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Questions from a Mom **By Alyce Finwall**

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To be a choreographer takes absolute commitment. To be a parent takes absolute commitment. Can the two live harmoniously?

I have thought a lot about what it takes to be a parent while maintaining my relevance as a choreographer since I became a mother five years ago. I now have two beautiful daughters, and I feel fulfilled in ways I have never thought possible before I had children. But the demands of motherhood have ultimately taken its toll on my life as a choreographer. When I was a single woman living in Minneapolis and then New York and Washington, DC, I thought of nothing more than my next project, what grants to write, and of course, how I was going to pay rent. I had all the time in the world to go to class, see shows, rehearse and stay connected to the dance community. It was my entire life.

When my husband and I moved to San Francisco in 2007 I was 7 months pregnant with my first daughter. I was immediately confronted with this new and wonderful, yet somewhat terrifying world of motherhood. One year later I was pregnant with my second daughter. All of a sudden I had essentially everything I had ever wanted, children and the exciting prospect of developing my choreographic work in the dance-rich city of San Francisco. So why do I find myself so frustrated at times?

I guess it's because the demands of motherhood have taken over my life to such an extent that I no longer feel like I can commit 100% to my craft. I cannot go to every performance, I can rarely take class, and my own rehearsals are few and far between. There are the playdates, school functions, doctors appointments, extracurricular activities, not to mention the endless stream of dishes to wash, clothes to clean, bills to pay, and let us not forget, when you have two young children, there is always a coating of dirt, sand, and/or food particles on just about anything they touch. So for now, I've more or less given up living the life of a compulsive neat freak, as well as the life of a compulsive dancemaker.

But I still wonder, is it possible to have the best of both worlds? Am I doing something wrong here? Perhaps my undying love for my children has overtaken my once undying love for dance, and maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Of course it would be easy to argue that the choices we make in life regarding career and how we manage our time is commensurate to our levels of frustration. But there is one very large hole in this argument, because being an artist is not something one chooses, it is something you are, as anyone who devotes their life to art knows all too well. To live the life of an artist takes many hours of introspection, as well as many hours of hands on work. When you are caring for children,

these sacred times are almost always taken up with their individual needs. So those frustrations I feel are indeed real and are hard to avoid. As greedy as it sounds, it comes down to feeling like in having a bit of everything, I can never have enough of any one thing.

All of this introspection has made me curious to know how other Bay Area choreographer/parents make it work for them. I spoke with Raisa Punkki, Kimiko Guthrie, David Szlasa and Christian K. Burns, all parents and respected artists in our dance community. Here are some of their thoughts on this potent subject:

How do you balance your home life with your professional life?
David Szlasa - (Artist, Producer) I left my full time programming director job at Z Space to freelance shortly after my son was born last year. The net gain was more time making art, lots of time with Max, but precious little time out in the world seeing shows and engaging with this incredible community. Bedtime seems to be winning out over show time. Trying to change this as Max rounds his 1 year birthday.

Kimiko Guthrie - (Co-director of Dandelion Dance Theater, lecturer at CSUEB) I don't, really. Right now home is really most of my focus. But I know one day my professional life will emerge stronger, as my little one goes to school. If I never make another formal dance piece, I'd be okay with it. But if I missed out on the once-in-a-lifetime world of home right now, I'd be deeply sad. So I don't stress too much about making art in the abstract way that I used to, for now.

Raisa Punkki - (Founder, Choreographer, Dancer at punkkiCo) Home life and my family is grounding me. I am pretty good at scheduling and dividing my time between home and professional life. This balancing is requiring a lot of extra work and energy though.

Christian K. Burns - (Director, Choreographer, Performer at burns/work) The balance comes through a lot of communication and negotiation. Being in a family structure is like being in a dance company 24/7. The logistic work is unending and therefore there is no such thing as 'free time'. Time itself has become the paradigm resource and I have learned to become much more efficient and careful how I use it.

Has your work as a choreographer changed since you became a parent?

David Szlasa—I'm coming to terms with the new perspective I'm developing as a maker since becoming a parent—reengaging in

meaning, purpose, and the direction of my work and messaging around it. More than ever I see the need for clarity. I also recognize my own personal timeline in a new way. If I'm going to make something great and meaningful, I need to get to it NOW.

Kimiko Guthrie—Yes; I would say I'm more relaxed in the process, less out to make "the perfect piece" but am more committed to, and comfortable with, the discovery process. But I'll find out more when my baby goes to kindergarten and I can actually rehearse again!

Raisa Punkki—My choreography has changed A LOT since I became a mother. My attitude towards creating dance and being a mover has transferred from "Terminator meets Alien" to more human approach. My focus got more clear. My senses are much more sharpened and alert.

Christian K. Burns—Since becoming a parent I feel so much more of a range of human experience than I ever even dreamed of. I experience love in a way that is utterly unique to experience as a dad. And surrendering to not being the center of my own universe. Therefore, my choreographic work has artistically exponentially deepened, become more refined, and focused. It takes about three decades to start getting good (not successful) at dance making in my estimation, and the long haul is what I am focused on.

It has helped me to talk with other parents in our dance community who, like me, are feeling the same overwhelming emotions, struggles and joys of being a choreographer and parent. What I have felt naturally, and what has been communicated to me in this discourse, is that of course it is possible to have the best of both worlds. It can be possible to be an engaged and loving parent as well as a choreographer who is serious about their artistic and professional growth; but it comes with a bit of sacrifice. Our first priority is to our children, and it's important to savor every minute of time with them, as it goes by so fast. But, with determination, our artistic aspirations can and should continue. Because in the long run we all want to be role models to our children, and that means not setting aside the aspirations we have made for ourselves, rather, to make it work so they can see us as a parent first, but also as real people who are following their real dreams. Our children will only be stronger and wiser when they see that their parents are fearlessly pursuing their artistic goals.

As Christian says, it takes about three decades to become good at this thing we do, and it doesn't seem as if any of us are ready to slow down one bit. We are just getting started, and being a parent makes it so much more important to keep going and to keep creating, for ourselves and for our kids. So for now I will try to take it in stride, continue the juggling act, and enjoy the craziness and rewards of being a mother while trying to continue my artistic work. But do contact me if you babysit, I could use a day off.....at least to get the dishes washed!

Alyce is the director and choreographer for Alyce Finwall Dance Theater (www.afdancetheater.org). She has an MFA in choreography from Mills College and occasionally teaches and choreographs for college and pre-professional programs when not mothering full-time with her two young daughters, Solveig and Zia.