Schedule priorities first

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When I think about work-life balance, my initial impulse is to say that I don't feel very balanced. You see, my wife and I had our second child in January and he came a few weeks early.

As is true for many major life events, this one has completely tipped our scales. Several grants and papers from my lab were in the works; some remain so. New trainees had just joined my lab, and we were planning for our part in the **largest autism study in history**.

I've often heard it said that one plus one does not equal two when it comes to children. I'm not sure I completely agree — luckily, we have a good sleeper — but adjusting to a home life with four people has been an adventure.

The biggest challenge is juggling competing interests in a limited time. Usually our to-do list is long at home and at work. My wife works as a development officer in higher education. For me, there is always the next experiment, the next question or, these days, the next grant. The only partial solution I have found is to schedule priorities, rather than prioritize my schedule. That is, I slot in what is most important to me first, and then work to fit in the rest.

Interstate bingo:

For example, we get perhaps two short stretches of time with our children each weekday: one-and-a-half to two hours in morning and a similar period in the evening. For a big chunk of that time, we may be stuck in the car. I could spend this time thinking about the next experiment, but instead my wife and I try to make the best of this time as a family.

With our 4-year-old, we talk about our day or play interstate bingo — in which we look for yellow taxis, trains, mile markers or even a pig — or the 'story game.' The latter involves each of us taking turns telling parts of a story, most of which involve baseball. The baby usually sleeps.

At home at the end of the day, we have dinner, play with games or toys, maybe watch an inning or two of baseball, and put the children to bed. Then I usually try to get a few hours of work done on the computer: data analysis, manuscript review or writing something such as this essay. By 10 p.m., I admit, I am often exhausted and no longer productive.

Game on:

As our children grow, our commitments are also expanding. When our local Little League was desperate for T-ball coaches, my wife innocently asked about the time commitment. (T-ball is a beginner baseball program played with a softer ball that is hit off a stationary tee.) Before I knew it, I had been assigned head coach of the Gutterman's Supply, a team of 4- to 7-year-olds that included my son (who was only 3.75).

With my wife's solemn pledge to handle all parent communications for the team, I was able to meet this commitment. I coached 15 games and had a great time working with the boys. The baby was the team's biggest fan and cheerleader. On game days, I had to schedule around this priority. I had to get to the lab earlier so I could leave earlier — or otherwise alter my day to make up the time. I'm proud to say that *every* Gutterman's kid could hit a live pitch (without the tee) by the end of the season.

I also believe it is important to find time for a non-science activity that provides interaction with people in other careers. Twice a week for the past six years, I have spent a few hours playing the Irish national **sport Gaelic football**. It is an ancient sport that combines skills people now use in soccer, basketball and rugby. Playing Gaelic football has been great *craic* (the Irish term for 'fun'). And if I rush home after the game, I can usually make it back before it is time to put the children to bed.