

Mother of 5 completes her PhD, finds a faculty position and finds success with her family

Chrysalis L. Wright earned her B.S. in Psychology (2003) and her M.A. in Experimental Psychology (2006) from Middle Tennessee State University. She recently completed her Ph.D. in Life-span Developmental Psychology (2010) from Florida International University. Her dissertation research, Parental Absence and Academic Achievement in Immigrant Students, was awarded the Dissertation Year Fellowship Award from the University Graduate School at Florida International University. Dr. Wright's research interests include romantic relationship formation behaviors, media influences on development, immigration, acculturation, and post-migration risks of immigrant students. Her work has been presented at numerous psychological conferences including the Association for Psychological Science and the Society for Research in Child Development. She is a wife and mother of 5 and has given presentations and written an article on how to balance graduate school and parenthood.

How many children did you have while in graduate school?

Before entering graduate school to obtain a Master's degree in Experimental Psychology, I already had two children; a boy, whom I was pregnant with when I graduated with my Bachelor's degree in Psychology, and my daughter, who traveled with me on my journey to earn a college degree. When I graduated with my Masters degree in the summer of 2006 I was eight and a half months pregnant with my third child, a son. I was already accepted into the Doctoral program in Developmental Psychology at Florida International University and was originally supposed to begin in the fall of 2006 but decided to postpone my admittance until the spring of 2007 because my due date was so close to when the Doctoral program was to begin. I literally had my third child the same day I was supposed to start the Doctoral program at Florida International University. So, when I began the Doctoral program in the spring of 2007, I had three children. During my first year of the program I had my fourth child, another boy, during the fall semester of 2007. I had my fifth child, a girl, in the summer of 2009. In fact, I was seven months pregnant with her when I took my qualifying exam and eight months pregnant with her when I proposed my dissertation. I remember my major professor asking me if there was a deadline I was aiming for. My answer was yes, my due date!



What was the most difficult thing about having children during graduate school?

I think that the most difficult thing about having children during graduate school was being away from family. My husband and I moved away from my home state so that I could pursue a Doctorate degree. We had no family living in the area and could not rely on anyone other than ourselves to help with our children. It seems common for families to stay close to home so there are grandparents and aunts and uncles around to watch the children if need be or help out in other areas, but we did not have that.

Another thing that was difficult was the economic sacrifices we made. We did not want to put our children in day care and had to make sure our schedules were flexible enough to allow one of us to be with the children at all times. My husband has goals that he wants to achieve as well but decided to postpone his plans until after I graduated. I graduated in the fall of 2010 and now it is my turn to show the same level of support to my husband as he did to me.

Why was your husband's support so important?

My husband and I have done everything for the entire family as a group. Every decision that has been made, every sacrifice that we have endured has been done for the better of the family as a whole. We didn't move to Florida so that I could earn a Doctorate degree. We moved to Florida so that we could have a better life for our family. Instead of only focusing on the goals and accomplishments of one person, we have focused on the goals and accomplishments of the family as a group and me completing my Doctorate degree is only a part of this overall goal that my husband and I have for our family. It is a step in the process. I think that this mindset and lack of selfishness is why my husband has been so supportive of my education.

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What was the most rewarding thing about having your children during graduate school?

I think that the most rewarding thing about having my children while in graduate school was that I actually did it. I think that in and of itself is the most rewarding part. By doing both at the same time I have learned a lot about myself that I did not know before and I have accomplished two goals at the same time; children and an education.

When my oldest child turned one, I decided I should go to college. I realized how hard it was going to be to give my daughter everything she needed without a college education. Being a mother is what made me pursue a college education in the first place. My children have got to witness the journey first hand and now know what it takes to complete a college education.

Aside from that, it is also rewarding to be the first person in my family to not only go to college, but to earn a Doctorate degree. And I did it with 5 children! It is a great feeling to know that I have changed my family tree in more than one way and to know that my decisions and my path in life have made a lasting impact on whatever family members come after me.

Did you feel that you were supported as both a mom and student?

While I was a student I felt supported, for the most part, by my family, friends, and faculty members at Florida International University. The most support I received came from my husband. I am the first person to go to college in my family and I know that my accomplishment has made my mother proud. My mother kept reminding me that I had to keep going; that I was almost there.

Even so, there were members of my extended family that did not think my attending college with 5 children was a good idea or that I would actually graduate. I even had one family member tell me not to apply to Doctoral programs because this person thought I would never get accepted.

Two of the most supportive family members I had were my paternal grandparents. Neither of them

ever hinted at doubting my ability to complete the program and be successful at it. Unfortunately, both passed away while I was in the Doctoral program and did not get to see me reach my goal. I did not handle the death of either of them well and wanted to quit the program. But my husband encouraged me to keep going and continuously provided support for me along the way. Any time I thought about quitting, there he was to push me to keep going until I graduated.

