



MOMS AT THE HEAD OF THE CLASS

by Vicki Salemi

For many mothers, both new and not-so-new, advancing their education usually takes a backseat to things like raising a family, managing everyone's busy schedules, and - let's face it - maintaining their sanity. Then again, if you peruse a recent survey on adult education conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, adults with children under the age of 10 are growing at a rapid rate as higher education participants.

Does that mean moms are neglecting their upbringing duties? Not at all, says Frank Mayadas, program director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, an association of more than 900 institutions and organizations of higher education engaged in online learning. Rather, eLearning gives students with busy schedules - like moms - the opportunity to receive a quality education on their own terms. As Mayadas explains, online programs remove the obstacles of transportation and time, and provide a way for individuals to balance their professional goals with their personal priorities.

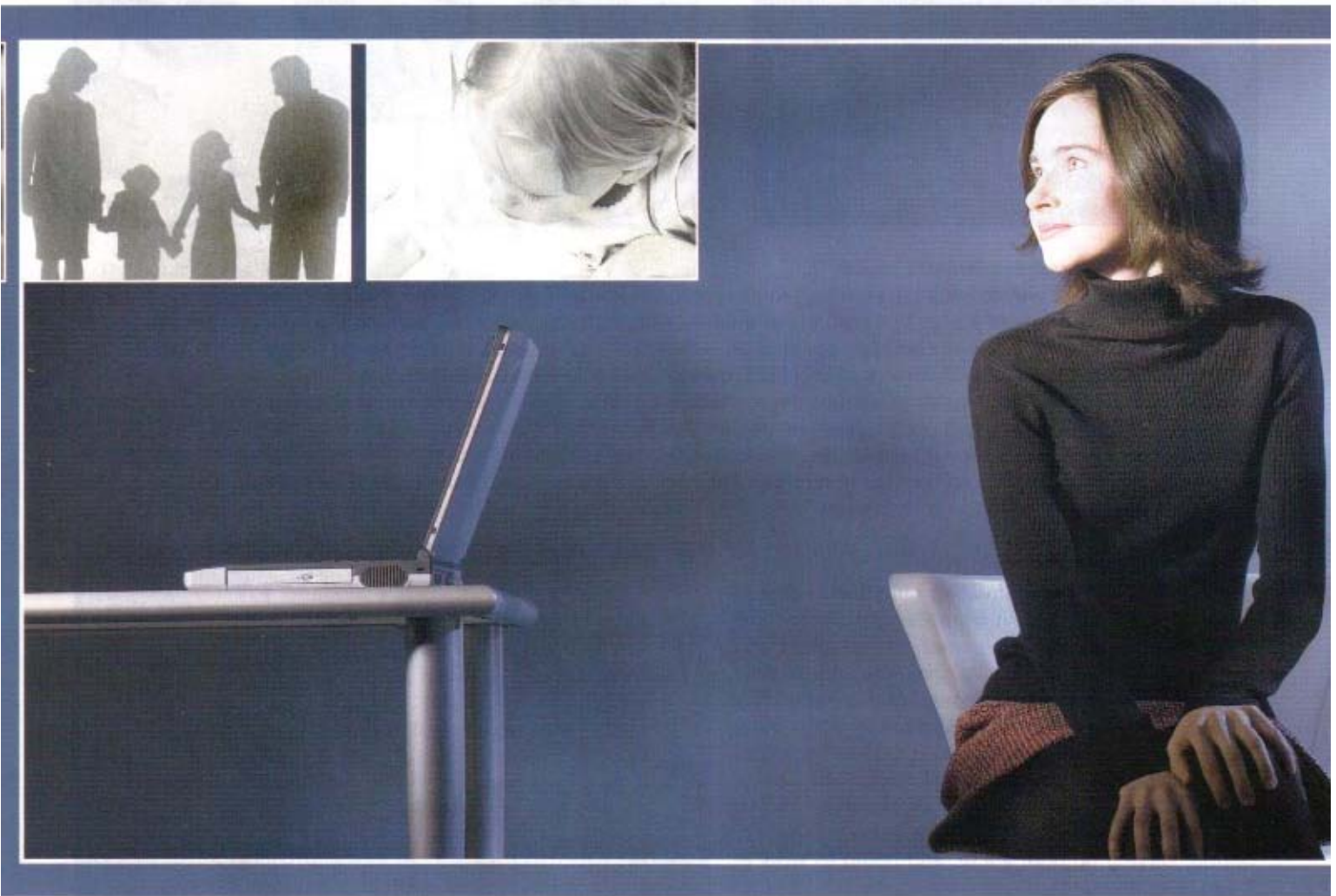
"Online learning provides the flexibility individuals wouldn't otherwise have in a traditional [classroom] setting," he notes. And, online learning enables moms specifically to make a positive impact on the lives of their children, something even more valuable than the monetary benefits that usually follow the earning of an advanced degree.

