



# The fab five

**Lisa Finn Powell**, our new columnist, shares stories of life with the fantastic five

When I tell people I have five children, the responses range from shock, to bafflement to utter disbelief. I derive immense pleasure from that moment when the quizzical look begins to form on their innocent faces. Eyes squint, mouth forms into a thoughtful little circle, head cocks to one side, cogs begin to slowly spin - maths skills at the ready - whilst they try to decide how to pose the question: 'just how many children do you have?'

'Oh, millions, loads, a gaggle at least,' I usually say, 'It's one of my claims to fame.' The lady with a lot of kids. I was something of a celebrity in my ante natal yoga class. All the ladies trying to put their mat next to mine each week, hoping to touch the hem of my overstretched garment and vicariously glean some shred of mother wisdom from me. It was all a bit embarrassing really, when the teacher would do the nightly introductions climaxing with 'we even have a mum here who's having her fifth'. Collective intake of breath, gasps all round as my rotund classmates gawked in my direction.

'No, wait, I am so many other things,' I am silently shouting. I am a writer, a teacher, a singer, a conductor. I can't eat spicy food no matter how many times I try. I love baking brownies and cheesecake and crumb cake and Christmas cookies...and eating them. I like to make 'To Do' lists, endlessly and cross things off. On really hopeless days, I make 'Ta Da' lists of things already done and cross them off anyway: 'Wake Up' tick, 'Count Children' tick, 'Eat Brownies' tick. During my Freshman year of American high school in front of a cast of thousands, Farrah Fawcett feathered hair blowing in the wind, my 1980s 'boob tube' fell down while I was running for my bus. Certainly that makes me interesting.

Besides, is five really all that many children? What about those families on the obscure Sky TV channels with 8 or 10 or 17, and still counting, all dressed in matching clothes, crammed in bunk bedded rooms, drinking from plastic cups with name labels sticky taped to the front. Well, okay, I have been known to label various items, personalised coffee mugs (no, the

children don't drink coffee), names embroidered on bath towels, initials cleverly sewn into the heels of socks to aid the poor person (me) sorting the clean washing. Actually that last one is still at the fantasy stage, but one day when I have the time...

What surprises me is that there are very few ways in which people feel compelled to express that they feel I am bonkers, crazy, one brownie short of a batch. Making a pretty steady appearance - and said as if no one else in the entire living world ever thought of the cliché - is 'you must be a glutton for punishment'. Also, quite popular is the word 'brave', which defies the normal definition, less like Joan of Arc

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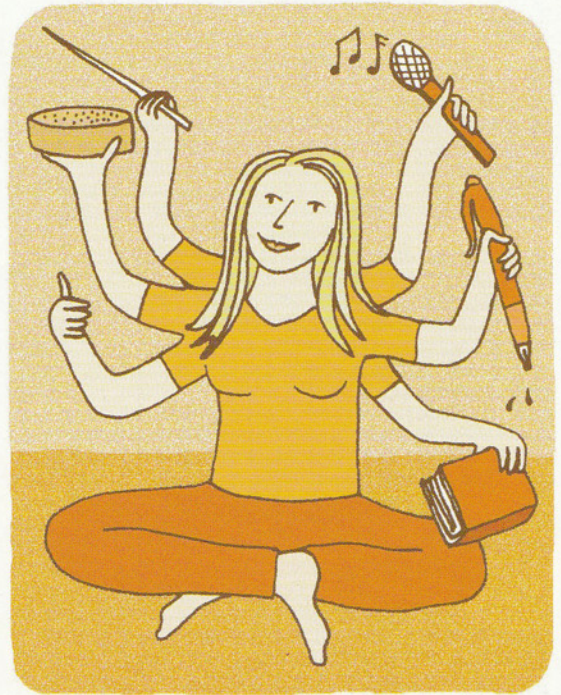
and more like Anne Boleyn (as in 'you got yourself into this mess'). And finally, there is my personal favourite, the silent shudder. Says it all really.

Then there is the frantic jump from them to me and back again with the obvious conclusion that motherhood en masse would certainly put undue stress and strain on their lives, so therefore my time, money, patience, food supply must all be pushed to maximum capacity. What? Well, of course it is!

Folks really get flummoxed when I start using the prefix 'home': Homebirth. Home Educate. Home Made. Silent Shudder upgrades to Audible Exclamation.

The advantages to raising a litter of autonomous, independent, health and environmentally conscious children are vast. For example, they are a great help reading the labels at the supermarket, pointing out E numbers and artificial sweeteners. They calculate food miles and then query loudly, 'Why don't they grow beans in Kent, Mum?'

They never feel the need to apologise for the, ahem, untidy appearance of our home, since it has become an expectation. They belly laugh uncontrollably when I tell them how my apartment at University was spotless with all my favourite yoghurts lined up in a



neat little row in my fridge. And my amazing children can do all of the above fuelled only by love and understanding and an unending supply of houmous.

As for me, nearly two decades of being pregnant and/or breastfeeding, eating crusts, peels and leftover veggie sausages, sleeping with various babies in contorted yoga-like postures and sleeping on the cold, wet, hard ground for nine million camping holidays has done wonders for my body!

To that end, I have acquired the greatest skill of all - the delicate art of multi-tasking, which usually involves doing two important things at once, like right now I am typing AND sleeping at the same time. It has taken years of dedication, practise and broken nights to achieve this goal.

As I was saying, I'd love to go on and on, but I'm late for my massage and then I have to get my nails done. If I don't have my daily long soak in the bath I get a bit grumpy and that book's not gonna read itself. I'm meeting my friends for lunch, then my husband and I are off for the weekend together, all I know is he said bring a passport and a bikini. Then there's that box of chocolate covered something-or-others that need eating... Don't know how I will ever find the time. ■