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Alpha mum? More omega

Having five children may not make her a role model for mothers. But it's worth it

Amanda Foreman

Last July, while visiting England with my husband and three children, I had a sobering encounter with a stranger on a train. We started chatting and after a while I explained that I was a historian and had written a book about an 18th-century duchess. "Oh," came the enthusiastic response, "you wrote that biography of Georgiana." There was a pause, and then he added,

"What happened to you?" What happened to me was this: I decided to have lots of children. While no competition to City whizz Helena Morrissey with her soon to be eight children, I will have five by this June. I married in 2000, two years after Georgiana appeared. Before I knew it, I was living in New York. Baby number one came in early 2002. Seventeen months later came baby number two. Baby number three, 20 months after that. The twins, babies numbers four and five, are following 24 months later. In short, I have been pregnant every year since 2001.

I am not one of those who thrive during pregnancy. They have all been quite an ordeal. If I had married in my twenties, rather than my thirties, I would have had a go at the Morrissey record. But I am approaching 39, and I know that I cannot face another pregnancy after this. So, it is a mere five for me instead of the Von Trapp sing-along I once imagined.

As a child I fantasised about having a large family; I was seduced by Enid Blyton's Famous Five, forgetting that the fifth was a dog. But all thoughts of motherhood disappeared by the time I went to university. After spending 12 years in the quiet confines of the library, children seemed rather alarming to me. I became one of those po-faced passengers who sit on the Tube and glare at mothers who can't control their offspring. I disliked going to Italian restaurants for Sunday lunch for the same reason. It never occurred to me that one day it would be my children attracting stares.

But the gawkers can't be blamed. We may not be in Children of Men territory yet, but the current fertility rate of 1.7 will turn Britain into a nation of geriatrics by 2030. Large families, meaning four or more children, account for fewer than 5% of the whole. Eighty-two per cent of British families have only one or two children. The situation, as captured by recent government reports, is that large families tend to be either recent immigrants, poor, known to the police or social services, or some combination of the above.



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Leaving the very poor aside, life for any big family is no bed of roses. The hurdles are myriad; from the tax system which still favours small families, to the housing industry which can't see past three bedrooms, to the car industry which thinks a six-seater is a luxury vehicle. Ken Livingstone clearly feels that large families have no right to drive in London. As far as I can tell, the chief economic advantage is the free baby-sitting once the oldest reaches 14.

In truth, there are considerable risks entailed with large families. A recent study by researchers in Utah discovered that parents of such families tend to die at a younger age than their less fecund counterparts. This week, a team from New York University found a direct link between family size and stomach cancer. If you have more than five siblings you should see a doctor straight away.

Yet, despite knowing all this, I am thrilled to be having twins. It is hard to explain the overwhelming desire for lots of children. It isn't rational. Nor can I point to its source. It certainly doesn't come from a feeling of competence or maternal superiority. Unlike the "alpha mothers" recently profiled, I am no advertisement for the cause. After seven years of working on my new book, I have only reached chapter 30.

My output looks ridiculous compared to that of my male colleagues in the field. I estimate that each child has set me back by about nine months. It is as plain as pike that my writing has slowed to accommodate my family. It isn't simply the number of children: it is also the division of labour. My husband is more than willing to share the burden. However, he is in the office until 10 or 11 most nights. Since I work from home, everything falls to me. It's not sexism, it's life.

I wish I could assert that I have fallen down in productivity only to rise in motherly expertise but that would be telling a whopper. I am no longer the petrified tyro of four years ago who didn't know whether there was an up or down to a baby's dummy. But leaving aside the progress forced by experience, I am still the fumbler of old. The alpha mothers sound wonderful, never missing a trick. They arrive on time for everything. They know exactly what each child should be doing on any given day. They never forget about teeth brushing. As for my own record, so far, nobody has required a long hospital stay.

There is no need to list every one of my maternal failings here. Suffice to say, that my children are always the last to arrive at school. I instantly forget every school notice and reminder. I would rather cut off my little finger than schlep my children around town from one activity to another.

I have also committed some terrible mistakes. The worst was not acting on my gut instincts. I never argued with the doctors who insisted that my little boy was merely a late developer. As a consequence, he spent the first two years of his life almost completely deaf. It was a social worker who suggested we test his hearing. A simple operation put everything right. A few weeks after the surgery he laughed for the first time. He was so amazed by the sound, he pointed to his mouth and laughed again. Hundreds of hours of speech therapy later, he is just beginning to speak like a normal child. When they publish the list of omega mothers, I won't be surprised if my name is among them.

My friends who have large families have advised me that the next three years will be the most difficult. My friend Caroline, a mother of five children under the age of five, has a phone message warning people not to expect a return call any time soon. I am starting to see the fissures opening up in my own life. My saint-like nanny has already given in her notice, with much sorrow and apologies.

Every nanny agency in New York has told me to forget about finding a similar replacement. It is unheard of to have five children in Manhattan. Apparently, no nanny in her right mind will work for us (meaning, no English-speaking, legal nanny), since she can get the same pay for looking after one child on the Upper East Side, with a pool and a gym in the building for good measure. We live downtown, in a crumbling brownstone which has much charm but little practicality.

I am therefore concentrating on the small victories. So far I have managed to figure out the sleeping arrangements: three children in one bedroom, two in the other. But how we will get around town is still a mystery. We don't own a car because there is nowhere to park. Taxis can't take more than four. How does one get a triple pushchair down two flights into the Subway? Where are Dorothy's magic shoes when you need them? When my first child turned one I wrote her a long letter. Partly, I wished to tell her how much I loved her. But mostly I wanted her to have a living record of who she was at that moment: what she had learnt to say and do. What had been the milestones. What made her smile. What interested or annoyed her; and what my hopes were for her future. I have done the same for the subsequent children. Twice a year, on their birthdays and on New Year's Eve, I write them each a letter.

It will mean they will have something tangible to compare against the dreams, myths, and half-understood feelings that make up our childhood memories. It is also my way of thanking them for giving me the greatest adventure and happiness of my life.

See the new *Alpha Mummy* blog at www.timesonline.co.uk/alphamummy

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