



TEXTBOOKS AND TODDLERS

Returning to law school as a parent

BY OLIVIA LIZ-FONTS

Most would say that the perfect time to pursue law school is straight after graduating college. For me, it was after having my two children. After spending several years working in the human resources field, I made the decision to shift careers and attend law school. Though I was nervous about returning to school, I was eager for the transition—being a lawyer had been a dream of mine from a young age.

When I started law school, I quickly realized that the competitive environment extends far beyond the classroom. The rigorous curriculum, the competition engendered by the “class curve” in grading, and the demanding Socratic teaching methods are just a fraction of what makes law school challenging. There is also the expectation that students will immerse themselves in legal work and become part of the legal community. As students we feel pressure to join every student group and bar association and to participate in legal clinics, moot court, and law journal—while also attending all social events. In my attempt to keep up with these expectations, I joined what seemed like an unsustainable number of organizations and attended countless social events during my first year.

As I was settling into that first year, however, my family experienced an unexpected hardship that led to a shift in my priorities. Suddenly, law school didn't seem like a viable option. Although it was a tough decision to step away from pursuing one of my life-long dreams, I decided it was best to focus on my family's needs and return to work full-time. Shortly after I made that decision, I found out I was pregnant with my first child. At the moment it seemed to validate my decision to step away from law school; becoming a mother was another life-long dream. For the next few years, I continued to work and although I didn't have a solid plan to return to law school, I wasn't ready to close that chapter.

After my second child was born, I found myself thinking a lot about returning to law school. From a professional standpoint, my desire to have a greater impact on my community only grew. From a family perspective, the decision to attend law school while caring for young children was utterly terrifying—but it was also strangely empowering. I knew that one day I would share my journey in becoming a lawyer with my children. Fortunately, I mustered up the courage to apply for readmission and was accepted. Once again, I was eager to get started—or rather, to finish what I started.

My transition back to law school required a drastically different approach compared to my first year. Having experienced how demanding law school is, I recognized that my path would look a little different this time around. I had to balance schoolwork, networking in a new profession, and gaining practical experience, all while raising two toddlers. Admittedly, the transition was rough. I found myself struggling with being a nontraditional

student given the gap in my law school path, my prior work experience, and my becoming a parent. Not only did I feel like an outsider in joining a new cohort mid-year; I also found myself hesitating to share with my new peers that I was a mother of two. As a working mother, I was aware of what was commonly referred to as the *motherhood penalty*—the common, stereotypical view that women are primary caregivers and therefore mothers who choose to work will be less committed to their jobs. As a result, I feared being judged or held back in my career. I did my best to blend in with other students but I found myself feeling inauthentic, especially when connecting with prospective employers. I didn't share much of my personal life and certainly did not talk about my children.

As the semesters continued, it became apparent to me that being a nontraditional student was nothing to hide. It was my biggest asset. I have work experience that stands to enrich my career as an attorney, and having children has required me to build a more structured and strategic law school experience. As I reflect on that experience, there are four lessons I have taken away. These four lessons allow me to have balance in raising my children while attending law school, participating in legal clinics, completing various externships, volunteering, taking on leadership roles in student groups, joining bar association committees, and continuing to immerse myself in the legal community.

1. Make thoughtful connections and nurture your network.

One crucial component of legal practice is building a network. The advice I often receive is to meet as many attorneys as possible. I am encouraged to attend social events such as bar association happy hours, member events, and galas to have facetime with practicing attorneys. During my first year, this social pressure was one of the most challenging facets of law school for me. Aside from my finding large social events intimidating, most of the events are held after work hours, which makes it difficult for me to attend. I have learned to prioritize which events I attend to maximize impact and opportunity. I attend one or two strategic social events each semester. Even with these limits, I have found that relying solely on this method seems to yield more in terms of quantity, rather than quality, of connections.

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The networking approach that has worked for me begins by exploring the relationships I already have. In the Minneapolis legal community, most attorneys are eager to share their connections. The opportunities presented by law school to connect with professors, peers, classroom guest speakers, and career counselors provide a great networking foundation. These individuals are often willing to share their legal experience, provide guidance, and connect students with other practicing attorneys. When an introduction is made or I am encouraged to reach out to someone, I request a “meet and greet.” I prepare for these meetings by researching the attorney, their work experience, recent publications or awards, and community involvement. I have found that this preparation allows for a more fruitful conversation, as I can ask specific questions about their experience. People who are sharing their time with you really appreciate this.

The second component of my networking approach is to continue developing the relationship. I typically follow up with a second meeting or additional questions, sometimes sharing resources I think they may find interesting or simply sending an email to check in every so often. This one-on-one approach has allowed me to develop meaningful relationships within the legal community that have been beneficial to my personal and professional development.

2. Staying organized is half the battle.

People often ask how I have time to raise two young children and attend law school. Though I joke that my life runs on coffee and chaos, the truth is that my husband and I do our best to create a structured schedule for our family. One of the toughest elements of being a parent in law school is watching the sacrifices my children have to make. The time I spend attending class, volunteering, or networking is time taken away from my children. In all honesty, it can be tough to stay motivated when my children ask me to stop working to play with them instead or when they cry for me to stay home rather than go to class.

This is why having a schedule is so important for my family. A schedule holds me accountable as to how I am spending my time. Since each semester’s class schedule is different, this also requires a strong alignment with my family and support system. Just as I allocate time to my classwork, I have a schedule for playtime with my children. We watch movies, have dance parties, color, bake delicious treats, or simply enjoy uninterrupted time together. Having a routine allows me to budget the time I spend on schoolwork, networking opportunities, volunteering, and other law school commitments while also ensuring I am present with my family.

3. Mental health is important.

When I became a mother, I quickly learned that if I am not okay, my children are not okay. In order for me to be the best possible mother and tend to my children’s needs, I must also take care of my own needs. This, like many things, is easier said than done. It can be so easy to get caught up in the demands of motherhood and lose one’s sense of self.

Unfortunately, law school is no different.

For me, setting aside one day a week to focus on things other than law school has been extremely beneficial. Making time to explore other interests and spend time with my family reminds me that law school is only a portion of my life. With that perspective, it is much easier to manage the stress and expectations that can become overwhelming.

4. It takes a village.

Most of us have heard the saying, “it takes a village to raise a child.” I am fortunate enough to have the support of many in raising my children. From my parents, siblings, and friends to neighbors and teachers, my children have been surrounded by a strong village of supporters.

Like the village that has rallied around my children, I have also been fortunate to have my own village as I navigate law school. When I made the decision to step away from law school, I felt like I had failed. As I made the transition, I reached out to two attorneys I had met through law school and shared my circumstances with them. To my surprise, they both understood my decision and appreciated my transparency. My relationships with these two attorneys transformed into genuine friendships and they quickly became strong pillars within my village. When I decided to return to law school, they wrote letters of recommendation for my readmission. They continue to guide me as I figure out my career path, and most recently they wrote a character reference in support of my bar exam application.

The support I received from these two attorneys has encouraged me to continue sharing my story. I have found that when you are honest about your path, you find people who want to support you. Since returning to law school, my village has grown immensely. From professors to librarians, classmates, and colleagues, I have relied on their support to realize my dream of becoming a lawyer.

My legal journey has been far from simple, but I know now that being a mother has positively impacted my experience as a law student. Although the days can be long and chaotic, my responsibilities as a mother have given me perspective and allowed me to approach law school with a greater purpose. ▲