How did other students respond to you?

When I was working on my Master's degree with two children other students responded pretty well to what I was doing. I associated with some of my classmates outside of class. I collaborated with other students on research projects and presentations. Some of us got together and helped each other with data analysis. We even applied to Doctoral programs together.

When I started my Doctoral program, however, it was different. I never associated with any of the other students outside of class, work with other students on assignments, or collaborate with other students on research projects or presentations. When I was preparing for the qualifying exam, while the other students were studying in groups, I was doing it independently while pregnant with my fifth child; every morning at 5:00 a.m for 6 months. The other students would talk to me during class or while on campus but there did not appear to be a desire to associate outside of the University.

Other students would ask how I went to graduate school with so many children. In response to these questions, I wrote an article that was published in the May edition of the APS Observer entitled *The Master Jugglers: Ten Tips for Balancing Graduate School and Family Life* and was invited to speak as a panelist for *The Naked Truth II: Surviving Graduate School* at the 2011 APS convention. I also spoke as a panelist for *Baby Bump or Bump the Baby* on the subject while a Doctoral candidate at Florida International University.



How do you think your professors and instructors responded to you?

For the most part, my professors were very supportive. I only had one professor express the idea that I should not be in the program because of my family situation. Other than that, my professors were great!

If something came up because of my children, my professors were understanding and worked with me. When I was serving as a teaching assistant in the psychology department, the professor I worked with called me the Angelina Jolie of graduate school because of my family situation. But the responsibilities of parenthood did not interfere with my performance as a teaching assistant. She liked my work so much that she for three semesters in a row!

When I would bring my children with me to the University the professors we encountered treated my children with kindness, respect, and understanding. My professors would talk to my children and never treated them like they were in the way. My children were always made to feel welcome. Some professors played with them, some cuddled with the babies, and some would give my children treats for good behavior or goodies to take home. My oldest son visited my major professor so much that he now refers to her as the "chocolate lady" because she always ended the visit by giving them a small piece of chocolate candy.

While almost all of my professors were supportive, there are two professors that really stand out in the amount of support and encouragement they provided to me while I was in the program. These are Dr. Mary Levitt, professor and chairperson of the psychology department and Dr. Dionne Stephens, Assistant Professor in the psychology department. Now that I have graduated, these two professors remain supportive and serve as role models for me.

What was the key to keeping sane and juggling so many responsibilities?

I never felt that I was at risk of going "crazy" when I was a graduate student and a mother of 5 small children. I think that there is a misconception about having children that women have today. Most women feel that they have to wait to have children; that they can't be mothers and be a college student or have a career at the same time. Some women choose not to have children all together. I think that this notion is the opposite of what women should be trying to achieve. Children shouldn't be considered a burden but should be considered a reward. I'm not saying that it is easy or that it is for everyone, but it is doable and is a very fulfilling experience.

But I don't want it to sound like I did it by myself because I didn't. My husband was very supportive. In fact, it was his idea for me to pursue the degree in the first place. If I had to do it by myself, I wouldn't have been able to complete the program.

How have your children benefited from you being a student and a mom?

I think that by my children watching me go through the process of earning a Doctorate degree that it has fostered a love for learning in them, especially in the two older children. My oldest daughter, who is now 12, says she wants to be a psychologist when she grows up and my oldest son is fascinated by dinosaurs. My children have learned that earning an education takes work, commitment, and determination. They have learned that people have to work for what they want and that nothing is free. They also understand that if they are curious about any subject, they can find the answers to their questions as long as they take it upon themselves to seek the answers. Also, since my children have experienced life before and after my degree they are able to see the difference in lifestyle that a college education can provide for them. They have seen the sacrifices my husband and I made for them. And they will obtain all of the benefits from it.

What's next for you?

In the fall of 2011 I will be joining the psychology department at the University of Central Florida. UCF is the second largest University in the nation. I am extremely excited about the new position.. I will continue to be actively involved in research and my current interests focus on immigration issues, racial discrepancies, educational achievement and media influences on development.

My goal is to get a tenure-track Assistant Professor position, and one day earn tenure, where I can devote a significant amount of time to my research and educating graduate students in Developmental Psychology. I would also like to devote a significant amount of effort in encouraging other women to pursue a college education after having children. I think women limit themselves by thinking that they cannot do both at the same time.

As far as the future of my family, I am not opposed to the idea of having more children. I think that my children are an accomplishment in itself and want to give them everything that they need. I want their childhood to be full of happy memories and I want their futures to be bright. Right now our family feels content with 5 children; three boys ages 7, 4, and 3 years; and two girls ages 12 and 2 years. But who knows what the future holds!

