

An Ode to the Audiologist Returning from Parental Leave

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Carolyn Falls, MSc



The day is March 7th, 2022. It is my first day back to work in nearly 10 months, and I can barely remember what an audiologist is.

6:09am

I chug coffee like my life depends on it while my baby drinks her bottle serenely and my oldest daughter tells me every dream she had in microscopic detail while absentmindedly pulling at random sections of my hair. It is the beautiful calm before the storm.

6:13am

I've finished my coffee. My baby is pinching my neck in a way that is somehow giving me 10/10 pain. She's holding a Cheerio in her other hand. We ran out of Cheerios over a week ago.

6:15am

My baby is sitting on my lap. Meanwhile, my older daughter is attempting a standing-balance on

my lap, while singing her original song, “I’m Going to Be a Cat”. It’s the type of multitasking toddlers aren’t very good at. The baby is screaming at this invasion of space. The toddler is angry that my attention is focused on preventing head injuries. No one is happy.

6:40am

I catch my reflection in the mirror as I race to stop my toddler from prying the slightly-creepy doll they both fight over out of my baby’s hands. I had hoped to be one of those moms that returns from maternity leave with a fresh new look, but instead I have bags under my eyes, my finger is too bloated to wear my wedding ring, and I’m pretty sure my shirt is on backwards.

7:15am

I’m exhausted from wrestling my children into outfits and reading 17 Peppa Pig books. It is finally time for me to get ready. I brush my teeth with one foot on the toilet lid so my baby can’t treat the toilet bowl like a wading pool. The carrot passage starts running in the back of my mind despite my attempts to suppress it. “A carrot is a long reddish vegetable which has several thin leaves on a long stem...”

7:20am

That’s about all the time I have. Time to head for the bus.

7:55am

I work with the best group of audiologists on earth, and it is wonderful to see them again. I struggle to string sentences together that might convince them that I can still relate well with adults. Everyone at work is overcome with joy to have me back. I think the most common phrase is, “has it already been 10 months?”

8:00am

I call my first patient of the day. Last week at this time, I was cuddling my sweet cooing baby.

8:01am

No. Wait. What is this? A NEW audiometer? AND a new tympanometer? Oh, this will not stand. My brain, completely ravaged from almost a year of diaper changes and Paw Patrol won’t even be able to rely on muscle memory to get through this day? This is a disaster. I dust off the proverbial cobwebs in my brain and get down to business. I can do this.

8:03am

The patient is looking at me weirdly. Can they tell that I don’t know where any of the buttons are? Can they see the tiny beads of sweat collecting at my brow? I need coffee.

8:05am

Is the first word “GREYHOUND” or HOT DOG”? If you don’t get the first word right, the rest of the sequence falls apart. That’s just science. I panic. The words that were once automatic aren’t

coming to the surface. “PLAYGROUND” I say, a bit too frantically. “HOTHOUSE”, I shout and then regret, knowing it can’t be a real word.

I shuffle through a drawer until I find a yellowed piece of paper with the word list printed on it. I hunch my body over the paper to conceal it, horrified by the idea of someone knowing I don’t have the word list memorized. I look up. The new audiometer has the words list listed right on it and you can get an important-sounding man to say all of the words for you without having to use a CD player manufactured in 1992. We are living in the future.

8:30am

I made it through the audiogram but I have way bigger issues. Time for the vestibular assessment. Have you ever tried to say “Vestibular Evoked Myogenic Potentials” after not saying it for 10 months? It’s a mouthful. I try to sound as official as possible and I think the patient buys it.

11:07am

I check my text messages during a break and there is an update from my husband.

It says, *“One of our electric toothbrushes has gone rogue and is turning on and off on its own. Help.”*

“... Oh, and the kids are fine”.

11:30am

As I call my next patient, I realize that no one has asked if I can see through to the other side during otoscopy yet.

11:32am

My patient asks if I can see through to the other side during otoscopy.

12:00pm

Lunch time! First, I should take a look at my emails. I put careful instructions on my out-of-office, how many emails could there really be?

12:02pm

Tomorrow. I will take a closer look at these many thousands of emails tomorrow.

12:05pm

For the first time in almost a year, I sit down and eat lunch completely alone. It is blissful.

12:20pm

Yup. I already miss my kids. And my husband. Being a parent is crazy, y’all. How can you both miss your children so much that it hurts and also rejoice in having a break from them?

Thinking that my older daughter must be facing similar turmoil from my absence, I do a Facetime call with her:

Me: “Lily! How’s my baby??”

Lily: [in the distance] “MOM! I’m very busy PLAYING”.

12:45pm

When I found out I was pregnant for the first time, I was worried I’d lose my professional motivation after having kids.

In my experience, this has not been the case at all. If anything, I find myself desperate to make my time away from them worth something. Being a parent also requires you to be organized and plan ahead to a much greater extent than I ever had to pre-children. These skills have come in very handy in my life as a working parent.

So, basically, having kids has made me a better human. And, sometimes, so sleep-deprived that I straight up walk into walls. It’s a balance.

1:00pm

The afternoon whizzes by in a blur of questions and catch-ups and paperwork. The earth made almost an entire trip around the sun while I was gone. My body housed, birthed, and cared for a tiny human around the clock, and the department I’ve spent my entire career with ticked on without missing a beat. An arrival here, a departure there. Celebrations. Birthdays. COVID waves. It already feels like I never left.

My brain feels like it’s been turned back on in a way, as I start to think about things that have been dormant for a long time. I huddle up to conversations around me about interesting cases like a warm blanket. Emma, who runs the clinics with me, starts to bring me up to speed on all of what I’ve missed. There is so much to do. It is time to dig back in.

4:40pm

Tiny squeals erupt as I announce my arrival home. Lily runs to greet me while her baby sister is all smiles, bouncing and reaching for me from her dad’s arms. The hugs are like magic. Being away is so hard, and I am full-body exhausted, but in this moment it feels like the kids (and parents) are alright.