

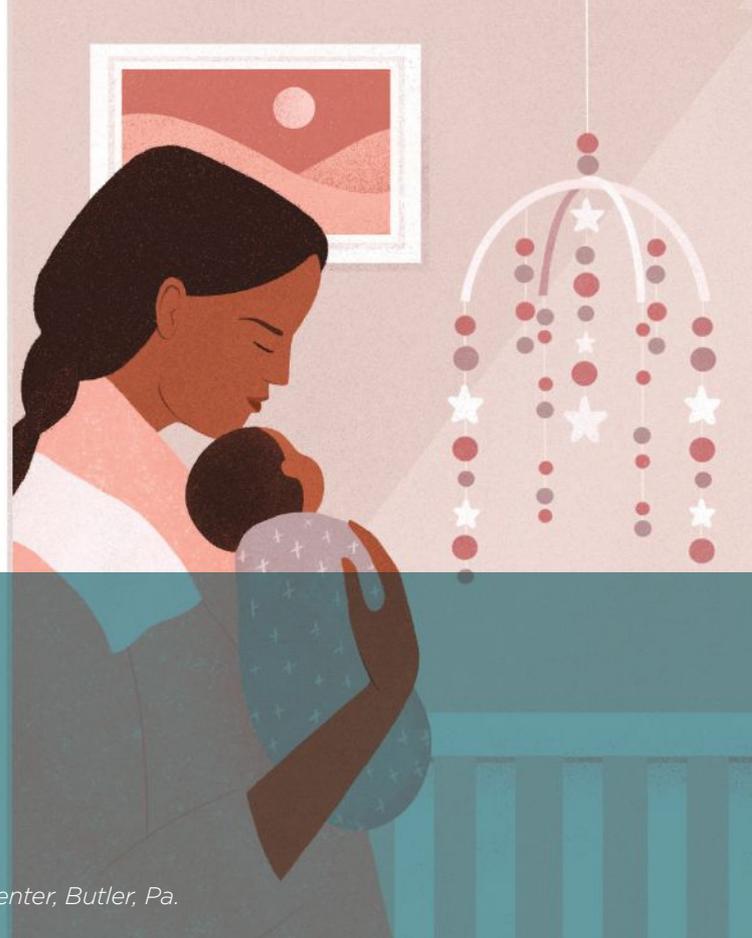


PERSONAL WELLNESS

Balancing Act

Kate Boatright, VMD

NVA Butler Veterinary Associates and Emergency Center, Butler, Pa.



Last week, I gave my infant son a suppository to help with his constipation, then went into work and performed a pericardiocentesis on a German shepherd. Can you guess which of these procedures was more stressful? This is just one example of the dichotomy of working as a veterinarian and being a parent. Each role comes with its own responsibilities and stressors. Finding a way to integrate work-life and home-life is a challenge.

CONFLICTING ROLES

Prior to August 2019, being a veterinarian was the core of my identity, both inside and outside the clinic. That August, everything changed with the birth of my first

son. One day I was miserably pregnant and working as an associate veterinarian seeing patients throughout the day. The next, I had given birth and was a mother. For the next 12 weeks, I was fortunate to be at home with my son, learning how to be a mom.

In November I felt ready to return to work, but finding the balance between my long-held identity as a veterinarian and my new identity as a mother was more challenging than I anticipated. When I was at work or tired after a long shift, I felt guilty for not being with my son or not having the energy to give him my undivided attention. When I would rush at the end of the day to leave work on time, I felt that I wasn't doing the best I could for my patients. Thankfully, after a few weeks and some schedule adjustments, this became more manageable.

My story is not uncommon. In the NAVC's Amplifying the Voice of the Veterinary Community survey, 62% of veterinary professionals (both veterinarians and veterinary nurses) said balancing work and family life was a frequent cause of stress.¹ In another survey, 75% of veterinarians indicated their duties as a parent had interfered with their role as a veterinarian, and 87% stated their duties as a veterinarian had interfered with their role as a parent.² Finding a balance is a daily challenge that all working parents face, though working

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Bee Johnson



veterinary parents may face additional challenges in relation to the physical, emotional, and scheduling demands of our profession.

WORK-LIFE INTEGRATION AS A VETERINARY PARENT

Each individual must find what works best for their own family. For some, this may mean cutting hours to part-time status or becoming a stay-at-home parent. This decision is difficult and can be affected by many factors, including cost and availability of childcare, earning potential in the workplace, personal values, and levels of support from a partner, friends, or family.

