

Another Child Matters

Bridging the middle-class baby gap

Colin Brazier

The decision to have more than two children represents a Rubicon many middle class parents cannot cross. With two children, returning to work – albeit with an expensive childcare bill and lost career momentum – remains an option. But three or more is typically beyond the reach of all but wealthier working parents. The result is two-fold. First, a new fashion for ostentatiously large families among the well-heeled.¹ Second, a growing ‘baby-gap’ – between the number of children parents want and the number born – put at about 90,000 a year in Britain.²

Anti-natalism

One influential recent commentary argued that this baby-gap reflected Britain’s culture of ‘anti-natalism’ — an entertaining but imprecise pun. The hardship, even animus, faced by parents worsens with *sibship*; the number of children they have. For the hard-working parents so beloved of politicians



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of all stripes, Britain is increasingly sibship-averse.

Economically, having a bigger family can reward economies of scale. Telephone line rental costs a family-of-five no more than it does a bachelor, who would also be well advised to install a water meter. Internet businesses like Ebay, online shopping and supermarket home deliveries have been a boon for child-rich, cash-and-time-poor consumers. Yet, one in five British parents say they cannot afford another child³ and the housing market, in particular, continues to act as a contraceptive. It forces would-be parents to postpone children⁴ and stymies those who want

more. Residential developers have favoured flats over family homes⁵ so that the cost of an extra bedroom plots an almost exponential curve in some parts of Britain. In the South East, a third bedroom will add a fifth to the purchase price, while a fourth bedroom adds two thirds.⁶

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High culture for all

*Robert Whelan, Michele Ledda,
Matilda Maxwell* *p. 13*

Those who choose to avoid those mark-ups (and stamp duty) by converting a loft or basement, face higher council tax bills. If parents move to a new house in search of space for more children, they are likely to be disappointed. A three-bedroom semi, built in the 1930s, was a third larger than its modern counterpart.⁷

The tax and benefits system, while helping the poorest larger families, has left larger families on average earnings worse off.⁸ The precarious financial position of these parents is exacerbated by relatively high rates of middle-class inflation.⁹ Prohibitively expensive private education is a frequently identified culprit. It is increasingly beyond the means of many high-sibship households.¹⁰ Within the independent sector there is only modest discounting for multiple siblings even where largesse might be reasonably expected. Roman Catholic schools, for instance, offer nominal incentives to fee-paying parents whose large families are proof of their adherence to Vatican dogma on fecundity. For those parents whose several children are in state education, recent changes to the ‘sibling rule’ are potentially sibship-averse. Hitherto, a parent securing a place for one child did so in the expectation that younger siblings would automatically follow. Some partially selective schools have gone back on that principle. It is difficult to imagine a greater disincentive to sibship than a school-run requiring a parent to visit several different schools each day.¹¹

With more children comes a greater likelihood that school holidays fail to dovetail. The Local Government Association calculates that when

schools schedule holidays for different weeks, the cost to parents is up to £500 a year for emergency childcare and play schemes.¹² In addition, the expense of any holiday is likely to be negatively related to sibship. A theme-park ‘family ticket’ invariably admits two adults and two children. A similarly nuclear definition applies to family hotel rooms.

At least one low-cost carrier now charges parents a priority boarding fee so that they and their children might be among the first to board an aircraft; a courtesy once extended for free. Other airlines include a surcharge for parents who want to sit alongside their offspring. Bigger families, *ipso facto*, pay bigger surcharges.¹³

High-sibship parents who drive to their holiday destination sometimes struggle to persuade insurers that vehicles with five or more seats are not plying for hire as minibuses¹⁴. All parents must now provide booster seats to children under the age of 12 or below a specified size; a nuisance for a parent of two, a time consuming and – depending on the size of car – physical impossibility, for a parent of more. The laudable objective of cutting the number of accidental child fatalities puts a particular burden on bigger families. Many local authorities, for example, insist that a parent takes no more than two small children to the municipal swimming pool.

