The coronavirus pandemic put a spotlight on many societal disparities. Mothers working outside the home have disproportionately felt the strain of managing childcare and jobs, resulting in some leaving the workplace. We interviewed eight female VA psychologists to discuss how they balance career advancement and family life. These women are diverse in terms of their background, marital status, geographic location, and career stage. Some decided to forge ahead with career aspirations, some decided to take a step back, and some feel torn. In this edition, we focus on those forging ahead.

Forging Ahead

Lauren Vines, Ph.D. is a VA Psychology Chief and single mother to her 6-year-old daughter. She wanted to serve Veterans since middle school, and while pregnant on her VA internship, she worried that starting her family early in her career might ruin her chance of obtaining her ideal VA position. She even hid her pregnancy by wearing Spanx! A female VA psychologist in a leadership position modeled being a strong leader while managing parenting responsibilities. This mentor spoke openly about her children and empowered Dr. Vines to assert her needs respectfully. For example, when she felt anxious about asking for time to pump, this mentor advised her to request a lactation room. After transferring VAs, Dr. Vines struggled in an atmosphere that was less supportive of taking family leave. She felt empowered to take on leadership roles by identifying supportive colleagues, whom she admired as leaders and who were open about how they balance work and family life. Dr. Vines identified reliable and back-up childcare and a support network as critical to her career success. Now as a Chief of Psychology, she tries to empower others and model what it means to be a family-friendly workplace.
Melissa Cyrus, Ph.D. found that setting boundaries allowed her to remain in a leadership role. Since completing her VA internship, she had been interested in training. After establishing a new VA internship program with local leadership, she became interim training director. She learned she was pregnant one week before she started this new role. Enthusiastic about the position and having a strong sense of commitment to her colleagues and interns, she returned from maternity leave for their APA accreditation site visit. Talking with her VA mentor and colleagues empowered her to ask for what she needed to balance her leadership work with family life. For example, to maintain reasonable work hours, she requested protected administrative time and comp time when she works outside her tour. Balancing work and family life has made her more flexible with trainees and gracious toward her colleagues with family needs.

Kaily Clark, Ph.D. noted that it is both exciting and scary to take the leap into a new leadership role. She is transitioning to a supervisory position in Suicide Prevention 2.0 Clinical Resource Hub. Her daughter just turned one, and she wonders how advancing in her career will impact her life overall. She hopes she can continue to honor her value of having a strong work/life balance in her new role. Excelling in both professional and personal endeavors can take thoughtful planning and consideration. Touching on a sentiment expressed by several interviewees, Dr. Clark commented on the guilt that can arise when professional goals lead to less time with her daughter. However, she is determined to take this chance to fulfill her professional goals and be a strong role model for her daughter. While her new role is 100% virtual, potentially allowing for better work/life balance, she will have new supervisory responsibilities and unpredictable clinical work in a sensitive area. Despite her fears, her AVAPL mentor encouraged her to apply, and she is excited to take on this new challenge!

Feeling Torn

Genevieve Davis, Ph.D. is concerned about the uncertainty of career advancement in light of becoming a mom. She is currently pregnant and considering whether to pursue leadership opportunities. She enjoys taking on new work responsibilities, like supervision and mentorship. Previously, she applied to leadership positions but was not selected due to lack of management experience. Despite thoughts that she should be further along in her career, especially being as career focused as she has been since graduation, she is uncertain as to what to expect once her baby arrives. She voiced shame for both having ambition and not having ambition at times. She has been advised to focus on her health, pregnancy, and beginning parenthood. At this time, she is working on acceptance.
Katie Juhasz, M.S., Health Science Specialist, also feels the pull to advance her career. Childcare has been a significant hurdle, as she has 4- and 6-year-old children. In 2019, the government shutdown closed their “non-essential” daycare for 6 weeks. This contributed to a decision for her husband to take a new job, closer to family; however, childcare issues have arisen again during the pandemic. She has been able to maintain her job with the National Center for PTSD during the pandemic; however, she desires a leadership position, which could require starting fresh with a new team. The unreliability of childcare has been a major determining factor for her. There is also limited support in her local community to work outside the home, as most mothers there stay at home or work part-time.

“I’m still a good psychologist even if I don’t take on a leadership position at this time.”
— Margaret Bencomo-Rivera, Psy.D.

Margaret Bencomo-Rivera, Psy.D. is a VA Psychology Team Lead. Her twins are 9 years old. She enjoys her clinical work and the flexibility in her schedule. She has worked at the VA for the past 13 years and has considered leadership positions; however, career advancement would involve a significant change in clinical work. She is concerned she will not have the patience and energy she needs to be a good parent if she commits to such new growth at work. She has come to recognize that she is still a good psychologist even if she does not take on new leadership roles at this time. She considers that 10 years down the road, her patient isn’t going to remember one cancelled appointment, but her children will remember whether she was there for them at an important event.

Stepping Down

Katy Bottonari, Ph.D. is one of a couple of women who shared how they transitioned out of their leadership roles to accommodate their family lives. After working at several VAs for nearly 12 years, she was selected for Section Chief after returning from maternity leave. She found it difficult to maintain boundaries with her time, often taking work home. She recently decided to step down from her role and values having more control over her time. She now feels able to solidly work the hours of her tour, feel good about her work, and truly be present with her child when at home. She plans to have a long VA career and made peace with maintaining a solid reputation at work and pursuing career advancement when the timing is better.

“You can step out of leadership, and step back in later.”
— Katy Bottonari, Ph.D.
Meg Martinez, Ph.D. recently left the private sector for the VA in order to achieve a better work-life balance. She obtained her “dream job” as the clinical director of a residential/partial hospitalization program for eating disorders while on her postdoc. She worked part-time on evenings and weekends until she completed postdoc. The long hours did not end there. Once full-time, she often worked 10-hour days plus weekends, and was on-call. She managed a team of 14 therapists and felt isolated as one of very few psychologists. The pace was exhausting. After becoming pregnant, she knew that she did not want to continue working those hours. She consulted with colleagues and applied for a VA job prior to going on maternity leave. She has been pleased with multiple aspects of her decision to join the VA: training opportunities, collegial support, and satisfaction that she is effective at work. She also values the mentorship she has received through AVAPL.

**Take Aways**

We explored the decision making process that women go through regarding career advancement while parenting, and were struck by many pearls of wisdom offered. Below is a compilation of that advice.

Advice from women on seeking career advancement:
- Find someone you respect as a leader, and ask how they manage work and life.
- Ask for what you need, such as an altered tour or comp time.
- If reliable childcare is a barrier, create back-ups (we realize this has been much harder during the pandemic).
- Take advantage of leadership development opportunities (e.g., Health Care Leadership Development Program, Leadership VA, mentoring programs).
- Remember that you can step out of leadership timing for your life is a personal choice.
- Find people who can mentor you and offer different perspectives.
- Partner with others in similar leadership/supervisory positions who can provide coverage when you need planned or unexpected leave.
- Time is a commodity. Make a plan for how you want to spend your time, and know that your plans might change across stages of your life.
- Know your rights in the workplace. For example, ask HR about the nuances of using FMLA.
- Do what makes you feel confident, competent, and brings you satisfaction.
- Don’t apologize for having reasonable boundaries.
- It’s okay to leave a position that doesn’t fit your life.
- Don’t give up on your leadership aspirations. Job opportunities will be there. In the meantime, keep networking, maintain your CV, and be ready when the timing is manageable for you.

Advice for peers, supervisors, and leadership:
- Model how you manage work-life balance.
- Show verbal and tangible support for work-life balance of colleagues and supervised staff.