Motherhood as a Doctoral Student

By: M. Silverman
Clinical Psychology PhD Student, Fielding Graduate University

Finding a balance between motherhood and your career requires creativity and support. I am a mother and a psychologist. Both of these titles are important parts of my identity. I have three children and I have worked as a masters level clinician for several years. When I decided to further my career by applying to graduate Ph.D. programs, I went to my mentors and peers for support and encouragement. Instead of encouragement, I was met with dissuading opinions. Some people asked me to evaluate my priorities and decide which was more important, furthering my career or growing my family - as if both were not obtainable.

Beginning my doctoral training, I was a mother of a seven-year-old son and a 6-month old daughter. I was asked many times how I would manage the workload of my program and the responsibilities as a parent. How could I have time for my children? As a response, I couldn't think of a good age that my children should be before I could continue my education. I can now say with support it is do-able. While in my program I have been able to keep up with all of my assignments, perform effectively as a clinician, and fulfill my "mother" role at home.

However, my role as a mother has led to some setbacks in my advancement in my training. As a mom who nurses and needs opportunities to pump, I have missed out on important luncheons that have provided opportunities for training and networking. I have also had to become creative in where and how to pump because many facilities do not offer spaces for this. Imagine how difficult it is to figure out how to pump when you are scheduled for at least four hours of assessments at an employment setting.

Being a mother, I have also experienced other missed opportunities in employment and clinical training. During my training program I decided to conceive and have my third child. After being offered a position I disclosed my pregnancy to an employer and they retracted the offer because, "It might be too much to juggle" to teach a new course and take care of a newborn baby. Needless to say this was illegal. However, I was still faced with the decision to either hide my pregnancy or have uncomfortable conversations about how I could still do my job effectively with a newborn and two other children. I chose to disclose and luckily I have met some employers who are supportive of me as a mother and a psychologist-in-training. Employers and I have been able to have open conversations and they have allowed me to determine my own limitations. Having my employers' support has increased my work performance and confidence. I have experienced professors/mentors who have judgmentally questioned my decision to grow my family and I have had mentors/professors who shared their experiences and encouraged me to continue my pursuit of both my family and career goals.

While the field of psychology has had an increase in women, future efforts can be made to support mothers to advance their careers and their families. Women should not be shamed or discriminated against for needing a place to pump, needing to take their kids to doctor appointments, or having to take maternity leave. Employers, mentors, advisors, and colleagues should encourage women to consider the sacrifices that will be required without discouraging

them from advancing their careers. Considerations should be made to help support mothers in advancing their careers and not make them feel as if they are a burden.

It is important for mothers to feel supported by their employers and/or training programs. Clinicians and training programs should encourage more conversations about the challenges that mothers endure. The information that is obtained may be used to develop recommendations and policies that increase the likelihood of mothers becoming successful in this field and/or not requiring women to sacrifice having a family for their career. Most clinicians value an ability to be empathetic to their clients; employment settings and training programs can increase their empathy for mothers in this field by having the necessary discussions and providing adequate support. The empowerment of mothers in the field of psychology is an important topic and deserves further attention.