomorrow. But, I digress.

A question that is at the forefront for most new parents is apportioning time between work and home. Unfortunately, there is no neat answer to this dilemma. Everyone strikes her (or his) own balance about how much time to spend at work and

how much time to spend at home. Clearly this depends upon the personality and needs of the individual children, the partner's allocation of effort, the age of the children, and many other factors. No one else can tell you what will work for your family; rather, you have to go with your gut instinct. I have found one guiding factor to be the importance of limiting work enough to have sufficient emotional energy (quality time) to devote to the children. Children can sense if a parent is not engaged when spending time with them. And the hour of the day that they need this energy varies by age. For example, when children are young, being home (at least some of the time) before they become tired is important. In contrast, when they are older, they may have activities after school and so aren't even available for parental interaction until fairly late in the day. If it seems to you that things are going well, they probably are. If it seems to you that you and/or your child are often stressed, then perhaps a change in your schedule is advisable. Trust your instincts.

Another important perspective is that you cannot raise perfect children, nor can you raise children perfectly. You are going to make mistakes. I have a long list of mistakes but will mention just a few to illustrate the point. My daughter never tires of regaling my colleagues and trainees with the story of the time I failed to bring her in promptly at age 5 for what turned out to be a broken arm. Never mind that she hardly even cried after her fall and happened to be home sick with a flu for several days, so she didn't need

to get dressed or move the arm much. I was quite grateful that our pediatrician knew us well when we finally brought her in several days after the fall and the arm turned out to be broken. Fortunately, I am not alone in this type of experience. One of my geriatric colleagues, whose wife is a psychiatrist, spent months trying to figure out what emotional trauma was causing his daughter to resume wetting her bed occasionally at night. Only when they finally brought the child in for evaluation was it determined that she was having nocturnal seizures. Another colleague's mother complained for about a year of feeling tired, while he encouraged her to get out and get more exercise. Finally, she visited her primary care internist; the ECG confirmed a clinical diagnosis of complete heart block. The best part of the story is that this particular colleague is an electrophysiologist! The goal with child raising (or dealing with parents, for that matter) cannot be perfection. When you make a mistake, of course you learn from it, but don't hold onto the guilt. Guilt won't help you or your child.

As I look back, I think that the most important single thing about parenting is to communicate to your children that they are incredibly important to you. (A tidbit about teenagers is that they frequently grumble when their parents pay attention to them, even if they secretly are glad. Don't let it dissuade you.) Much less important are some of the comparatively minor decisions that seemed important when they were young, like exactly how many grams

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of sugar they could have in their cereal. Still, even the minor decisions can be useful in conveying importance to your child, as in, *"If I didn't care so much about you, I wouldn't worry about how much sugar is in your cereal."* For most people, hav-

ing a balanced life consists of some combination of meaningful relationships, satisfying work, and time for hobbies and self care. It is healthy to make time for each of these aspects in your life. Having children does not mean that you are less devoted to

your profession anymore than having a second child means that you are less devoted to the first child. Although it has meant a fair amount of drama at times, having children is one life decision I would not change.

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