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# Lifelong Learning

## Pursuing further education in midlife and beyond



by Poppy Smith

"Mom, Grace loves the pink backpack you gave her for preschool."

"I'm so glad. Does she still get scared when she goes to her classroom?"

"Not anymore," my daughter said as she chuckled. "She loves preschool, and she's learning to share and play with the others."

I remembered my 3-year-old granddaughter's traumatic introduction to a scary new world. Grace had happily skipped into her classroom but, after a quick look at the other children, refused to go any farther. Grabbing her mom's leg, she whimpered, "No, no." Only patient coaxing — "Look, Grace, you get to color and paint today" — and blatant bribery — "Wouldn't you like some goldfish crackers and juice?" — could entice her to let go of the familiar and venture into the unknown.

"I guess she and I are the same," I responded. "We were both scared of going to school, and now we love it!"

For a lifelong scaredy-cat, going to seminary in my 50s meant facing my fears — but I wouldn't let them stop me.

Whether 3 or 53, going to school is an adventure that produces fear and excitement, as well as questions. If your New Year's resolution includes investigating further education, it might help to consider five common concerns many of us face in midlife. See if you recognize them.

### 1. It's scary, so why go?

Like Grace, we might initially battle insecurity.

Why leave our comfortable routines for the scary unknown? The answer is simple: Going to school brings new benefits. Still employed? New skills and knowledge increase your value in the workplace. Looking for fresh direction? Signing up for a degree, certificate or courses in your area of interest will prepare you for change in the second half of life.

At 3 years of age, Grace didn't know why she was scared. But I did. Perhaps you also wonder if you'll fit in with the other students. Will you like each other and be comfortable tackling group projects? Will the teacher be demanding and mean, or understanding and kind? Remind yourself that others probably share your apprehension, so walk in with a smile and greet those around you.

### 2. Are you capable?

It's normal to question whether your brain can still zip along at sufficient speed for school. My friend Kelly shattered my long-standing fears with one penetrating question: "How do you know you're not capable if you don't try?" I didn't know. Nor do you — unless you try.

### 3. Can you afford it?

Grace's parents pay her school fees, but as an adult, you'll be responsible. If money is tight, explore community college courses or online classes. Also, check if you're eligible for life-learning credits. Look into financial aid through the school, or ask if your company will cover some costs. Scrutinize your budget, look for places to re-prioritize and squeeze out enough money for at least one class per semester.

### 4. When will you play?

Grace has plenty of time and energy to attend school and play every day. After a certain age, however, you have to evaluate your schedule and stamina. If time is an obstacle, consider how you use your days, evenings and weekends. Could some chores be dropped or shared with a family member? Going to school is time-consuming, so you'll have to rework your schedule to get in time with family and friends.

### 5. Who will support you?

Grace's parents expect her to attend preschool, and they pitch in to make sure she succeeds. Share your desires with family and friends. Tell them why you want to do this and the benefits you anticipate. Also, be willing to discuss the pros and cons involved, and don't be afraid to ask for their support.

As you look forward to the new year, if your mind dances with thoughts of going back to school, remember you won't be doing this alone. Grace relies on her mom to take care of her, and you can rely on your Father to take care of you. Ask Him if your desires and dreams are from Him. If they are, let go of the familiar and get moving!

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