

Tips for students raising families

It is possible to raise healthy and happy children and to study effectively at the same time, although it can sometimes be challenging. While your family is unique, the following suggestions are helpful in achieving a successful outcome. **Planning and being organised can be the key to successfully combining family and study.**

As one student said, it is about being “super organised, having super routines yet being super flexible”.

There are many ways to successfully plan your trimester. For example, create a map of your time and make a spreadsheet that includes all the 168 hours in a week and plan your routine. Bear in mind that each unit you study at university generally requires an average of 10 hours of study per week. If you can't find the number of hours required in your weekly schedule for the number of units you plan to enrol in, then you need to consider enrolling in fewer units.

You may need to reduce activities such as face book, online games and television, yet protect time for essential, less negotiable commitments. Put a large calendar on the fridge and encourage family members to write in important events, school holidays, family birthdays, athletics carnivals, etc. Note down your study commitments and discuss with family how these are to be accommodated. Problem solve together where possible. Start to make plans for intensive schools ahead of time, especially mandatory ones. Consider cost, travel, childcare, accommodation, pets.

Work out your children's routines and plan around these - soccer practice, music lessons, etc. Try to study around these activities. For example, watch a cricket match while reading your textbooks, sit your child beside you to draw pictures while you study, or read your textbook aloud to the baby to put them to sleep!

Most parents study when the children are asleep, at school or in daycare, etc. It's helpful to be firm and consistent about regular bedtimes at night or decisions to study in the early morning. Try doing things in time blocks and become productive at studying in short bursts. For example, set aside 30 minutes of reading before the morning rush begins, with an emphasis on quality not quantity, and have your assessments organised to allow this.

Try to get started on course work as early as you can in the trimester and give yourself a time buffer for unexpected events. Write a timetable of work to complete each week, and try to get a fortnight ahead to allow for the unexpected family demands, sick children, etc. Or allow for some “just in case” time in your weekly timetable so that you can fall back on this time if something arises when you planned to study. Have a list of things you would like to do. If you don't get to all of them then problem-solve when and how you can. And remember that crossing things off the “to do” list can be very satisfying.

Organise meals that are nutritious and easy to prepare, slow cookers are great, and prepare more food to freeze for busy study times. Also the occasional take away

meal can save your sanity. Perhaps Fridays can be “fish and chip” night. Remember that partners and children can help with meal preparations, dishes, etc. If children are young, they could assist with easy meals like tacos or pizza.

Be well organised but expect the unexpected. For example, toddlers who give up daytime sleeps or children who need to complete last minute school projects. Also be prepared to let the house get a bit messier sometimes. Plan for a big clean up at the end of some study tasks – with kids and partners helping where possible. Avoid using cleaning as a form of procrastination!

After your family make your study a priority.

You will find competing demands on your time and may need to learn to say “no” to some requests from family, friends, school etc. It’s important to be realistic with your expectations, and expect that it will be difficult at times. You may need to pace yourself, even if it means dropping unit/s. Keep in mind deadlines or “principal dates” for when you can change your study load without penalty. Initially consider enrolling in fewer units per trimester and gradually take on more as your family adapts and your confidence grows. Let go of expectations of having a perfectly tidy house, and have a roster with the family for age appropriate tasks, or do the housework when you are feeling brain dead from study!

Build a healthy support network and utilise other community resources.

Think of tasks that will safely and creatively occupy the children while you study e.g. books, craft, and safe outdoor play in a secure yard. Try to research “out of school” and “holiday /vacation care” activities in the local newspaper, local library, schools newsletters, etc. Sports camps can be good Christmas gifts from grandparents. Source good quality videos or DVDs (your local council library?), record educational television programs, etc.

Remember that trimesters mean university holidays and schools holidays do not always coincide. During these breaks and in stressful assessment/exam times ask for help from partners, parents, grandparents, friends and neighbours etc. Let them know that you appreciate their support and reciprocate when you can. Be mindful when the children are having their holiday time that they will want fun and play time and try to devote some quality time to each individual. Let them know that you might not have as much free time as them, but that you want to strike a balance. Aim for promises and activities that you can keep to. If you short-change the kids, they often know it and might act out. This does not mean you have to “entertain” them every day. Set realistic limits on what is possible. If your children are young, they, just like you, will probably welcome some routine during their holidays. Talk to them about how you can weave your routine into theirs. Perhaps they need a quiet time at home every second day that allows you to do quiet activities alongside them. Let them know when you have done some “homework” and are able to do more active/fun things. Try to communicate effectively with your adolescents and be mindful of their activities, especially online ones.

The support you need to succeed

Talk to other students with children and share your experiences. It's good to talk to people who understand the challenges and they may know local resources that are available. Study with other parents and let your children play together.

Self-care is vital.

Plan to keep as healthy as possible, eat well and exercise. Perhaps listen to lectures on an iPod when you do the housework. Dance to music, or during a study break physically play with the children at soccer, cricket, etc. Expect late study nights but on a time limit so you don't get exhausted. As another student said, "set a bedtime for yourself as it's no good studying until 3 or 4am when you know the kids will be up at 5 with their batteries charged". Setting a regular bedtime for yourself will help you remain well-rested. Try to aim for some quality times for yourself and a healthy balance of family/study/work life and don't give up all the fun things! If you study at night, make sure you have one night off a week to spend with your children and/or partner. Also, coffee and "energy" drinks to keep yourself awake will affect your health and ultimately your ability to cope with study.

Remember by studying you become a more interesting parent and the children will learn the value of education. Talk to your children about your work and explain how your study can help the family in the future. You are also role modelling good behaviours when they see you persevering and successfully working towards your goals.

Celebrate every academic success as a team effort.

Celebrate every submission of assessments or examinations and delight in your progress; bake a cake with lots of candles and acknowledge and show your appreciation for the support and cooperation of your family.

Do not struggle alone if it feels too difficult and stressful.

Communicate any difficulties with your lecturers/unit coordinators and be open and honest about your situation. Contact the Student Support Team and the Student Centre who can give you support in person, by phone or by email. The sooner you seek assistance the quicker you can gain control over your life. For example, if you start feeling overwhelmed by an assessment you may be eligible to apply for extensions, special considerations or special exams. See our tip sheet about when and how to seek extensions, plus other tip sheets at <http://www.une.edu.au/current-students/support/student-support/counselling/tip-sheets>

As one student has said:

"Expect it to be hard

Expect it to be rewarding"

**Contact UNE Student Counselling and Psychological Services
(CAPS) for a free appointment: (02) 6773 2897.**

The support you need to succeed