

Don't you have a television?

Strolling down the street during school hours with a baby in a pushchair and seven more children trailing alongside, I hear various comments, ranging from the incredulous, “*Are they **all** yours?*” to the sympathetic, “*Goodness, you've got your hands full, however do you manage?*” to the humorous (well, at least I suspect it's meant to be humorous), “*Haven't you got a television?*”. For the curious amongst you, what follows will hopefully answer some of those questions...

Firstly, yes – they are definitely all ours! I'm always tempted to say in response to this comment, 'No, actually, I found a few of them just back there down the street – would you like to borrow a couple?' but this seems mischievous. I do wonder sometimes what onlookers find so remarkable about our having eight children: we feel quite small fry with friends around who have ten, twelve or even fifteen. In fact, there are plenty of large families out there, it's just that you never see them because they travel around in people-carriers. Personally, as someone who doesn't drive, I wish more of them would use the bus as then we wouldn't feel quite so conspicuous.

Secondly, how do we manage? Well, how honest do I have to be? We manage wonderfully! We are a model family – our children never squabble, never forget to say their bedtime prayers, always eat their greens and are, generally, paragons of virtue. In my dreams. Really, we manage as most parents do: we get some things right and some things wrong, and somehow our kids manage to survive intact and appear pretty normal (well, there is James who thinks he's Bobo the Monkey King, but we all have our foibles.).

I have to make a confession at this point when we're talking about 'managing': we not only have eight children, we also home-educate them all. Before you stop reading on the basis that we must be certifiably insane, let me briefly explain. We got into home-educating for a variety of reasons when our first child reached school age (way back in 1999). Some of the reasons were negative, but more were positive: we liked the freedom it gave to let us go at our own pace, to follow interests we shared, to take a day or two off when we felt like it or work in the holidays if that suited us better. Home-education is alien territory to most parents because schools play such a dominant role in their lives, and it wouldn't be an over-statement to say that it is not just a different way of educating, but a way of life – it's not 'school at home', but a whole different way of learning, and of being a family. Obviously, we felt that it worked for us because we're still doing it, six more sons and one daughter later. I don't have time here to answer all those questions you're dying to ask me, such as: 'Don't you worry about their socialization?'; 'Are you a qualified teacher?'; “Is that legal?”; “Do you have to follow the National Curriculum?” and “Can they still do GCSEs?”. (Well, OK, if you insist: no, no, yes, no, yes, in that order).

So now I've got that dark secret off my chest, you can see that the 'how do you manage' question is more complex than it first appeared. It isn't just a question of having a few extra school shirts to iron (in fact, there are none at all), it's more a question of living, day in and day out, with a small horde of energetic, quarrelsome, curious, occasionally moody and generally exhausting offspring who need to be fed (seemingly constantly), clothed (we could challenge the E.U. odd-socks mountain), and – most daunting of all – *educated*. Unfortunately, I've never been organised enough to manage the kind of 'Little House on the Prairie' one-room schoolhouse approach, but during lesson times you might find: a 16 year old boy ploughing through GCSE textbooks; a 14 year old boy conducting (possibly dangerous) chemical experiments; a 12 year old boy parsing Latin sentences; a ten year old boy designing banana-armour (that's the Monkey King of course); a 7 year old boy memorising catechism questions in preparation for First Holy Communion; a five year old boy reading everything he can get his hands on ; an adorable one year old boy trying to prevent all of the above

going on because no-one is paying him the slightest bit of attention; and, finally, the lone daughter (three years old), just busy being bossy, independent, and refreshingly feminine. If you're thinking it doesn't look much like school, you'd be right – it doesn't, and it isn't meant to, but somehow it works.

I almost forgot the most important part of the answer to this question: we manage all this because, quite simply, we pray together. For us, the Church's traditional wisdom that we should offer our day to God in the morning, ask Him to bless all our meals, commit ourselves to His care as we go to bed, and – essentially – ask Our Lady's help through the Holy Rosary, is really at the heart of everything we do. On a larger scale, one of the blessings of home-education is that it gives us time and space as a family to follow the cycle of the liturgical year together. Involving the children in planning celebrations for all the wonderful feasts sprinkled throughout the year is a great way to teach the Faith, establish deep-rooted family traditions and have some fun (and lots of nice cakes) along the way. Of course we hope and pray that they will carry these traditions – and with them, their Faith – into their own families.

Now what was that last question? Oh, yes, something about watching television. I think we do have one somewhere, but, you know, things are pretty busy around here...

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