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Living Large

Big families are back in style. What's it like to raise one?

By Lisa Bendall

It's a typical Saturday morning in the Paquette household in Lansdowne, Ont. Sixteen-year-old Amanda mixes up waffles in the kitchen. Mom's upstairs helping six-year-old twins Claire and Saige find their clothes.

Teagan, three, pours five pounds of Duplo onto the floor. Dad jogs through the house collecting the garbage. Fourteen-year-old Emma unloads the dishwasher while the middle kids, Maddison, 12, and Jonah, 10, bump elbows setting a very big table for breakfast.

It's not every day you meet a family with seven children (not to mention two or more foster kids at any given time — plus three dogs, two cats and two horses). But for Kerri Paquette, whose doctor once told her she might never have children, every one of her seven babies was a blessing.

Big broods like the Paquettes are becoming a bit more commonplace in Canada than they have been for years. We're not exactly living another baby boom; households with four or more children are still the exception, not the rule. But after a decade of decline and an all-time fertility-rate low in 2000 of 1.49 children, the number of babies born to Canadians has started inching upward.

That's a surprise to many of us, especially when juggling just one or two children can make us feel like we're going off our gourds. So, when we meet a parent with four or more kids, sometimes the first thing that rises to mind unbidden is the burning question: "Why?"

Cultural, social and economic influences (see "Baby Bonus," below) aside, sometimes there are gut reasons why couples expand their clan. Some come from large families themselves and, to them, four or five children feels right. Others were lonely onlies who yearned for a household spilling over with siblings. But many have no reason at all. A Vanier Institute of the Family survey found that as family size increases beyond two kids, parents are more likely to report they didn't plan the births of all their children. Take divorced dad David Turner, who lives near Halifax with his party of five kids. "Quite frankly, we just started having kids and didn't think too much about it."

So what's it like to head up a busy household? Here's a taste of the good, the bad and the ugly.

The Good: Membership has its privileges

Ask Turner about the benefits of a big family, and he'll quip: "How long do you have?" His five well-socialized teenagers are so used to being around people that they're comfortable in a variety of situations. That's a sentiment echoed by many other parents. Ann Douglas of Peterborough, Ont., author of *The Mother of All Parenting Books* and mother of four, says kids with siblings have many golden opportunities to hone their

social skills: Having to relate to three or more siblings, day in, day out, teaches the art of negotiation and apology a lot faster.

Parents also report that they're thrilled by the bonds between their children. Theresa Eeftens, who's raising four boys in Calgary, says having younger brothers has been a positive experience for her two older sons. "They're much more nurturing now than they were before. My oldest, Tyler, is very caring with them and loves to give the baby his bottle. You don't see that often in 12-year-old boys." Many moms and dads in large families are comforted to think that these strong bonds mean their kids will continue to be there for each other when they are grown-ups.

Best of all, children in supersized families have more opportunities to revel in merrymaking. Janet Tremblay is a full-time schoolteacher with four children living outside of Fredericton. She fondly recalls her own childhood with seven older siblings. "There seemed to be so much conversation and fun. I remember a lot of laughter, and a lot of people sitting around our big dining table." She adds, "It's the same memory that I hope my kids will have too as they grow up."

The Bad: Rising to the challenges

Does raising a crowd of kids pose problems? Two words: Laundry day. "It's the sheer volume," moans Tremblay. In Paquette's household, each child gets a designated laundry day, which can eliminate the angst of sorting clothing for seven kids.

Finding family activities everyone enjoys can also be trying when your children range in age. That's something else that Tremblay has discovered, now that she has a teenager and her young twins are only four. "The oldest one doesn't want to go to the pumpkin patch anymore," she says.

Another hitch is finding a suitable family vehicle. Most budget cars seat five. Add in a couple of extra kids and their gear, car seats, a playmate or two and, realistically, a vehicle with eight or more seats is needed. This and other essential extras (food, clothing, diapers) can certainly bleed the household budget. But many of these moms and dads quickly develop financial savvy. They scout out second-hand hockey gear and snowsuit sales, and eschew pricier purchases like prepared foods and designer shirts, opting for bulk buys and store brands. It also helps when the kids aren't quintuplets. "You have to remember that even though my kids are only seven years apart, we only ever had one or two in diapers at a time," says Turner.