"A back-to-school mom is a living example, showing her children how to establish goals that extend out from the family," says Thomas Haller, MDiv, MSW, DST family therapist, and author of "The Ten Commitments: Parenting with Purpose" (Personal Power Press, 2005). "She shows her children how to structure time, set limits, and reach personal goals - lessons her kids will carry with them the rest of their lives."

For Winnie Warren, a stay-at-home mom with a one-year-old son, the pursuit of an online degree also provides her with much-needed mental stimulation. "My mind was going to mush," admits the Ph.D. student. Online learning gave her an outlet to increase her professional productivity. "I'm doing something for myself while also doing something for my family."

On track for a Ph.D. in public policy administration from Walden University, Warren enjoys her classes and current role as teaching assistant (TA). What's interesting, she notes, is that as a TA, she sees how learning goes above and beyond the actual subject matter. Learning is not constrained by time or place, she says, and this is illuminated by the fact that she teaches students around the world and answers their e-mails late at night, after her son has gone to sleep. Warren is so impressed with the functionality of eLearning that she aspires to become an online teacher upon completion of her Ph.D.

She sees flexibility as the biggest benefit to eLearning, especially when raising a young child. While it's important to be self-disciplined and meet assignment deadlines, Warren explains, when her son is sick, "everything stops." The nature



of her online courses permits her to work around his schedule. "I plan school around my family, not vice versa," she says.

Ultimately, Warren maintains a dual dedication – to her studies and to her family, and has found a way to make them complementary. "Whatever I fit into my busy schedule, I make sure it's something I enjoy doing, like learning and teaching," she says. "Of course, being a mom is the best job in the world."

Lifelong Learner

When Carlyn Blake's children were ages three and five, she enrolled in an instructional and performance technology graduate online program at Boise State University. Her main purpose: To further her career as a Certified Performance Technologist with Key Bank and maintain the family balance she deemed so important.

Blake, who was working in human resources at the time, noticed that the new employees getting hired all had master's degrees, and began to question her own job security. "What would it be like to get a job without one?" she wondered. An online degree was the answer, especially since being a full-time working mother presented its own challenges.

"The online learning [process] transformed not only me, but my entire department," Blake explains. "Whatever I would learn in the classroom one night, I began applying in the workplace the very next day." Her department relied on her so much for information and education to improve their workflow that she was promoted and given the title >>

Moms in Charge

- > Females are more likely than males to participate in an educational activity (49 percent versus 43 percent).
- > Never-married adults and those who live in households with children under the age of 10 are also more likely to participate in adult education.

Source: National Household Education Surveys of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education Institute of Education Science)



“Continuous Improvement Projects Leader.”

Blake also found a way to ensure continuous improvement at home. Through Boise’s flexible online program, she was able to devote the hours of 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. to her studies. Although she was often burning the midnight (and beyond!) oil, and it took her four years to complete her studies, online learning enabled Blake to spend time with her family. She even became a regular at her children’s swim and gymnastic meets in between her studies.

Upon completion of her master of science degree with a 4.0 GPA, Blake was promoted to senior national employee development manager at Key Bank. “The online degree completely changed everything for me,” she says.

In addition to the professional advantages, Blake also realized the positivity that online learning has allowed her to pass on to her children. In a conversation with her daughter, Blake explained that she had just finished the 17th grade. And, she points out: “You can go all the way up to 22nd grade!”

The Empty Nest Scholar

Some find scholastic motivation once their children are grown up. Just take it from Beverly Simon. She started her master’s degree when her daughter and son were in high school. At the time, the easiest option was to pursue a traditional route by attending night classes at Fairleigh Dickinson University (Teaneck, NJ). After all, she needed to keep her job as a teacher of computer science at Middlesex County College (Edison, NJ), and remain involved in her teens’ lives. “I got very little sleep,” she admits. For Simon, staying up until 4 a.m. and going to work at 7 a.m. was the norm.

After completing her master’s, Simon aspired to continue her education toward a Ph.D. This time, her method of choice was a computer technology in education program presented completely online from Nova Southeastern University. Her goal was to become a professor, which she has since accomplished. “It was exactly what I wanted to achieve,” she notes.

There were many significant differences between online and traditional learning, says Simon, such as time saved by not going to campus every week, but a great amount of dedication was needed. “You have to be very self-motivated,” she advises, but explains it’s worth it in the end.

“As long as you’re willing to put in the time and effort, I definitely recommend it.” ■

Four Keys to Mommy's School Success

- 1. Learn to say no.** Balancing mommyhood and school is a feat in itself. It's acceptable to say no to friends and family sometimes. Be upfront that your schedule makes it unrealistic to book too many plans or dates.
- 2. Put yourself first.** Take your friends up on babysitting offers, and use the time to study and complete assignments.
- 3. Schedule quiet time.** Set aside an hour during the day where your children have 'quiet time.' Turn the phone ringer off and explain to your children that for the next hour you will be working.
- 4. Schedule housework time.** Believe it not, taking a mental break away from your hectic life may be just what you need to brainstorm and come up with that great new idea.

Source: Melissa Leonard, business and social etiquette expert (www.establishyourself.com)