Babies and carbon taxes

The perceived danger to *planetary* health is an evolving source of sibship aversion. In his 2008

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budget statement the Chancellor announced a showroom tax on so-called 'gas-guzzlers'. This broad definition brackets high performance sports cars with unflashy, seven-seat people carriers. These vehicles already pay punitive levels of road tax. At least one London borough is forging ahead with plans for a graduated scale of parking permit charges based on the 'polluter pays' philosophy.¹⁵ The same principle lies behind 'pay-as-you-throw' pilot schemes, designed to encourage more household recycling. It is estimated middle class families will pay an extra £100 a year. Bigger families stand to pay most.¹⁶

In 2007 the Optimum Population Trust urged Britons to have fewer children because each birth cost the environment 750 tonnes of carbon dioxide: 'A climate impact equivalent to 620 return flights between London and New York'.¹⁷ Since senior environmental protection officials acknowledge that green issues 'tend to be a middle class concern'¹⁸ it seems reasonable to assume that *bien pensant* sensibilities render middle class parents more susceptible to neo-Malthusian scaremongers and their invocations to have fewer children.

Professor Barry Walters, an obstetrician at the University of Western Australia, made headlines around the world last year when he urged his government to replace its pro-natalist baby bonus with a carbon tax for parents of more than two children. The levy of A\$5,000 at birth would fund the planting of trees. Sterilised parents would be eligible for tax concessions.¹⁹

This analysis is bogus for two reasons. First, in Britain and Australia, birth rates are significantly below replacement levels. The citizens of both countries are guilt-free proxies for the demographic high achievers of the developing world. Second, it is entirely plausible to argue that, far from being profligate, large families carefully husband resources. A four-person household uses half as much electricity, per capita, as a home for one.²⁰ The number of men under 65 living alone has tripled since 1971.²¹ The environmental gains of declining fertility in the West are being more

than offset by the lifestyle choice of solitary living.²²

No large family lobby in the UK

The share of national resources taken by the average child is a quarter less than an adult, whereas a pensioner consumes a quarter more, mostly through ill-health.²³ However, as one of America's leading parenting commentators, Welsh-born Sylvia Ann Hewlett, says: 'It is no secret that old people's standards of living have improved considerably in the last few years because they are well organised... American parents could do well to arm themselves accordingly.'²⁴

The natalist lobby is increasingly vociferous in the US and parts of it are dedicated to high sibship. Websites like Lotsofkids.com offer rapid rebuttal to media misreporting. Perennial stories offering ever more eye-popping guestimates about the cost of bringing up a child are, in particular, deconstructed. Such stories fail to reflect how, in bigger broods, each birth results in a lower cost-per-child: children wear clothes, play with toys and ride in buggies handed-down by siblings.

In America and continental Europe organisations and offices of state exist to chide the mythmakers and peddle the good news about bigger families. The German minister for families, Ursula von der Leyen, is a vigorous exponent of high sibship and a mother of seven. The French presidency bestows the *Medaille de la Famille Francaise* on thousands of parents each year, with a bronze for four children, up to gold for eight and more.

In both countries demography and pro-natalism remain awkward subjects. Napoleon and Hitler both encouraged population growth for their own expansionist ends. Neither country sends delegates to meetings of the European Large Families Confederation. But nor does Britain, with seemingly less cause. (see table 1). There are, by contrast, an enormous number of child-related NGO's in the UK that, while advancing an agenda of children's rights, do not believe children have a right to a sibling.

Table 1: Organisations representing large families

Austria: Verein KinderReich
Belgium: Gezinsbond + Ligue des Families
Cyprus: Pagypria Organosi Polyteknon
Czech Republic: Zivá Rodina
Estonia: Eesti Lasterikaste Perede Liit
Greece: Hellenic Confederation of Large Families Associations
Hungary: Nagycsaladosok Orszagos Egyesulete
Israel: Association for Rights of Large Families
Italy: Associazione Nazionale Famiglie Numerose
Latvia: Latvijas Daudzbernu Gimenu Biedribu Apvieniba
Lithuania: Paramos Gausiai Seimai Centras Vakaru Lietuvos Regionui
Netherlands: Groot Gezin
Portugal: Associacao Portuguesa de Familias Numerosas
Romania: Association Pro Familia Transilvania
Slovakia: Klub Mnohodetných Rodin
Spain: Federacion Espanola de Familias Numerosas

Source: *The European Large Families Confederation (founded Lisbon 27 March 2004).*

Do singletons struggle?

