

Book Review

Parenting & Professing: Balancing family work with an academic career.

Edited by Rachel Bassett.

**Reviewed by Julia Rucklidge, PhD, Department of Psychology, University of
Canterbury.**

Finding our voice: Academic mothers unite in common challenges and opportunities

After overcoming the initial overwhelmed reaction I have often felt over the last three years when asked to do something falling immediately outside of teaching, administration and research, I found it a pleasure to review a book that highlighted so many of the issues I have been grappling with since the births of my two sons, in 2002 and 2004. That a whole book could centre on the issue of balancing academia and family was reassuring. However, it also highlighted for me that any woman trying to do both will likely face similar struggles, decisions, and dilemmas as the contributors to this collection.

“*Parenting & Professing: Balancing family work with an academic career*” edited by Rachel Bassett, is a collection of personal essays written mostly by American women, grouped into three themes: *challenges*, *possibilities*, and *change*. The book attempts to address the question of why the impact of having children continues to be so minimal for male academics and so significant for women. The personal accounts are compelling and illustrate the determination and courage of our female peers and colleagues. While some

women rose to the challenge, in too many cases, children played a significant role in the demise of academic careers. In some cases, the discrimination against women with young children was discouraging, to the point that some women hid pregnancies and children from current or prospective employers. While most women were able to come to terms with the sacrifices (many held untenured positions in universities), the loss of these brilliant minds from the academic world was disheartening. One theme weaving its way through the stories showed the irreparable damage caused by too great an overlap between the tenure clocks and fertility clocks. The women who successfully had children after achieving tenure, while taking risks on their fertility, were at a definite advantage to their younger counterparts.

Challenges. Perhaps one of the most salient messages received from this compendium was for academic mothers to learn “that a full life is not so much about squeezing more into an already bulging schedule, but about learning to make peace with your best effort, valuing it for what it is instead of mourning what it is not” (Cindy Brewer, p.67). Having switched overnight from a life where I could pursue any line of research, spend ample amounts of time writing and rewriting manuscripts, to a life where the choice and freedom has disappeared, the message rang true for me. In their own individual ways, most of these women determined how to protect time with their children and tried not to overwork. I can sympathize with such decisions as necessary to combat the exhaustion and irritability that come with early parenthood. Further, being a child clinical psychologist, I am acutely aware of the research highlighting the importance of a good foundation in the early years of life, stressing the importance of engaging with one’s children, a task made more difficult if the stresses are too high. From my

perspective, how could I jeopardize mother-child attachment -- a foundation clearly linked to healthy outcomes -- for the pursuit of academic distinction? I, like these women, have been challenged to find a balance that allows quality time with my children but also allows me to stay afloat in the academic world during their early years.

Possibilities. As highlighted by Bassett in the introduction, academics who are also mothers have the potential to contribute in original ways to the expansion of the research endeavors of our society. Courses of research can be altered by children and explorations into family life enhanced by mothers who also are scholars. We can also role model to our female students a balanced lifestyle that includes children. We are fortunate to be in these well sought after positions – they are flexible, they are prestigious and they are, all in all, extremely rewarding careers. Maybe women try to juggle motherhood and academia precisely because their jobs are so flexible. After all, if your employer expects you to be at work, *at the desk*, between 9 and 5, it wouldn't likely cross your mind to try to juggle taking care of the children, at least partially, and working; the choice would be made early on whether to seek alternative care arrangements, take unpaid leave, or at the more extreme end, quit. It is the flexibility that entices us and keeps us bound. There are not many occupations where mixing roles and shifting schedules are possible.

Change. Based on this collection, it appears that one reason why there are a low number of women at the professorial level is that women choose to compromise career for parenting, deciding against the complex juggling routines required to maintain success in both pursuits. However, it was also apparent to me that the policies at universities played a role in the decisions women made. Ultimately, to truly enhance the choices of academic mothers, to encourage them to seek higher positions, and to prevent

resignations, more policies that invest in new parents are required. While many universities claim commitment to assisting mothers in the academic world, it was apparent from these entries that the level of commitment needs further consideration. As with many professional positions, academia is not one you can walk away from, take time out to have children, and then expect a job to be waiting on return. In order for the universities to encourage women to choose *not* to walk away, accommodations are needed to assist them, particularly in the early years of childrearing.

Stopping the tenure clock is one thing (albeit not a policy exercised widely or given due consideration during promotions), but providing good maternity leave in conjunction with such policies would be better. Having childcare on campus that reflects the needs of an academic is crucial. A drop-in crèche, parent rooms, child-friendly policies, role models and openness within the university environment that the child should not be hidden but cherished are essential. Emphasizing quality, not quantity, in research endeavors would benefit us all. Michelle Francl-Donnay summed up the need for a new stance from our colleagues: “the two personae, mother and scholar, are not so much figments of *my* imagination, but fragments only in *your* imagination. Without the ability to see mother and scholar simultaneously or to see a single image in which both subsist, the world shifts its focus and the images flick past” (p.131). Finally, I was duly impressed by the spouses of these academics and the equal sacrifices they made to support their wives. More men need to respond and assist women, whether they be sisters, mothers, wives or friends. Without their support, the challenges are even greater.

Parenting and professing is an excellent source of support for women struggling to find a workable and satisfactory compromise between academia and motherhood. I add

that those in powerful policy positions would benefit from a review of this book to better appreciate the everyday struggles faced by a significant minority of their workers. These essays offer a wide variety of opinions and solutions coming from parents of varying race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, time in life when parenting, as well as biological, single and adoptive mothers. While a bias existed in the book towards academics in the arts, this may be more of a sad reflection, yet again, of the lower numbers of women in the sciences. However, despite the accounts of challenges, humour also abounds; the titles are capturing: “*Chuck E. Cheese at noon: Adventures in parenting and higher education*,” “*Elemental MoThEr*,” or “*Of diesels and diapers: A resident alien in motherland*.” I particularly enjoyed Lorretta Holloway’s account and honesty: “if you can manage enthusiasm for Candyland, you can manage alertness for the most petrifying committee meeting about copy machines” (p.95). The commonality weaving its way through the stories is evident: the road is not an easy one but the riches are plenty. Children provide us with a better backbone and for many, bring the accolades and failures of the academic world into a real world perspective.

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About the Editor: Rachel Hile Bassett has a PhD in English Literature from the University

of Kansas. Her research focuses on early modern English literature. She and her husband and two children live in Lawrence, Kansas.

About the Reviewer. Julia Rucklidge has a PhD in Clinical Psychology from the University of Calgary. She is Senior Lecturer in Clinical Psychology in the Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury. She and her husband and two children live in Christchurch, New Zealand. Email julia.rucklidge@canterbury.ac.nz