

Balancing Academics and Family During the Internship Application Process (and Beyond)

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Applying to internship is an exciting as well as stressful process. All applicants are faced with the task of considering their career goals, their academic strengths and weaknesses, their training needs, and their personal goals when selecting an internship. Applicants who have families must also take into account a myriad of other considerations when making decisions about applying to and ranking internship sites. These applicants must consider the personal and professional needs and wants of partners, children, or other family members. I am currently a 5th-year graduate student who has just completed the internship selection process. I am also the mother of an 8-month-old boy. The following advice for navigating the process of applying for internship when you have a family is based mainly on my personal experience and conversations I have had with other intern applicants who are also parents.

Communicate With Family Members

Open, honest, and direct communication with family members is essential during the internship application process. Balancing family and academic obligations is inherently stressful, and students need emotional support throughout this period. Fortunately, the availability of emotional support from family members is one of the major benefits of having a family. Families can meet our needs for love and companionship, as well as practical support. We can turn to family members when we are feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or discouraged. Graduate students who lack social support face their own challenges. However, for families to be able to meet these needs, ongoing communication regarding matters such as money spent during the application process, internship responsibilities, child care, family time, and the division of labor is essential. Furthermore, it is useful to revisit family issues and arrangements throughout the internship process and after you begin internship.

Open communication is especially important when it is time for the student to make significant life- and career-altering decisions

such as applying for internship. Decisions about where to apply for internship affect the whole family. This time may be extremely stressful as the graduate student attempts to balance his or her training needs and goals with the needs and goals of his or her family. As pursuing advanced training through internship often entails a geographical move, graduate students with families may be asking partners to leave their current jobs and having children leave their current home to attend new schools. These considerations are especially difficult when both partners are students, both with their own training needs. Such decisions and choices often require sacrifice on the part of all family members and may be quite difficult.

Be Honest With Potential Training Directors and Internship Faculty Members About Your Family Situation

According to APA guidelines, students are not obligated to disclose their family status during the graduate school application process or the internship application process (APA, 2002). Additionally, internship programs are prohibited from discriminating against applicants because of their family status. However, it is common for applicants with children to fear discrimination in this arena. This may be partly due to the fact that applicants generally do not receive feedback regarding why they were not accepted into an internship program, so they may be left to wonder whether their family status played any role in training directors' decisions.

My advice to disclose your family status to training directors and faculty may well be my most controversial suggestion, and I would like to state at the beginning that this advice is based mainly on my own values and personal experience, and therefore may not be appropriate for everyone. From my perspective, a supervisor who would violate APA ethical principles and discriminate against someone based on his or her family status would not make a good mentor for anyone, but especially not for a graduate student with a

family. The reality of caring for dependent children is that, invariably, situations will arise in which the student will need to put family concerns before academic activities. For example, if a child is ill, the student may have to leave work early for the day to care for his or her child. Having a supervisor who is not supportive and flexible would place the student in a very difficult and uncomfortable position.

I have been extremely fortunate to have had very positive experiences in this domain. My mentor and other members of the faculty in my graduate program have been extremely supportive of me. Furthermore, during the internship application process, I chose to disclose my family status, and I found training directors and other program staff members to be supportive.

Parenting and family life does not take away from what you have to contribute to your internship program. In a human service field, life experience may enhance our knowledge and ability to empathize with others. I believe that being a parent has enhanced my performance in academic pursuits. For example, as an instructor for an undergraduate child development course, being a parent has made it easier to come up with examples to clarify and explain course material.

Look for Specific Things That Will Help You Balance Your Family and Professional Responsibilities When Considering Internship Sites

Many internship sites hold a philosophy that encourages interns to develop personally as well as professionally. These sites offer many advantages to the intern with a family. Such internship programs value the contribution that students bring from their life experiences and generally expect students to work reasonable hours.

During the application process, pay attention to practical factors such as on-site child care and a health care plan that will adequately meet family members' medical needs. These benefits are often described in the internship brochure, or described to you

during the interview process. If you are applying to internships with a partner using the APPIC “couples match,” you might want to ask internship sites during the interview process whether they are willing to take multiple students from the same program.

If Possible, Talk to Current Interns Who Have Families

Remember that you are not alone. Many current interns and other internship applicants have families. If possible, talk to current or former interns about their experiences applying for and completing internships. They are often good sources of advice regarding which programs are more or less “family friendly” and which cities or towns are good for raising children. They may also offer helpful advice on the practical aspects of undertaking the application process with a family. For example, long-distance travel for interviews may be complicated when the applicant has children, and being separated from an infant all day for an interview presents some unique challenges for the nursing mother.

Keep in mind that students face conflicts while balancing family and internship responsibilities in many different ways. Even if you are the only student with children, students who are caring for elderly parents or sick family members face many of the same challenges.

Take Care of Yourself

Although following this advice may be extremely difficult at times, setting aside time to nurture yourself is not selfish—it is important for your well-being. Eating healthy, getting enough exercise, and having some downtime

will take more time out of your day, but it will benefit you and your family in the long run. First, you will be setting a good example for your children by sending them the message that nutrition, exercise, and good self-care are fundamental for well-being. Second, if you pour all of your energy into your work and family without caring for yourself, you will end up burning out. Unfortunately, parents (especially mothers) often feel that taking some time out for themselves is selfish and detrimental to their families. I have spoken with many mothers who believe that they are constantly forced to choose between “what is best for me” and “what is best for my family.” However, as our families depend on us to meet their needs, is it not true that what is best for you is also best for your family? Your well-being is essential to their well-being, and so by caring for yourself, you are also caring for them.

Do not be afraid to ask for help. Whether it is practical support, such as asking someone to watch your children for a few hours while you finish a paper or report, or emotional support, such as talking to a professional about family difficulties, asking for help is an important component of self-care.

Accept That It Is Not Easy

Both pursuing a doctoral degree and having a family are important, valuable, worthwhile endeavors that are full-time jobs in their own right. Embarking on both endeavors simultaneously is an inherently daunting experience. Simply pursuing advanced graduate study without a family entails many sacrifices. I was often reminded of this earlier in my graduate career. Although I did not have the family responsibilities I have

now, I witnessed my friends who had already begun their careers obtain good jobs, buy houses, go on vacations to Europe, and purchase brand-new cars. This was at a time when I was working very long hours and being able to afford something besides macaroni and cheese for dinner was a rare treat. Pursuing a graduate degree with dependent children often entails even greater hardships. This is especially true for single parents who lack a second income and the practical support of a partner.

Remember that many of the challenges faced by graduate students who have families are temporary. Financial difficulties, the stress associated with traveling for interviews, and needing to change geographical locations for internship are generally temporary challenges that you will not have to struggle with forever. However, for many of the professional positions in our field, many of the aforementioned stressors will persist. Building good communication with family members, seeking out positions where the needs of families can be accommodated, and taking care of yourself are likely to be life-long investments that pay long-term dividends. ✍

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