

# ***WISEST Words***

**Women in Scholarship, Engineering, Science & Technology**

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WISEST often speaks of the need to retain women in science and engineering, as well as attracting them to these fields of study. A factor that women may consider in determining whether to pursue their studies to a graduate or post-doctoral level is how they will balance a family life with their academic and research responsibilities. These are difficult, and very personal, questions and choices. Suzanne Kresta and her partner, Jim, have been successful in the work they have done as parents and partners. Here they share their experiences with WISEST readers.



## Parenting as a Team Sport

My husband and I are both PhD Chemical Engineers: he works in R&D for Syncrude, regularly commuting to Fort McMurray and to conferences; I work as a professor at the University of Alberta with the rich variety of responsibilities that carries. We try to keep travel down to one week a month. We have two girls, aged 9 and 6 now, a (part-time) nanny, a cleaning lady, a dog, two gerbils, and two fish tanks. Jim coaches soccer for both girls, and I have guided them both through their first quilts. They are happy, thriving, responsible kids who have brought us tremendous joy, and have taught us many of life's most important lessons. At the same time, it is a bit daunting to carry the full responsibility for two professional jobs and two children in one household. There are no magic answers, and to a very great degree, every family must find their own path. The only general truth seems to be that happy fulfilled caregivers make for happy and healthy kids. WISEST has asked me to briefly share with you some of the things that have worked for us as a family, so I speak from the perspective of two

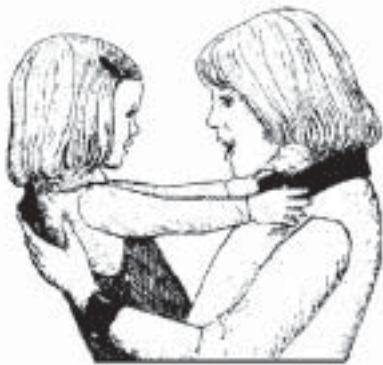
demanding jobs with leadership responsibilities, plus kids: time is in very short supply for us, while money is available. Our solutions reflect this set of constraints.

The most critical thing in our lives is the safety net we have built for our children. Jim and I shared 50/50 in the very early infant care, and it was one of the happiest times in our marriage. I would encourage every new father to take time off to be with their family every time a new child arrives, even if only for a week after the baby is born. We have used day homes, day care, grandparent care, 13 year old mother's helpers, and live out nannies - often in combinations. Each and every one of these adults has brought additional richness and their own unique gifts to our children's lives. My girls are very, very fortunate to have so many people in this world who love them, and who they can learn from. I hope that this doesn't even need to be said anymore, but working as a professional can work hand in hand with being a good (maybe even an excellent) parent.



The best solution for me, and for my mother, has been nannies. Nannies look after Mom and Dad as well as the kids. They are running on a slower clock than we do, they always have time to stop and chat at the end of the day, they do the laundry and iron our shirts. They make cookies. They are there for the children, they spend time at the school, they go on field trips, and they do a million other things that I don't even know about because

they are so effective. We pay them significantly more than the market rate, we spend time teaching them as we talk, we look out for their best interests, and we go to their concerts and plays. None of these things are in their job description, which says first, keep the children safe and happy, then tend to the household and the community. If you plan to have children and you can manage it at all, I strongly encourage you to get help from the beginning. If you are really passionate about your work, get someone who will come in two days a week to clean and do laundry so that you can spend more time with your baby, and one or two days a week at work. Just feeding an infant takes 6 hours/day, 7 days a week! There may be times when you feel that day care is a better solution for your children: seriously consider hiring someone two days a week to do cleaning and laundry and/or cooking. Your talents and energy will be best reserved for your children, your partner, your own health and well being, and your work. I don't know what order those priorities belong in - it seems to depend on the day. Do remember that you will be competing with many people who have elected to completely delegate their lives outside of work to a partner, people who do not have the responsibility of childbearing and the disruptions which come with it. Give yourself as much support as you can possibly get, and then enjoy the choices which you have made.



Perhaps I can close with some of the phrases that have been our best tools:

Who is the adult in charge? (The transition from Mom/Dad to nanny/grandma and back is sometimes slower for the children than it is for us - and it is critical to support your caregiver's authority.)

Have we closed the loop? (Does everyone know who is picking up the kids? Two pick-ups is close to as bad as none.)

If it's bugging you then do something about it. (Jim sweeps floors, I wipe counters.)

I gave up suffering for Lent. (There's no virtue in being miserable.)

A crystal ball doesn't come with the job. (Sometimes, there is no way to know what the right answer is.)

The best you can do is to pick your problems. No problems is not part of the deal.

I'm listening.

Thank you.

I need a time-out tonight (and a million other requests).

What can we do to support you?

Catch your children (and your partner!) in the act of doing something good.

Tell your children what you DO want them to do. (Daycare workers call this redirecting. It works on adults too.)

Make bedtime a special one-on-one time. Read to your kids.

Eat dinner together.

I love you! Have a great day!

Good luck fighting the dragons, Mom!

Welcome home.

This all sounds very simple as I read it over, but it seemed so very difficult at the time. It is all a very grand adventure, perhaps life's greatest and most terrifying adventure, but it is marvelous, and above all manageable - as long as you are willing to let the S on your superhero cape stand for Supported as well as Super. My eldest points out that I need an S for Suzanne too - but that is another story!

by Suzanne Kresta, Professor, PhD, P.Eng.