For those who choose to return to work in some capacity after having children, here are a few tips for successful work-life integration collected from my own experience and that of other veterinary mothers:

- Find your village. Parenting can feel like a very lonely journey at times, and it is essential to have support. This may come from a partner or spouse, family members, close friends, coworkers, or other professionals. Whoever the members of your village are, accept their help when it is offered and do not be afraid to ask for help when you need it.
- Do not feel guilty for outsourcing tasks in your life, especially if they are tasks you don't enjoy. Utilize help such as a cleaning service, grocery delivery, or mail-order meal kits.
- Find a workplace that respects your responsibilities as a parent and can afford you some flexibility in scheduling. However, remember that not all members of the veterinary team are parents, whether by choice or not, and that the scheduling needs of non-parents must also be respected.
- Stay grounded in your personal values. As veterinarians, we are good at triaging and prioritizing critical patients. We can use our values to help us “triage” our schedule and commitments both at work and home.
- Find a childcare option that allows you to have peace of mind that your children are safe when you are not with them. This may be a family member, friend, nanny, or daycare.
- If you are struggling with feelings of anxiety or depression, seek help. These are normal feelings that can occur at any time and may be more likely to occur during pregnancy or in the post-partum period. In a profession where mental health is considered generally poor, it is essential that we find support during these times of extra stress in our home lives.

- Find some time, even a few minutes a day, to do something for yourself. It can be as simple as taking a hot shower or a 15-minute nap. Both parenting and veterinary medicine are caregiving roles. While many of us excel at caring for others, we must also invest in self-care to maintain our identity as an individual.

SUPPORTING PARENTS WORKING IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

Many veterinary professionals delay starting a family because of their career, with females being more likely than males to delay family planning.^{3,4} Research from the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University suggests that many students and residents who are pregnant or considering pregnancy feel undersupported.⁴

Once in the workforce, veterinarians still face many challenges when it comes to starting a family. Economic hurdles surrounding parental leave and cost of childcare are a common problem for many veterinary parents, who often have large amounts of student debt. These problems offer employers the opportunity to set themselves apart by providing benefits such as paid parental leave or support for childcare. Beyond these benefits, workplaces can support their employees through being understanding of family commitments, especially daily pick-up times from daycare or school, and offering flexible scheduling. Many veterinarians stated they would accept less pay in exchange for more flexible work hours.³

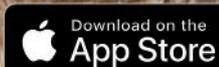
Outside of the clinic, many working veterinary parents find support from others with similar experiences in the profession. DVMoms, a Facebook group with more than 12,000 members consisting of veterinary mothers working in all areas of the profession, is one group that provides support for women in the veterinary profession starting as early as pregnancy. This community is centered on support for fellow veterinary moms, whether through day-to-day parenting challenges, workplace drama and baffling medical cases, or more serious life-changing experiences such as illness or the heartbreaking loss of a child or partner.

THE FUTURE OF PARENTHOOD IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

In a profession that is over 60% female,⁵ issues surrounding working parenthood will only continue to grow. In order to create a sustainable profession,

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veterinary clinics, schools, and other employers must find ways to support working parents. A fantastic example of the growing support for working parents came at the 2020 VMX Conference, where the NAVC provided daily childcare programs, a nursing mother's room, and storage and shipping of milk for nursing mothers, sponsored by Merck Animal Health. Working parents can also help to move the profession forward by continuing to advocate for their needs and sharing their experiences.

Though both parenting and veterinary medicine can be emotionally, mentally, and physically exhausting, they both can be very rewarding as well. With a little help from those around us, it is possible to successfully integrate family life with a career in veterinary medicine. **TVP**

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Kate Boatright

Dr. Boatright is a 2013 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. She currently works as a small animal general practitioner and emergency clinician in western Pennsylvania at NVA Butler Veterinary Associates and Emergency Center. Her clinical interests include feline medicine, surgery, internal medicine, and emergency. As a freelance writer and speaker, Dr. Boatright enjoys educating veterinary students and colleagues about communication, team building, and the unique challenges facing recent graduates. Outside of the clinic, she is active in her state and local VMAs and serves on the VBMA Alumni Committee. In her spare time, she enjoys running and spending time with her husband, son, and three cats.