



# MOTHER/SCHOLAR

## A TOOLKIT

DEVELOPED BY: BUNNY MCFADDEN,  
DOCTORAL CANDIDATE  
DOCBUNNY.COM

# MOTHER/SCHOLAR

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Welcome Letter	<i>pg. 3</i>
Note on Intersectionality	<i>pg. 4</i>
Decision Flowchart	<i>pg. 5</i>
Timeline	<i>pg. 6</i>
Homework	<i>pg. 7</i>
Choosing an Advisor	<i>pg. 8</i>
Finding Equilibrium	<i>pg.9</i>
Self Care	<i>pg. 10</i>
Body Talk	<i>pg. 11</i>
Affirmations	<i>pg. 12</i>
Quick Stats	<i>pg. 13</i>
Case Study 1	<i>pg. 14</i>
Case Study 2	<i>pg. 15</i>
Networking	<i>pg. 16</i>
Common Challenges	<i>pg. 17</i>
Setting Goals	<i>pg. 18</i>
Resources	<i>pg. 19</i>
About the Author	<i>pg. 20</i>

*Let's Go!*

# MOTHER/SCHOLAR

## A TOOLKIT

When I started my doctoral program, I was a foster mom and fulltime high school English teacher. Throughout these three years, I experienced pregnancy, loss, two c-sections, an international move, and a pandemic.

While I was pregnant, I taught full-time during the day and gave evening classes at the same community college that launched my academic career. I'd come home so tired I couldn't stand up in the shower. Then one night a student stayed after class to tell me I'd inspired her to make a degree plan. She said watching me lecture with my big ol' belly inspired her. I want that for everyone.

I'll be realistic in this toolkit, but I also believe in you. Chin up! You've got this.

Bunny

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BUNNY.THE.BOOKWORM  
@GMAIL.COM



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# INTERSECTIONALITY

## A NOTE

Academia is incredibly unforgiving and harsh toward students in marginalized groups. This includes but isn't limited to: women; nonbinary students; Black, Indigenous, and People of Color; impoverished and / or housing insecure students; first generation students; students who don't speak English as their primary language; disabled students; neurodivergent students; students with mental health issues; students with learning challenges; students of faith; LGBTQ students; and undocumented students. You might be in one, two, or eight different marginalized groups.

I wrote this guide toward moms who want to go back to school. Take the advice that works for you and your family; leave the rest behind without guilt.



This toolkit is like a good recipe passed from mother to mother within the small, tight-knit community of mother academics. Use what you want, but feel free to change it to suit your family's tastes and needs. The toolkit includes resources, case studies, worksheets, tips, and warnings.

It's available for free at [docbunny.com](http://docbunny.com) and I invite everyone to download, print, share, email, and use freely. Please don't use pages from the toolkit for profit! I want it to be accessible.

# SHOULD YOU GO BACK TO SCHOOL?



A Helpful Guide from Bunny McFadden, Consultant



\*Don't give up. Your finances and childcare options don't preclude your ability to go to school.

# A TIMELINE

*(no pressure)*

1

## RESEARCH

Before anything, you need to research. This covers everything from finding the right program to looking into financial aid.

2

## APPLICATIONS

You might do an interview, take admissions tests, and seek recommendations from past mentors..

3

## ADMISSION

They say the summer before your program begins is the best time of your life. All the glory of it without the work!

4

## PROGRAM

Every program is different. Some take a few months, some take years. Be gentle on yourself. Nothing wrong with being a Super Senior.

5

## GRADUATION AND BEYOND

Go ahead and imagine yourself on Graduation Day, whatever that looks like for you and your family. Throughout your program, this daydream will keep you going.



# HOMework



## What should I think about?



### End Goal

Decide what your end goal is. Do you want a degree? A title? A certificate? A license? Deciding this before even looking at programs will help you choose the right path.



### Funding

How do you plan to pay for school? Your funding options might include: loans, grants, teaching assistantships, employer funding, asking relatives, or paying incrementally.



### Delivery

Is your program available online? Is it usually in person? The pandemic has highlighted how important virtual delivery can be. Also consider how you learn best.



### Strengths

Make a list of your strengths. How are those going to help you as you navigate schooling? Think about what you bring to the table. It's good prep for an admissions interview, too.



### Challenges

Think about what unique challenges you might face. Remember academia has been historically unfriendly to marginalized groups, so you might be facing layers of challenges.