Efficiency is another survival skill these parents hone. Multiply activities, events and appointments by six or seven people, and you're swiftly snowed under unless you find a way to cope. "My wipe-away calendar is my best friend," declares Eeftens. "It's colour-coded. It keeps me sane."

Speaking of sanity, do bigger families mean more squabbles? Anyone who has more than one child knows that when it comes to sibling rivalry, it takes two to tangle. In a big family, as Douglas points out, there are that many more relationships playing out. So there are more siblings to turn to — whether for comfort or guidance, or for squabbling — and much less time for sulking in your room alone.

The Ugly: Public opinion

When Eeftens told people she was expecting her fourth boy, several of them blurted: “Oh, you must be so disappointed.” When Douglas announced another birth, she was greeted with: “Was this one a surprise?” And Paquette was once followed out of a department store by a lady who snapped, “Nobody should be having that many children. In this day and age, there’s no excuse.”

“I think we need to have leaflets on large-family etiquette to hand out to strangers,” laughs Douglas. “People want to know about your sex life! ‘Was this an accident, or were you just having a wild time?’”

According to Barbara Mitchell, an associate professor of sociology and anthropology at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, BC, when folks make unwelcome comments, they often don’t intend to be inconsiderate (even if that’s how it seems!). “They’re projecting their own feelings onto the situation and thinking, If I couldn’t handle it, how can someone else?”

Jennifer Tipper, a researcher at the Vanier Institute of the Family, says that some people are simply not comfortable with the diversity in today’s family structures. But perhaps some of those naysayers should realize that a higher fertility rate would do Canada a favour. Right now we lack the numbers of newborns needed to sustain our population. Tipper warns, “We’re headed for huge generational inequities down the road.”

However inadvertent, discrimination does rear its ugly head from time to time. “We’ve gone into restaurants and seen the waitresses fight over who would not serve us,” says Paquette. “They think they’ll have all this food to clean up and the kids will be loud and obnoxious.” At other venues, family admission packages max out at two kids. Eeftens points out that when her toddlers become too old to get into the local skating rink for free, she’ll have to buy not one but two family passes to pay for everybody.

Eeftens and others say they’d welcome planning that takes into account various family sizes. For instance, restaurants designed with tables that are easily pushed together instead of bolted to the floor can make all the difference. One mom even suggests free valet parking or designated parking areas at malls, so parents aren’t forced to ferry four or five small children across a perilous parking lot.

From balancing an overstretched budget to getting busybodies to back off, there’s no question that raising a mob of minors calls for a certain amount of stickhandling. But don’t bother asking these moms and dads if they have any regrets. They’re laughing all the way to the family reunion. As David Turner’s mother told him years ago: “The love you have for your children doesn’t divide as more kids come along. It multiplies.”

Baby Bonus

Will Canadian parents start having bigger broods on average? “I suspect a marginal increase might continue, but I highly doubt we’ll swing back to the numbers of earlier days,” says researcher Jennifer Tipper of the Vanier Institute of the Family. After all, most of the reasons why those baby numbers plunged are still in place. Women are in the workforce in greater numbers, and fewer families live on farms, where, historically, kids have been an economic advantage. Also, we’ve encountered new factors that lower the fertility rate. For instance, an increasing number of women are delaying motherhood, which can narrow the window of opportunity for conceiving.

On the flip side, however, women over 40 can still have a bounty of babies, due to fertility treatments increasing the odds of multiple births. Plus, more mature moms often feel financially secure enough to go for those extra kids, says parenting author Ann Douglas from Peterborough, Ont. She adds, "We now know that dads have a biological clock as well. So maybe once people do decide it's time to have a family, they're really making hay while the sun is shining."

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