

Hi! I am Melissa Ko, a neuro-ophthalmologist, currently in an clinical-educator academic position at the SUNY Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. I am also the chair of the Young Neuro ophthalmologist Committee within NANOS and happy to answer questions or help in any way I can during your early years as an attending. In addition to working full-time, I am also a mom of three little kids under the age of 4, and wanted to talk a bit about my experience with work-life balance as a woman in the early years of her neuro-ophthalmic career. I have divided my comments into the top 4 components that I have found helpful in achieving my goals

Number 1: Support: Having a supportive spouse or partner is critical! My husband has been a tremendous part of why I am able to keep moving forward with my professional and personal goals. We both made choices early on in our careers before children came along that our family and marriage was the highest and greatest priority. He is truly a hands-on Dad and has made certain choices in his career as an academic physician, to work his schedule such that it gives him maximal time to be with family. For example, we have both chosen to limit travel and judiciously choose which conferences to attend during these years with very young children. At times that has meant only attending 1-2 conference/year and/or significantly limiting the number of days we are out of town and away from family. We also have extended family within driving distance, who come to help out once a month. Trust me when I say that if you are still in the job search process, being near family members who desire to support you during the years of raising a young family is an important consideration.

Number 2 Outsource: Having a busy life and busy household with only so many hours in one day has led us to outsource necessary household tasks to others, so that when we are together, we aren't stressed out. As our family has grown, that has meant hiring someone to clean our home, initially it was once every other week, now with a household of 5 people, we have budgeted for this to be weekly. I have also realized that beyond having a clean toilet, there are so many time-consuming, but necessary organizational tasks in our home. After a long day, we want to be with our kids and each other, not folding laundry. Before outsourcing for help, We literally lived out of piles of clean clothes dumped into laundry baskets. Same went with the dishes piling in the sink. I finally drew up a list of all such tasks that never got done that was making the household life crazy. Put out an ad and hired a wonderful, trustworthy, highly organized person to come to our house several times/week to help us with all of these things. Think "Alice the housekeeper" from the brady brunch. This woman has maintained my sanity.

Number 3 Childcare: We live in a city where we do not have immediate family nearby to help with childcare. For our family, it has meant utilizing great daycare options, babysitters and pre-schools near our home and offices. I have hired the teachers from our pre-school and daycare to help us during after school, evening and weekend hours. It simplifies things because they have already been background checked and fingerprinted by our licensed daycare and schools, saving us an extra step in the vetting process. For others, finding the right nanny or au pair has helped them. Whatever you choose, soul searching as to what setting ensures that you feel your kids are safe, healthy, and care for is all that matters.

Number 4: communication with your chair/boss/director: I feel lucky that I have had a supportive chair through these early years of going from zero to 3 kids. He has supported me while out on maternity leave and worked with me to help me achieve my professional goals. Actively keeping my chair in the loop and updating him on my situation and negotiating with him ways that I can support the department and vice versa has been critical to finding professional satisfaction. If you are still in the job search stage, there are ways to check out how a prospective office/department works. Its helpful to speak with other attendings who are in a similar station in life to gage and get a pulse on how your department or practice works. If may feel awkward to ask, but its better to learn if the environment is right for you early on. Other things you can do: check out the institution benefits office as well as the specific by-laws for your department can outline out family leave policies and other benefits. For those of you in academic environments, become acquainted with your institution promotion and tenure committee requirements. Its helpful to know what is expected of you early on for promotion so that you can plan ahead. The AAMC also has annual early and mid career conferences specifically for women in academic medicine, to help you achieve your professional goals and improve your negotiation, leadership and communication skills.

Listen, Good luck to you! Feel free to email me with questions and check out our Young Neuro-ophthalmologist as well as women in neuro ophthalmology specific programs during the NANOS Annual meeting. We are all here to help. Now 5 years into my career, with 3 little kids, I can attest that with the right support, having a great professional life and healthy family can be achieved!