

Why big families really are the best

by AMANDA FOREMAN

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Family favourites: Amanda Foreman with her children Helena, Halcyon and Theodore

Historian Amanda Foreman had just published her best-selling biography of the Duchess of Devonshire, when she met her husband. Now the couple have three children with another two on the way. Here she explains why she's convinced that big families are best:

My drawing room contains a beautiful photo of a naked woman posing behind a huge column of books.

Blonde, slim and immaculately groomed, she's looking at the camera with a smile on her face that says: "I've got the world at my feet."

I look at that photo now and I laugh. Was that woman really me? After three children - and with twins arriving in June - there's no way I would dare strike that same pose now. My hair may still be blonde but by the time I've bathed three children and brushed three sets of teeth, personal grooming is really the last thing on my mind.

But there's another much more fundamental difference. Back then with my book top of the bestseller charts, courted by editors and TV companies, I thought I had it all. Certainly, that's what everyone told me. Now I know that it's impossible to have it all. Instead I've got what I really want - a wonderful happy marriage and five children.

At a time when over 80 per cent of British families have no more than two children I've completely bucked the trend. And in doing so I've come to believe that having a big family is so much better. In fact I'm convinced that the bigger the family, the happier it is. So why is it that women today feel so browbeaten into sticking with the 'normal' two when it is not necessarily best for them - and certainly not for society?

Children in large families have so many benefits. They always seem more relaxed around each other, more confident and independent because they do not have such an intense focus from their parents as only children or those with only one sibling.

Those with lots of siblings learn so much from each other - how to share everything from toys to their parents' attention. Through the rough and tumble of family life they learn how to negotiate and compromise. They grow up knowing they are not the centre of the universe - which can only be healthy. In times of trouble, they always have each other to lean on.

Smaller families' parents meanwhile are inclined to be so much more intense, loading their standard two children with all their own dreams and desires - mini me's if you like. Because they've only two chances to 'get it right' they're much more likely to push their children to conform.

There's this unhealthy desperation for their children to succeed. Failure just isn't an option. Their children have to go to the right school, follow the right hobbies to get ahead - I know little girls in my daughter Helena's class who are already studying chess aged four, for heaven's sake. It's all too much.

On the other hand, parents of large families are usually so much more relaxed and less pushy - giving their children space to develop their own interests and talents. Quite simply, when you have a big family, you are less likely to have the time, energy or money to hothouse your children, let alone the inclination.

Instead, children in large families are often to be found racing around the garden to let off steam rather than hunched over a chess set. These children get the priceless gifts - independence and the freedom to discover their own interests at their own pace. Plus a real childhood - not one where they are hothoused to distraction but where they actually get to play.

Nor, crucially, are they burdened with all their parents' hopes and dreams. Their parents are too busy looking at the big picture.

Why big families really are the best | Mail Online

And yet, as a society, Britain is so negative about big families. It's extraordinary how cultural attitudes over the past few decades have influenced something so personal as the number of children we have.

Women have been encouraged to think they should liberate themselves from childcare and return to work as quickly as possible. As a result, having a maximum of two children has become the norm. Beyond that it becomes incredibly tough to juggle work and family. But it's not just this. The hurdles to having a large family in Britain are myriad.

The tax system favours small families. For example, child benefit is on a falling scale depending on how many children you have - unlike in France where couples are rewarded for having children. Modern living is geared around

two children - from the housing industry which churns out three bedders to the car industry which thinks a sixseater car is a luxury model.

Why must we assume that two is the ideal number?

Of course having so many children is exhausting. I sometimes think I will spontaneously combust with fatigue and stress. Not to mention my career which has ended up very much on the back-burner. Some people may wonder why on earth I've made so many personal and financial sacrifices - we won't be going on any beach holidays any time soon. But the fact is that I've never felt happier or more fulfilled.

Not that I ever imagined I would be in this situation when that famous photo of me was taken for the February 1999 edition of Tatler magazine. It caused a huge furore at the time.

Aged 29, my biography of Georgiana, the racy Duchess of Devonshire who stunned 18th century Britain with her wit, beauty and scandalous affairs, had just been published in a blaze of publicity. I won the Whitbread Prize for Best Biography and was courted by editors and TV producers.

I'd spent the previous seven years as a graduate student at Lady Margaret Hall College, Oxford. My thesis was the basis of my book. Working ten hours days, six days a week was solitary, badly paid and extremely unglamorous. So I emerged blinking into the spotlight.

For two entire years my feet didn't touch the ground. There was a TV documentary and a radio play starring Judi Dench. I discovered the joys of Harvey Nichols, of fabulous restaurants and first class travel. And then something totally unexpected happened.

