

Cunningham, F. (2017) My third child. *The Feminist Psychologist*, Fall.

My Third Child.

I've noticed a progression of relationship-related expectations as I've moved through my life. Once a couple is dating seriously they begin to get questioned on when they will get engaged. Then on when they will get married. Then when they will have a child. Then when they will have another child. There is really no point in a woman's life for which her decisions are not scrutinized. But you may have noticed that, in general, two children is the "magical" acceptable number of children in our culture currently. Any more children than that and we are no longer met with happy squeals when we announce our pregnancies. Oh sure, there may be some shared joy and celebration, but there are also raised eyebrows or a feeble grasp at an appropriate comment.

I have two beautiful children so I fit in the comfortable category of having the appropriate number of children, so says society at large. As my younger child approaches the age of 5, conversations about my family are framed as, "So, you are all done, right?" And while I am all done gestating the biological progeny that will ensure the continuation of my genetics, there is still one more task I feel is at hand. "Well...", I joke, "There is going to be *one* more. But this one has a 5-6 year gestation period and will be called PhD." Interestingly, I am often met with a similar mix of enthusiasm, doubt, scoffing, and eyebrow raising as I would experience if I suggested that yes indeed, I did wish to continue procreating. There are hearty good-for-you's, and headshakes accompanied by wow-I-could-never-do-that; comments much like the ones I hear are received from my friends who have dared to broaden their families beyond two children.

It certainly will be different this time around. I completed my first graduate degree in psychology over 10 years ago. While I know that I am fully capable both intellectually and academically to complete the requirements of a doctoral program - additionally proven by my success is a postbaccalaureate program this year - there is the added dimension of life having different demands than it did when I finished my first graduate degree pre-family. But as with many other decisions in my life regarding parenting, my feminist approach is exactly the reason to move forward confidently and capably into this new venture. My feminist ideals are what spur me forward, create the energy needed for such a task, and fine-tune my focus as I approach the next set of challenges.

Feminism has taught me that there are many ways to change the systemic problems we face as women and mothers but one is to affect change within the system. If change is to be affected within a system, there must be game changers within it. Nothing makes me want to push forward into the challenge of furthering my education more than the thought that I “can’t” or “shouldn’t” because I now have a family. Assumptions such as “my time has passed” or “my focus should be on my family” must be disrupted, which requires action by people who will demonstrate alternate education and career paths, such as myself, by entering a doctoral degree after having children rather than before. It is my intention to show that doctoral work and family life can exist in harmony, as well as gain the influence that comes from higher education and a doctoral degree. As mentioned my Jill Kuhn (No More Talking: A Call to Action From the Heart!, Fall 2009), we need to be inside the sphere of influence to effect change. Sadly, her column from over seven years ago show us how much more work we have ahead of us, regardless of any changes that have already transpired.

Returning to graduate school is also an opportunity for modeling. In the Summer 2014 entry of this column, Kuhn (Kuhn, J., 2014, Mothering the Psychologist Mom. *The Feminist Psychologist*), mentions that as feminists it’s important to hold up the many iterations of what womanhood and motherhood can look like. One single woman can’t possible model them all, thus, it is important to support each other in our respective paths and journeys. Our children need to know that women can be successful and thrive no matter at what point in their lives they have children. I agree that our governments and systemic structures and culture-at-large have a long way to come to fully supporting women, motherhood, and parenting, but those changes come with challenging them and demonstrating success when things unfold in alternate ways. If women don’t pursue the different ways they wish to live their lives, there is no reason for the systems to adapt.

Lastly, I enter into my doctoral adventure because psychology is my passion. Psychology has been a part of who I am since I was invited to a peer counseling pilot project in my junior year of high school. The thought of living without pursuing this challenge, regardless of the level of success that I may or may not face, is far worse than the thought of never having tried. I am so eternally grateful and thankful for the women who have blazed trails before me and I fully intend to extend their path and further to light the way for those who may come behind me. I may not be a Rosa Parks or a Nellie McClung or a Rosie Bingham, but for my daughters and the other girls who are in my sphere, my actions may have lasting consequences as we model reaching for our goals. I have to admit it was encouraging when my 9-year-old daughter asked to keep my APA name tag when I returned from this year's conference because she wants to wear it to career day when she dresses up as a psychologist.

My family and daughters make me a better, stronger, and more capable doctoral candidate. There are many paths waiting to unfold before us, and whatever path that may be, I feel confident we will ok, rooted in our values of feminism.