Training as a future physician and having a family: Successful strategies

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Medical school and residency are times of intensive training, so adding a family to the mix can necessitate even greater planning and attention. At the same time, medical trainees with families say the rewards of going through this period with such a support network are well worth the effort. One medical family shares their tips for success.

It’s quite a ride

“I'm not exactly sure how to explain what it was like going to medical school as a family of five, but I guess the best way to describe [it] is a rollercoaster,” Angela Kalcec wrote in an article in the Spring 2016 issue of Physician Family, a publication of the AMA Alliance.

Kalcec and her husband Everett, a third-year medical student at Michigan State College of Osteopathic Medicine, have three elementary-school-aged children and came to medical school after successful teaching careers. They share their joint insights in the article.

“There are highs and lows, and sometimes we just barely hang on, but it is a fun ride,” she said.

Here are six tips the Kalcecs recommend for other physicians in training and their families:

- Communication is essential to succeeding as a busy family. “If you and your spouse are not communicating and working as a team, things will be really hard,” Everett Kalcec said. “We talk every morning and every night and go through the plans for the day and the next,” Angela Kalcec said. And when plans change along the way, the Kalcecs said it’s important to stay in constant contact. “We talk and text often,” she said. “We communicate, and we make it work.”
Don’t follow assigned responsibilities. With the sometimes chaotic schedules that come with the responsibilities of medical training, a partner’s job and the children’s needs and activities, each day may look a little different. That makes it all the more important for everyone to pitch in. “If something needs to get done, you just do it,” said Angela Kalcec. “From picking a child up from school to emptying the dishwasher or folding laundry, nothing is beneath either of us.” When there are multiple things that need to be done at the same time, that’s when communication and prioritization are most important. The Kalcecs advise that you talk to your spouse if you need more time for essential responsibilities—such as studying for an exam or meeting a work deadline—and rearrange the other priorities accordingly.

Plan carefully, but be ready to improvise. “We plan just about every minute of the day,” Angela Kalcec said. That includes using organizational tools, such as a shared Google Calendar that includes reminders about upcoming activities. But with children, the best of plans can get derailed. “You have to be able to improvise,” she said. “This includes backup and double back-up childcare, friends that can take notes and co-workers who can cover in a pinch.”

Make family time a priority. “When my husband decided to go to medical school, we agreed to do our best to always make time for our family,” Angela Kalcec said. For their family, that means having dinner together and spending time together in the early evening before studies. Whatever family time fits with your schedule, the important part is to make it quality time together.

Follow a budget. Not only does this mean understanding how to manage your finances but also prioritizing what you will spend on and what you will save on. “One sacrifice I couldn’t make was opportunities for our kids,” Angela Kalcec said. Instead, the Kalcecs spend less on clothing, drive older cars, and use coupons and bargain shop.

Make the most of your support network. The Kalcecs recommend connecting as much as possible with built-in support networks. Angela Kalcec said she’s been very active in the local and national physician family groups, where she has met great mentors and friends. Everett Kalcec said taking advantage of the school’s resources for students has been invaluable. “Nothing important was ever done alone,” he said. “All medical schools have counselors and advisers to help students.” He said he also has made sure to talk with professors whenever possible. “Remember to reach out to each other, other medical student families and get involved,” he said. “We are all in this together!”

Additional insights for physician families

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- How to balance a two-physician family
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