I fell in love. I'd never believed I'd get married. I was so work-focused that friends teased me that I'd remain a lonely blue stocking. And as for having children - well babies simply didn't figure in my solitary, academic life. But then I found myself sitting next to Jonathan at a dinner party.

We stalwartly ignored each other until dessert - a sublime cheesecake. Saucily I offered him some from my plate. The moment his lips touched my fork we both knew it was love. That was September 1998. We married at London's Victoria & Albert Museum in June 2000.

By then I had begun research on a new book: tracing the stories of Britons caught up in the American Civil War. My editor describes it as a cross between *Gone With The Wind* and *War And Peace*. My publishers, Harper and Collins, urged me to finish it - to capitalise on the success of *Georgiana*.

However, I was 33 and Jonathan and I wanted a baby. In fact we knew already that we wanted lots of them. Jonathan is one of four children and I'd spent my childhood fantasising about belonging to a huge, rumbustious family instead of having just one brother. I'd soaked up films such as *The Railway Children* where broods of children roam the countryside having amazing adventures.

I'm very close to my brother Jonathan, two years older than me. Our father, the Hollywood script writer Carl Foreman - the man behind classics such as *High Noon* and *The Guns Of Navarone* - died of cancer when I was 15.

Jonathan and I have always been extremely close - never more so than when Dad died. We leaned on each other and it brought home just how much you need siblings.

And so, aged 33, I visited my doctor. His words sent a chill through me. "You can't wait much longer and be sure of having children." When I explained about my career, he was blunt. "You can still be writing at 80. But you're only fertile for the next ten years."

I was fortunate. I realise many women leave having their first child too late - and then simply don't have the option to have a large family. Naively, however, I still assumed that I could produce both babies and books with equal speed and efficiency.

After all, hadn't society brought me up to believe I could do it all? I vividly remember my reaction in the late 1980s to reading a brave article by a woman explaining that women could either reach the top at work or have children. They couldn't do both.

"Why ever not?" I huffed. Stories abounded of top barristers and bankers who had a baby one afternoon and were back at their desks four days later. Now I shudder at the agony they must have been putting themselves through. But, at the time, I took it all as gospel.

On April 2, 2002 our sunny natured little Helena arrived. The second she was put in my arms, I fell totally in love. Gazing in adoration at this vulnerable little creature, I knew every ounce of my happiness and sense of fulfilment was bound up in her and always would be. I've never felt more ecstatic - nor more vulnerable.

Back home, I struggled to get used to my new life. In the old days I'd started work at 7am and often still been at my desk at 10pm when Jonathan, who works extremely long hours, came home.

Now whole days passed in a blur of nappy changing and feeding. I was exhausted and often frustrated by my incompetence.

But I was happy. I'd told my editors I was taking three months off. I hired a nanny - a wonderful girl, Caroline, who's still with us. And then the day arrived for me to start work.

It took me exactly 20 minutes to realise it was impossible to work full time. I heard Helena cry and instantly I melted. I might have hired a nanny but I hadn't given Helena up for adoption. So I explained to my publisher, HarperCollins, that my book might take a lot longer than expected. They were disappointed but understanding.

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In September 2003 - 17 months after Helena was born - our son Theo arrived. Then, in June 2005, our daughter Halcyon. In June I am expecting twins. We will be a family of seven. And I know then - and only then - our family will be complete.

With every child, finding the time and energy to write has become harder and completing my second book looks ever further away. With so many children there are endless crises and dramas.

I have lists everywhere and a huge chart on the wall recording which child is supposed to be where, when. Jonathan is a very hands on, devoted father but since he has to work extremely long hours in an office and I work from home, inevitably most things fall to me during the week. It's not sexism. It's life.

Most people think we're utterly crazy to have such a huge family. And strangers invariably regard us as freaks. We took the children to a restaurant recently. When the waiter realised we didn't just have three children (taking up every single high chair in the entire restaurant) but I was actually pregnant, he shot me the most pitying glance.

Did I care? Of course not. Strangely, the more children I've had, the more relaxed I've become. I know I probably don't do anything to the level I should but being a good enough mum is absolutely fine.

Meanwhile my next book is still progressing slowly. I have written 250,000 words and hope it will be ready for publication in late 2008.

Until then I will be busy enjoying every moment of my children's lives. Today, as every day, Jonathan and I woke the children at 7am. There were excited squeals as they rushed into our bedroom and we all piled into bed together for a cuddle and a chat. It's become our routine - and the most glorious moment in my day.

It may be chaotic and noisy but I wouldn't swop it for an orderly breakfast with two children for the world.

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