

And Baby Makes Seven: How big families do it all & have it all

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Milford -

Although today's average U.S. household includes just about two children, national statistics are revealing an ever slight increase towards larger families. *Parents and Kids* found local families boasting three, four, five and even six kids and wondered - how do they do it?

"By never stopping to think about it!" jokes **Shauna Wagner**, of Reading, mother of four ages 2 to 10. Organization plays a vital role and moments can be chaotic but the bottom line is that these parents feel "blessed" to have a houseful of children.

Inside their world: The challenges and the rewards

Yes, it is a ton of work. The sheer volume of laundry and the paperwork from school can be overwhelming.

"Sometimes there is so much coordination work it is over the top," admits **Susan Kern** of Newton, mother of four ages 4 to 10. School, activity and sports schedules can become a mathematical equation.

"We sometimes need to be in three different places at the same time," says **John McAndrews**, a father of five, ages 9 to 16, from Methuen. **Dr. Lisa Thayer** of Harvard Vanguard in Watertown, and a mother of four herself, says that parents of large families need to create a social support network of relatives, friends and community to help off load the demands of time and childcare.

There is also the added financial responsibility. "The kids have to choose their activities carefully," according to **Karin Weinstock**, mother of six, ages 3 to 11.

"If four kids want karate and you can afford only two, then you have to choose which activities are affordable for the family," comments **Wagner**.

Gaps in ages can make planning a family activity a challenge, such as choosing a movie that is appropriate for a 3-year-old and 10-year-old.

“Sometimes it is too noisy,” admits Weinstock. It may be hard for a child to find a quiet space, and for parents to find time alone and couple time, but they do. Mom to six kids ages 6 months to 11 years old, **Katie Brown** of Harvard goes for a run almost every morning. Weinstock eats dinner with her husband later in the evening so they can have some alone time.

These parents also strive to find time to have some one-on-one interaction with each of their children. Wagner worries she might miss something important a child says in the hustle and bustle. Weinstock keeps communication open by being flexible enough to drop something in order to spend time with a child.

Despite the challenges, these parents also say that the benefits to having a large family are as abundant as their actual size. As Boston area child psychologist **Deborah Weinstock-Savoy**, Ph. D. says, There is an “enormous enrichment of the quantity and variety of human relationships.”

“They don’t need a lot of outside entertainment,” says Brown.

“There is always somebody around to play with,” says McAndrew.

“The kids learn to share early, how to voice their opinions, and generally how to interact with people,” adds Weinstock.

Wagner points out that having siblings gives a child more freedom to be themselves. “They do not have someone micromanaging them,” she says, as might be the tendency with an only child. Because there is “less intensity on each child, parents can be more flexible and allow their kids to grow more on their own,” says Kern. In a large family parents aren’t rushing in to rescue or perfect their children’s every move.

And of course, birthdays and holidays are more fun with a crowd, says **Judy Polson** of West Newton, mother of four which will go to six when their twins are born

“There is a lot of love around the house and laughter,” says Weinstock.

HOW DO THEY DO IT?

Clearly, organization is crucial

Brown leaves out each child’s toothbrush at bedtime so she knows who has brushed their teeth. Wagner has her children leave their backpacks in the breezeway for easy early-morning access. And Weinstock often says no to activities which involve too much driving.

“I cannot go all over the place. The kids’ activities need to be close to each other.”

When a family grows in size there are more mouths to feed and please but Kern says she makes meals that include each of her four children’s favorites, such as rice or pasta, but won’t make any special orders. “The kids eat what we eat.” This mom confesses that things run a little more rigidly because her kids know their parents can’t wait on them, but also the children develop self-help skills and a sense of responsibility. “What one person does impacts the other guy,” she says.

Teamwork helps too

With a big family, inculcating a group effort early on and getting children to think about what is good for the whole family is helpful, according to **Jacqueline Lerner Ph. D.**, professor of applied psychology in the School of Education at Boston College.

This includes chores. Polson and her husband have their kids sweep the kitchen floor. Kern has a chart for dinner chores. Kids may not like having chores and added responsibility, says Dr. Weinstock Savoy, but they encourage self-care skills and contribute to a child’s sense of self worth. ‘I am doing something

important to help my family.”

In a large family younger siblings often learn by modeling their older brothers and sisters, according to pediatrician, **Dr. Thayer**. Sometimes siblings consult one another for advice rather than their parents.

Flexibility is key.

“You need to know yourself. You need to be the kind of person who can go with the flow,” says Kern.

“There is not a cookie cutter approach to parenting,” emphasizes Professor Lerner. “Parents need to make constant adjustments because kids have different personalities and needs. What works with one child may not work with another. Parents must also be consistent with their core values.”

Dr. Thayer marvels at how each child comes into the world as a unique individual. “A lot of parenting is learning to respond to each individual child with his/her different temperament and personality,” she notes.

“Each child is so special and so different,” comments Polson. “The positives all outweigh the negatives,” says Brown.

The lesson here for every parent is to not fret the small stuff. As one mom of four replied when somebody asked her how she manages dinnertime, “I go to the store and buy chicken and green beans.” In essence, that’s what we all do.

As Professor Lerner says, the most important thing a parent must do is to nurture positive relationships and provide a loving environment. That’s what makes a family, of any size, happy and successful.

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