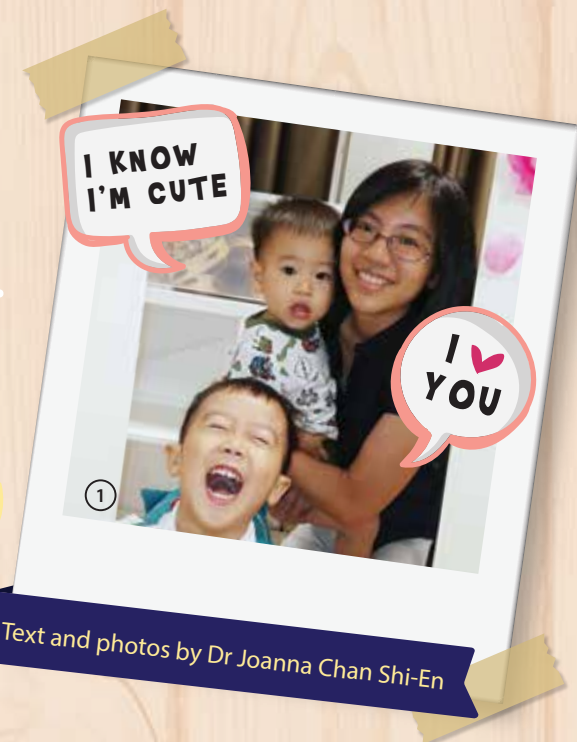


The "Permanent" Resident



Text and photos by Dr Joanna Chan Shi-En

I became a mother of two sons during my senior residency. To figure things out, I took ten months of maternity and no-pay leave after each child was born, hence doubling my senior residency duration from two to four years, and I completed the components of my exit examination over three years with three different batches of my peers. During this time, I was jokingly referred to as the "permanent" resident within my programme!

A year after my first return from no-pay leave, my firstborn entered the toddler phase of pushing boundaries and I felt that I needed to spend more time at home to fill up his emotional tank and train good habits. Thankfully, my programme director was understanding and allowed me to

take the unprecedented step of going part-time as a resident until my second son was born. This permission to take a slower route and prioritise family during pivotal seasons allowed me to continue with the training programme and sow seeds into my son's life which are bearing fruit till this day. I will always be grateful to my programme director and head of department for their support.

Life as a mother working in the emergency department (ED) poses the challenge of having to accommodate the regularity of a child's routine while managing the antisocial hours and insomnia of a shift worker. Having the children settled in a reliable childcare during office hours is a blessing, but when I work the evening shifts, my contact with them is limited to breakfast and washing up in the morning. My children have to be pre-empted that on some days, Mama goes to work after they sleep and won't be around when they wake up. Many "ED Mamas", me included, eventually feel a strong pull to go part-time to make up for regularly missing dinners and bedtimes.

Family is a blessing and always worth prioritising. When I put my kids to bed, I look up at the glow-in-the-dark stars pasted on the ceiling and feel thankful to be given the gift of wonder and beauty as I experience the world through my sons' eyes each day.

In a profession like ours in which sorrow and death are not far away, it is necessary to have a link back to human experience and contextualise our work to enable us to see its meaning, celebrate life in its sticky-fingered and short-lived messiness, and bring warmth back to our workplace. My family plays this role and keeps me going. While being both a mother and doctor may sound insane to some, I find that each aspect helps to inform the other, to keep me more sane than otherwise! ♦

Legend

1. My two children and me
2. A supportive spouse is essential; my husband has mastered the art of putting two kids to bed on his own, and dodging the Incredible Hulk (a sleep-deprived wife) till she turns human again

Dr Chan is an emergency medicine doctor. She was so traumatised by the first ten minutes of *Avengers: Infinity War* that she lost her appetite for a week. That, and the fact that she also had gastroenteritis from her pre-schooler and her toddler.