### Deadlines

Some programs have rolling deadlines, while others use the calendar to determine deadlines. Remember to budget time for admissions tests, letters of rec, & school tours.



### Reputation

Is your school for-profit? Are they certified by a recognized board? Is your program notorious? Do the professors have good reviews?



### Tools

Do you have a relatively quiet workspace? Sharing the kitchen table or the home computer with your children might not be ideal, but with planning all things are possible.

# CHOOSING AN ADVISOR

## A checklist

### FIRST, WHAT'S AN ADVISOR?

An advisor is someone who will help you create your thesis, capstone, viva, or dissertation. Not every program offers an advisor; it's usually for graduate school, so if you're going back to school for a certificate or an undergrad degree, you might not need one.



### WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS?

Your department might pre-select an advisor, or they might limit who you can choose depending on workload and whether the person is a faculty member. Look at your student handbook for details, and email the program director if you can't find the answer.



### WHAT HAVE THEY DONE?

You should be able to find a list of publications, committees, and professional experience on the candidate's bio. Check that their research interests align with yours.



### DO THEY HAVE ENEMIES?

Oooh. This is a tough one. Academia is a bit cutthroat; can you find any evidence of a longstanding feud within the field? You can't just outright ask this. Go with your gut. Enemies don't mean this person is a bad choice, but it might present a challenge in networking.



### WHO HAVE THEY ADVISED?

You might be able to reach out to their former or current students. A single conversation with one is invaluable.



### CAN THEY RELATE?

You don't have to see a mirror image of yourself when you look at your advisor, but you do want someone sympathetic. My advisor is not a queer Chicana mom, but he understood and cared about my family enough to ask after my children every few months. That's how I knew he was a good egg.



### CAN YOU CHANGE ADVISORS?

In rare situations, it is possible to change advisors. I did it, my husband did it, and I know there are plenty of people who want to. It's not desirable and it can set you back, but you do NOT have to suffer. Your advisor should not make you cry more than once or twice.



### ARE THEY CLOSE TO RETIRING?

Be mindful of their own career goals so that you're not left in the dust. A good advisor will give you a heads-up.



# FINDING EQUILIBRIUM

## An Honest Inventory

Scholar

- ✓ Is your program timeline strict?
- ✓ Will you run out of funding after a set amount of time?
- ✓ Will you be pressured to publish frequently?
- ✓ Will you have obligations like mentoring?
- ✓ Do you deal well with your own academic mistakes? Are you going to be ok if you get a B?

Mother

- ✗ Is your partner supportive?
- ✗ Are your kids entering a key period like their senior year or puberty?
- ✗ Are you ok with fast food, late nights, and working on holidays? What are your limits?
- ✗ Do you deal well with mom-guilt?



# SELF CARE BINGO

USE ME  
OFTEN



Get enough  
sleep

Read for  
pleasure



Say no to  
someone

Go outside



Eat something  
yummy

Go on a  
chore strike



Let your  
laptop die

Hug someone



Send a  
Thank You

# BODY TALK

## Little Tips



### Body Changes

Diet Culture hits hard when you feel out of control in other arenas in your life. Academia is also dominated by respectability culture, and bodies are policed as part of that. Be gentle with yourself. Screw the "freshman fifteen" narrative. Your body houses your mind; love on it.



### Self Medicating

You're going to be challenged more than you've ever been before. Be mindful of caffeine, alcohol, smoking, and substances. They can disrupt sleep and make it harder to be present for your family. If you find yourself needing to numb things, consider reaching out for help from your support system.



### Aging

I got my first gray hairs during grad school. You might notice your body aging more rapidly during the high stress situation of being a mom and a student. That's life!



# AFFIRMATIONS

*for hard days*

## Mother

- I stand up for myself, my kids, and my work.
- My family is a blessing.
- One bad day doesn't define me.
- I am enough for them.

## Scholar

- I can do hard things.
- It's ok to ask for help.
- I can make a difference.
- I love this challenge.



# WORKING PARENTS



## Quick Stats



### 4hr, 25min

Women spend 4 hours and 25 minutes per day on unpaid care-oriented work, three times as much as men.\*



### Earnings

There's a significant pay gap even when accounting for parental leave and educational attainment. It's markedly worse for Women of Color.