G. Stanley Hall, founder of the *American Journal of Psychology*, wrote in 1896 that ‘being an only child is a disease in itself’. This crude diagnosis defamed a small minority which, a century on, is poised to become the prevailing family unit in some developed countries.²⁵

Do singletons still feel caricatured by an outdated, irrational prejudice as coddled or selfish? Parents of some only-children certainly consider themselves traduced.²⁶ Theirs is obviously not the puerile or vindictive anti-natalism of the child-free movement whose subscribers feel penalised by a ‘kid-centric’ world.²⁷ Instead, it is a form of familial relativism, proclaiming all family sizes to be of equal worth.²⁸ What then of Stanley Hall’s stereotyping? Do singletons struggle to make friends, show their emotions or behave spontaneously? Is low sibship a disadvantage?

‘Just as a column of liquid must be thin in order to rise under the force of capillary, so must a family be small to rise in the social scale.’

Some academics claim these alleged characteristics are the product, not of missing sibling, but of parenting and the environment in which a child grows up.²⁹ Yet others argue that only-children are ‘less liked’ by their classmates³⁰ and that any dysfunction might not abate with age. Only-children are more likely to change partners through divorce or separation than those with siblings.³¹

Teachers in one American study of 20,000 children³² found that a pupil’s membership of the awkward squad often hinged on sibship. Results, when controlled for economic circumstances, consistently showed that children from larger families got into fewer fights, made friends more quickly and kept more of them. The report’s authors say their data makes ‘a compelling case for the position that children hone social and interpersonal skills through sibling interactions at home, and that these skills then become useful outside the home’. Large age differences between siblings water down the benefits of sibship, but the authors stress this is reduction, not obliteration.

High-sibship children are, on average, better rounded by their— often abrasive — domestic relationships. This is especially true of younger children in large families.³³ They occupy positions of relative powerlessness. To get along they must negotiate and accommodate. Conflict resolution in small families is, by contrast, a parental responsibility. With high sibship that level of intervention is impractical. The sheer *quantity* of conflict makes it so. Typically, toddlers have a spat every ten minutes³⁴ and there are more arguments in larger families.³⁵ Some psychologists argue that it is only by resolving disputes without parental oversight that children learn to manage aggression meaningfully.³⁶ When a five-year-old has a row with his brother, he will have to face him at tea-time, at bed-time; for the rest of his childhood. An only-child on a play-date has fewer incentives to patch-up differences compared to a youngster stuck with a sibling for the next decade or more.

One frequent objection to high sibship is that large families are academically stifling. Successful social climbers, it has been argued, imitate the capillary action of plants: ‘Just as a column of liquid must be thin in order to rise under the force of capillary, so must a family be small to rise in the social scale.’³⁷ This ‘dilution theory’ posits that children with fewer siblings are better educated than those with many because parental resources—chiefly time and money—are diluted by the arrival of an extra child. It can mean that children from big families face a cultural wasteland; not reading enough and too much television.³⁸ Other sociologists favour the ‘confluence theory’. It asserts that a household’s intellectual environment degenerates as a couple have more offspring. More time is spent with ‘pre-verbal’ children and the whole family succumbs to a linguistic lowest common denominator.

