



parents league  
of new york

# the review 2020

Essential Articles on  
Parenting & Education

# Finding Balance: Your Preschool Can Help

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*Balance: An even distribution of weight enabling someone or something to remain upright and steady. A situation in which different elements are equal or in the correct proportions.*

Five years ago, I was offered the position as director of First Presbyterian Church Nursery School. I happily accepted, and hung up the phone. Then reality set in. The dream of leading a school was coming true, right now, for me—the mother of a 6-month-old daughter. How was I going to make this work? My husband, also a school administrator, was optimistic: “You can do this!” But how would “this” look? What would it mean for us as a family and what would it mean for me as a working mother?

## **My “Perfect” Parents**

The youngest of several children whose parents were Haitian immigrants, I have quite vivid memories of how they managed our household. They appeared heroic. My mother worked during the day for families like ours, families with children and homes that needed to be cared for. When she came home, her handbag and shoes were placed at the bottom of the steps, where they stayed until dinner was cooked and quickly eaten by all of us. Before we found ourselves tucked in bed, the house was spotless and quiet, ready to receive our father—who arrived home at 1 a.m. from his job as a janitor and ate dinner alone.

My parents were passing ships, but one of them was always there: present, ready and loving us, despite everything they had to manage. I didn’t know it then, but I know now the countless daily struggles they faced. I’m sure they were doing their level best to balance the many challenges that came with being immigrants

and working parents. And they didn't have the resources readily available to parents now: numerous parenting books, classes, support groups, fellow parents and nursery schools.

### **Let's Rethink**

During the past five years, I allowed these childhood memories to convince me my parents were infallible. They weren't, and I'm grateful they allowed us to see some of their tough moments and weaknesses. However, my convictions prompted a desire to be as "heroic" as I thought they were.

What was I thinking? Dear parents, what are *we* thinking? Do we believe this is what our children want or expect from us? Or are these expectations self-imposed? It does seem at times that heroic efforts are necessary, given the time commitments nursery school parents face: events and meetings, play dates, birthday parties and carving out family time. In the midst of trying to do it all, it can be hard to keep in mind that being involved and present in our children's lives is what really matters.

### **We're Here for You**

Because nursery schools are typically small and self-contained, we have the opportunity to form close partnerships with parents—partnerships that help families navigate the first steps and early years in their children's lives. We are often the first school experience for many families. We can help lay a strong foundation, one that is just as important for the parents as it is for their children—if not more so.

My administrative team and I think critically about the role we play. What are the challenges and burdens our families face? How can we help parents to be involved in their children's lives? In answering these questions, we are able to identify ways to enhance our program and make it more responsive to our families' needs.

In recent years, we have provided options such as early morning drop-off, as well as extended-day offerings that are just as "hearty" as those offered by outside programs and allow children to remain on site. We provide childcare during evening

events. We've created more opportunities for parents to spend time with their children at school, including our First Stories program, which features parents as guest readers. We invite parents to share their personal traditions and rituals during holidays, chaperone trips and help plan school events. And we've established professional partnerships with consultants who serve as counselors and advisors to our families.

Additionally, our school, like other nursery schools, can offer strategies and suggestions to parents as they try to find the balance. But be patient. There are no magical solutions. Parenting requires a lot of "hanging in there" and meeting your children where they are. It also requires being kind to yourself. The "even distribution of weight" that enables someone to remain "upright and steady" varies from one person to the next, and from one day to the next. Give yourself permission to decide what you will and can balance. Perhaps the weight should be shifted towards self-care, mindfulness and creating safe emotional spaces.

### **As for Me**

So how do I manage to balance it all? When all is said and done, should that be my goal? My daughter is watching me just as I watched my parents. I don't want her to think I'm infallible or give her an unrealistic view of what it means to be a good parent.

I was delighted the Parents League asked me to contribute to this year's *Review*. I needed to share my story, with the hope that my feelings and experiences might resonate with others. In truth, though, while trying to "do it all," I submitted this article past the deadline. I was forgiven. Should you find yourself feeling you've fallen short, your children will forgive you, too. I encourage you to forgive yourselves as well.

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