### Nearly Half

Nearly half of all respondents feel that children suffer when mothers participate in the labor force.\*\*

## Sources

\*International Labour Organization, *A Quantum Leap for Gender Equality: For a Better Future of Work for All* (2019): p. 36.

\*\*McKinsey Global Institute, *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific* (April 2018): p. 15.

\*\*\*Gavin Jackson, "What is the Best Way of Measuring the Gender Pay Gap?," *Financial Times*, January 30, 2018; Rakesh, Kochhar, "How Pew Research Measured the Gender Pay Gap," *Pew Research Center*, December 11, 2013; Tavia Grant, "Who is Minding the Gap?," *The Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2017.



Stay the  
course.

Every new day will present a host of twists and turns (just like in motherhood) but we are all in fact wired to successfully earn these degrees. I have found in the years spent creating and moderating the #DoctoralMomLife Facebook group that each mother/scholar is there for a reason. On the tough/challenging days, remember your, "Why," and "Nothing Great Ever Came From Comfort Zones."

When times get tough, thoughts of my daughter watching my every move gives me the hope and strength to push through. It's the tough times that will reveal our character and when we are challenged that's when we grow. It's not always comfortable—that's for sure; but, I have tried to train my brain to always look for the lesson.

One final thought, Your journey is *your* journey. Much like motherhood, what might work for another might not work for you. So, trust your gut instincts &



**Dr. Tessa Rivera**





Let people  
help you.

I got pregnant during the last year of my masters program and gave birth a week after completing the program. I've only been a pandemic mom, so it's hard to tell what other kind of mom I can be. I pictured myself attending class at a school for the doctoral program, but alas, this hasn't been the case. Focusing on a virtual classroom is challenging because home life is happening all around me.

Soon enough I realized I was going to need help, more than I anticipated. My mother volunteered right from the beginning to take care of her grandchild, so she was an easy recruit. My sister is more of the occasional visitor, that spontaneously saves me going on two consecutive days without showering. My boyfriend, the father of my child, was harder to recruit. I had to be very vocal about needing him to step into a caregiver role and assume a larger responsibility.

Let people help you. Speak up and be clear about what you need. If you're not heard the first time, repeat it until you get what you



**Daniela Vazquez,**  
**AMFT,**  
**Psy.D Student**



# Networking



## Do your research

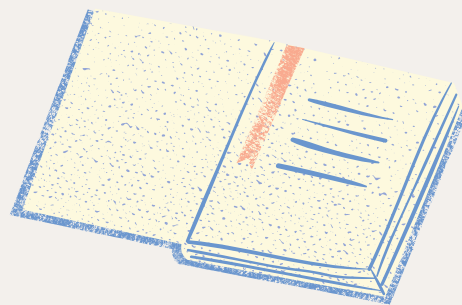
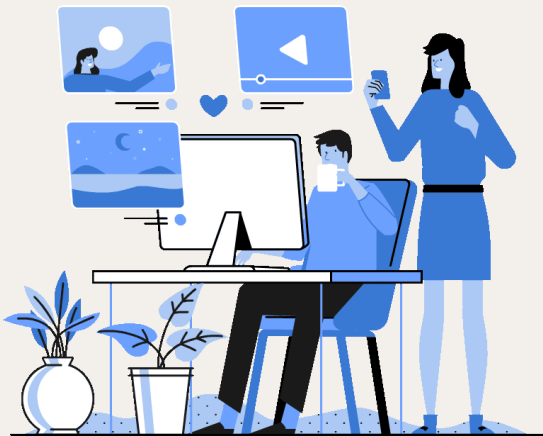
Look up the top researchers in your field. See what they've written and done.

## Keep it casual

You don't need to only chat business! We're more than our careers.

## Lift others up

If you see an opportunity for a friend, introduce them. ESPECIALLY if they're from a marginalized group!



## Use social media

Your industry probably has a hashtag to follow. If not, make one!

## Save for later

Just because someone is working on a project that doesn't relate to you right now doesn't mean there won't be an opportunity to connect later on.

## Follow up

Send thank you notes, follow up emails, or shoutouts after you connect.



# COMMON CHALLENGES

## & Solutions

### Challenges

**Childcare!** Who is going to watch your kids when you have an important class, meeting, or presentation?

**Time!** There's not enough time in the day for everything you want and need to accomplish.

**Imposter Phenomenon!** You're going to feel like you don't belong, whether it's in class or in playgroup.

**Discrimination!** Unfortunately, the world is not built for the people at the bottom. You'll face discrimination at the individual AND institutional level.