But those who advance this analysis admit that middle-class children suffer far less,³⁹ possibly because their aspirational parents increase the time dedicated to parenting by shifting their priorities; spending less time eating out and more time reading bedtime stories.⁴⁰ It is possible, after all, to read to more than one child simultaneously. A motivated parent, like any worker, can improve productivity through economies of scale. Others claim that any dilution is actually reversed in middle-class households.⁴¹ A study of 22,000 French school-leavers found academic performance improved with an additional sibling so long as the parent was ‘an educated professional...engineer, teacher, lawyer... middle manager’. The children were beneficiaries of a ‘trickle-down...family know-how’.⁴² It may be that better-educated parents, many with managerial experience, are able to create an atmosphere conducive to learning, where teaching is delegated to older siblings. One of the authors of a sibship study involving the entire population of Norway concluded: ‘The eldest child acts as a teacher for the younger children and learns how to organise information and present it to others.’⁴³

Counter-intuitively, low sibship can be a recipe for academic underachievement. Several studies show only-children underperforming those with a sibling,

Table 2: What is high sibship?

2 children - the current British birth rate hovers around 1.7
3 children - a large family, as defined by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation
4 children - Churchill’s ideal: one for mother, one for father, one for accidents, one for increase
5 children - In her novel <i>Notting Hill Mummy</i> , Rachel Johnson suggests a <i>famille ultra nombreuse</i> must have at least five
6 children - is recognised as heroic motherhood by Pope Benedict XVI
7 children - actor Mel Gibson manages a Hollywood career and a big brood
8 children - Steven Spielberg goes one better, as does Helena Morrissey, CEO of Newton Fund Management
17 children - Ben Franklin, US President
69 children - the Russian mother identified as the scarcely plausible world record holder for the most children

especially in maths. Even controlling for other factors (singletons are more likely to have divorced or absent parents) ‘a certain level of disadvantage remains’.⁴⁴

The soft skills of high sibship

Conflict resolution, empathy, team-playing, popularity, gratification deferment, time-management, creativity. Many of the soft-skills so sought-after by entrepreneurs are, arguably, by-products of high-sibship. Business has discovered the importance of mentoring employees. Yet the benefit of sibling mentoring seems undervalued. Government agencies now say they recognise the importance of non-cognitive skills and, naturally, the focus has been on ‘excluded’ groups who want for these skills.⁴⁵

Without soft-skills the poor are, increasingly, socially immobile. The link between big families and poverty is clear; the role of high sibship in social competence, far more opaque. Indeed, one authoritative report on the problems facing modern youth blames lack of social cohesion and the pressures faced by single parents without mention of family size.⁴⁶

It is arguable that one of the only things endowing some deprived children from broken homes on sink-estates with any soft skills are the brothers and sisters around them.

If middle-class children are so much better suited to the challenges of the knowledge-based economy, then how can we nonchalantly observe middle-class parents having fewer of them?

The middle classes face few of these disadvantages for which, in some analyses, they are almost made culpable. Certainly, there is no encouragement that they should gift society more of the softly-skilled children they produce and which the economy craves.

It is, of course, right that society should make its first concern help for those deprived of non-cognitive skills by birth and upbringing, but this should not lead us to ignore the elephant in the room. If middle-class children are so much better suited to the challenges of the knowledge-based economy, then how can we nonchalantly observe middle-class parents having fewer of them?⁴⁷ This is not to endorse a form of social eugenics. It is simply to pose an obvious demographic question.

Cars, clothes, holidays, even the style of buggy used by their children: the middle classes rely on trappings to identify one another. In the nineteenth century socially-mobile Victorians devised a system of first-, second- and third-class railway travel. But, like cleanliness, social stratification began at home. Aspirational Victorian parents hastened to give their many children bedrooms of their own.

Snobbery aside, that made medical sense. A century and more ago, communicable diseases were child-killers on a scale unimaginable in modern paediatrics.

While the lethal jeopardy posed by whooping cough and scarlet fever has receded, new atopic threats are emerging. They are predominantly sources of discomfort. But in their most chronic form are deadly. In 2005, 27 children under the age of 14 died of asthma in Britain: a child is said to be admitted to hospital with the condition every 19 minutes.⁴⁸

Repeated research has shown that allergic conditions like asthma, eczema and hay fever are related to sibship. Several have concluded that sharing a bedroom at an early age increases the number of infections caught from brothers or sisters and stimulates the immune system. The more siblings, the greater the resistance. One of the biggest recent studies, involving half a million army conscripts, revealed that one in ten only-children developed asthma. In the largest families the figure was closer to one in 200.⁴⁹ Against this backdrop, putting children into their own rooms looks less like a function or display of aggrandisement and more like immunological folly. Statistical evidence also links big families with a reduced risk of serious diseases including certain types of leukaemia, cancer and diabetes.

