

First 5 years of practice, first 5 years of parenthood

Kiranpal Dhillon MD MEd CCFP

The first 5 years of practice are a time of change and adjustment for many early-career physicians. We are learning to provide care more independently, trying to balance personal and professional demands, and forming our professional identities. For those of us who also become parents during this transition, such changes and demands are compounded exponentially.

I had my son in 2020, 2 years into practice and at the beginning of a global pandemic while living in a city with no family nearby. I took 15 months of parental leave. Every individual's experience will be different, and no one's journey will be easy, but here are a few reflections from my own experience that I hope will help new family physicians as they move into their *other* first 5 years—their first 5 years of parenthood.

Identity formation

The biggest thing I struggled with mentally after having my baby was reconciling the person I used to be—and the goals and priorities I had had then—with the new person I had become with parenthood. It felt frustrating at times to press pause on a career for which I had worked so hard and for which I was still pursuing higher-education degrees and taking on leadership roles. Those long days and nights in the early days of parenthood can feel like an eternity, and it can seem as though life will never go back to how it used to be. I decided to step back from some additional roles I had taken on so as to make more time for my parental responsibilities. Not everyone will need or want to step back, but for me it was the right decision. It took me a while to accept that; now, I realize that I have many years of my career ahead of me, and when my family requires less of my time I can return to some of those opportunities and goals. Again, some may find that jumping right back into their career pursuits is what is best for them, and that is completely wonderful! The point I want to share is that acquiring a new role as parent will mean needing to find the balance between professional life and parental life that works for you and for your family, and it will totally depend on your personality, your work situation, the support you have available to you, and what fulfills you most.

Priorities and expectations

Adjusting my priorities and having realistic expectations about what I could accomplish in a day at home with a baby were big struggles for me. A day will only ever have 24 hours, but once you have kids, there is just so

much more you need to do in a day. Something might have to give. You might need to hire some extra help, rely more on family or friends, or simply cut back on certain roles and tasks. I remember the feeling while I was on parental leave that I was “achieving” very little in a day, and as someone who measures the success of my day by how productive I am, this was incredibly discouraging at times. I had to remind myself that looking after another human is an achievement, and all the little tasks it involves throughout the day amount to a whole lot of productive output.

Returning to work

Returning to work can provoke a bit of anxiety. Just like a deconditioned muscle, you might need time to get back to full strength. It might also help to do a bit of a warm-up before you return to clinical work by undertaking some continuing professional development as a refresher on some high-yield topics related to your practice. If you are able to ease back into practice, that can be helpful, too. I started by working just a couple days a week and increased from there. I was fortunate to have a flexible work situation, so I could return gradually and adjust my schedule as I learned how many hours at work would allow me to be effective and fulfilled, both personally and professionally.

Depending on where you live and how much family support you have, child care might be something you need to plan well ahead of your return to work. At times I felt guilty about being away from my son, but as he and I adjusted to our new routines those feelings went away, and my son really started to enjoy his time at daycare. And when I returned to practice after parental leave, I found so much joy and satisfaction in my work. It felt rewarding to be able to care for patients again, and it was personally fulfilling to exercise my “family doctor muscles” again.

Social life


Every parent's journey will be different, but I have found my social life has changed a lot since having a baby. While I have wonderful friends, some are better able than others to understand the demands of balancing a career in medicine with parenthood. My reality has changed, and how I relate to my friends has changed, too. I have found it helpful to connect with other physician parents and have developed some great new friendships as a result. There are some wonderful groups on Facebook for physician moms that provide invaluable support and a social outlet.

Keep in mind that social gatherings might look different compared with those you enjoyed pre-baby—you might have to bring your kiddo along for a coffee date, for example—but it can also be healthy and refreshing to meet up with friends without your little one, if you can arrange it.

Conclusion

In my fifth year of practice and with my son now 3 years old, I have settled into my roles of parent and physician and I am better able to balance their respective responsibilities. Big life changes require adjustment time, so my final pieces of advice are to be patient with yourself as you navigate new realities of life as a parent

and physician and to reach out for help when you need it. The physician community, and the physician parent community in particular, is strong, supportive, and aware of the unique challenges we face as new doctors and as new parents.

Best of luck to you in both of your first 5 years. 

Dr Kiranpal Dhillon is Assistant Clinical Professor in the Department of Family Practice at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Competing interests
None declared

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