**Setbacks!** You'll experience failure and be sent back to the starting line during your journey.



### Solutions

Friends, neighbors, family, and even colleagues can help. Don't underestimate the utility of screens and noise cancelling headphones, as well.

Make a schedule. Get comfortable throwing out things that don't work for your family. Stay up late or get up early. Multitask.

Find a way to relate to the people around you. Find role models who look like you. Be the role model you needed when you were a kid.

Unionize. Call attention to the problem. Publicly name and shame if you feel comfortable. Reach out to others who have experienced the same thing.

Persevere, but also know when a fight is too big. Pick your battles. No, that's too many battles! Go put one back.



# SETTING GOALS

## *A Simple Guide*



One last thought. You've done all this work to decide what you want to do. Now it's time to set some goals. Goals help you quantify the work you've done, but they also help you look to the future. So how do you set goals for yourself?

### CONTEXT

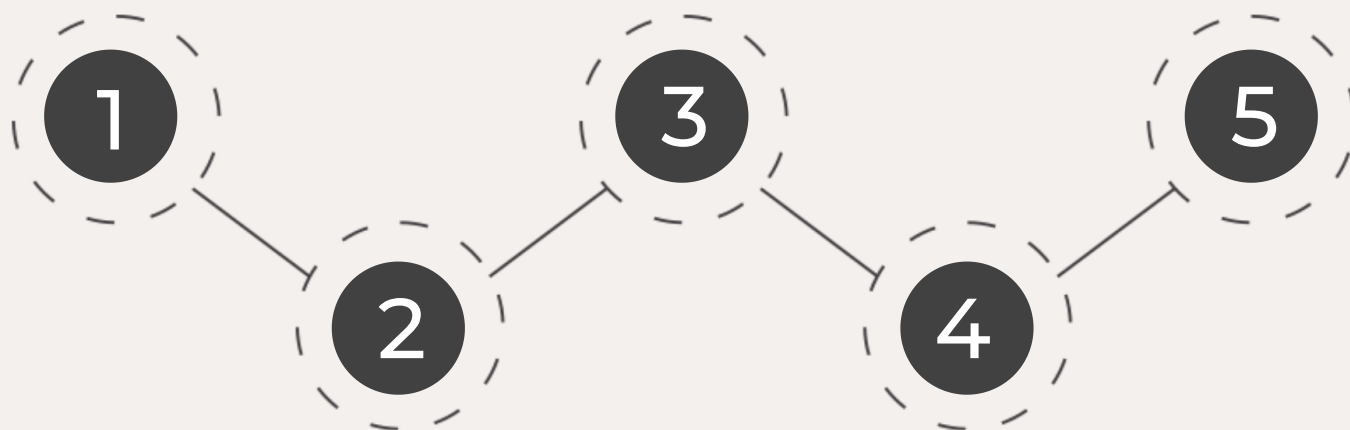
Who is this goal for?  
Who is telling you it's necessary?

### ACCOUNTABILITY

Who can help you meet the goal? Who will determine when you've done it?

### PLAN

What's your list of actions?



### MEASUREMENT

How do you know when you've met the goal? Do you check in weekly? Is it a one-time thing?

### PATH

Are there other ways of meeting the goal? The traditional path isn't always the best way there.

# RESOURCES



## For Moms in School

PRINT

The Chicana Motherwork Anthology  
A Different Road To College: A Guide For  
Transitioning Non-Traditional Students  
The Mental Load : A Feminist Comic  
Surviving Sexism in Academia

PODCASTS

Unlocking Us with Brene Brown  
Code Switch  
Life Kit  
How to Talk to [Mami & Papi] About Anything  
Motherhood Sessions

ORGANIZATIONS

EMERGE: Program for Emerging Women Leaders  
American Association of University Women  
WIASN: Women in Academia Support Network  
#DoctoralMomLife  
Alliance of Women in Academia

SCREENINGS  
FOR FUN

One Day At A Time  
Life of the Party  
Community  
Workin' Moms  
Ali Wong: Baby Cobra

DocBunny.com

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bunny McFadden will be formally robed as a Doctor of Education on May 8, 2021 from the University of South Carolina. She is grateful to her husband, Neil, and their two children, Tabitha and Arthur, for cheering her on... loudly.

 Bunny.the.doc

 Doctor Bunny

 BunnytheDoc