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# Survival Tips from Parents Who Went Back to School

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By Sarah Netter



From hitting the books in the bleachers at a Little League game to hustling the kids into bed the night before a major exam, parents going back to school face very different challenges than the younger students sitting next to them in class.

“When I was in undergrad, I didn’t sleep

much at all. I had a ton of homework and a baby who didn't sleep through the night," said Kate Leahy, a 32-year-old single mother from Massachusetts. Leahy earned her bachelor's degree in mathematics and a law degree while parenting. "Most of my friends were staying out all night and I was up, too, just studying and feeding my baby instead of partying."

Leahy and her sister, Kristin Leahy, 34, both went back to college with young sons at home, knowing their degrees would give them and their children a better life.

"I was in an abusive, toxic marriage and I knew that I would need a degree if I wanted to be able to support Connor on my own and give him the kind of life I envisioned," said Kristin Leahy, a Connecticut mother who earned two bachelor's degrees in psychology and education and a master's degree in educational psychology. "He was two when I went back to school."

"I worked my class schedule around the childcare I had available," she said. Kristin Leahy is now working toward a certificate of advanced graduate study in communication sciences and disorders, which she expects to complete in May 2016.

Kate Leahy was working full time while attending law school. She learned to use every break to study, even if it was only a few minutes at a time.

"I studied during lunch breaks. On the weekends I got up early so I could get a few good hours of school work in," she said. "I brought books with me

everywhere. Doctors appointments, baseball games, birthday parties and so on. You never know when you'll get a free 10 minutes and you need to make the most of it."

It's a delicate balance, parents say, of not being consumed with schoolwork while they are spending time with their families, but also leading by example so their children see that education is a priority.

Melanie O'Connor, a first-grade teacher and a mother of two young boys, bought a laptop when she went back to college for her master's degree in early elementary education. With the portable computer she could unplug from her desk and at least be near her husband and children when she was studying.

"I hated being in my room, all by myself and hearing things go on around the house," she said. With the laptop, "I could sit in the kitchen or the living room and be around my family."

At one point, both O'Connor and her husband were enrolled in school at the same time and had to juggle work, two children and two college educations all while their sons were under the age of 6. They would get the kids occupied and sit at the kitchen table to do their homework.

"It's possible. It isn't easy. But it's possible," she said. "Get through it. Do what you need to do."

O'Connor and the Leahy sisters said they were careful to choose courses based on class schedules so they could attend class around work and available childcare. O'Connor said she made sure to pick courses that interested her the

most to keep herself engaged with the material and her classmates. O'Connor said she was also honest with her professors about her school, work and family balance, and it paid off.

"I asked to miss a Wednesday class because it was Halloween night," she said. "The teacher asked the class how many of us were parents. When a large number of us raised our hands, he canceled class."

Kate Leahy said the bigger picture of a more stable life for her family motivated her to find time to study and be an involved mother.

"You can still play with your kids, eat dinner with them, put them to bed every night and still get your work done, if your heart is in it," she said. "You will teach them that their mom is even more amazing than they ever could have realized."

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