Siblings can be the surest confidantes.⁵⁰ The guidance needed by a child fluctuates wildly, and with high sibship there can be a range of advice available. A 13-year-old girl with a first-time crush might ask very different questions of an older brother and sister. Sometimes the problem is more serious than being smitten. The sympathetic ear of a sibling is not governed by the rules of confidentiality which bind counsellors. Sibship can mean a system of trip-wires and alarms capable of monitoring and uncovering risky behaviour. A sibling can be a shoulder-to-cry-on and a whistleblower — simultaneously.

An older sibling might also be a deterrent to bullying, reported instances of which are increasing sharply in Britain.⁵¹ A study of children aged 7-13 found children with siblings claimed ‘that having brothers and sisters meant there was always ‘someone there’ for them, and gave an emotional sense of protection from being alone’. The authors concluded that sibship could be a potentially beneficial ‘resource’ which might be recognised in ‘initiatives to tackle bullying at school and outside the home’.⁵²

Safety in numbers

Outside is increasingly off-limits to many young Britons. A third of eight- to ten-year-olds never

play outside without an adult being present. Play under a parent's watchful eye is only ever 'virtual'⁵³ because grown-ups are more risk-averse than children. Children deprived of the chance to manage risk in play are more likely to go off the rails.⁵⁴ Such 'cotton wool kids' also lack leadership and entrepreneurial skills, to the detriment of the British economy. As Sir Digby Jones, former head of the CBI, said: 'If we never took a risk our children would not learn to walk, ride a bicycle or swim; business would not develop innovative new products, move into new markets and create wealth for all.'

How does family size change any of this? High sibship provides critical mass, safety in numbers and an antidote to ennui. From hide-and-seek to tag, games are easier to sustain with more participants. Older siblings, often grudgingly, act in *loco parentis*. Their supervisory role more accommodating of risk than if performed by adults. A larger family is more likely to provide a gender mix which encourages play. The odds of a girl finding a sister with whom to visit the playground are shorter in a family of six than in one of three.

There are less conscionable, if no less effective, reasons for a large family's adventurousness. Levels of omniscience decline with rising sibship. Parents with several offspring cannot monitor their children's movements with the rigour practised in a nuclear family. Helicopter parenting, where a parent hovers around a child and scrutinises its every movement, becomes impossible in a multi-child household.⁵⁵ It is probable that parents of larger families also have a well-evolved sense of risk. A father-of-five is exposed to the same media focus on child abduction as a father-of-one, but the experience of bringing up children, without those scare stories translating into reality, is prone to produce a more relaxed parent who does not see paedophiles lurking behind every park bench. With each additional offspring, parents learn to let children out of their sight.

Stranger-danger is not alone in depriving children of unsupervised exercise. Anxiety about traffic has seen the numbers of children walking to school fall

rapidly. Local authorities are encouraging children to form 'walking buses'. Children from large families, when attending the same school, frequently form their vanguard.

'I can almost guess my small patient's place in the family from the number of times they come to see me each year,' says one French paediatrician. 'The more children in a family, the fewer visits to the doctor. The parents have the experience to cope with little routine illnesses.'⁵⁶

Parenting is learned on the job, not from TV

The self-taught wisdom accumulated by dint of high sibship is denied to the growing number of parents who do not have a large family. The mistakes made and lessons learned bringing up a singleton cannot be corrected and refined with a second child who never is. Even parents of two say it is only in families of three or more that practise begins to make perfect.⁵⁷

Some commentators say the efficacy with which experienced mothers and fathers practise parenting is psychological,⁵⁸ but others point to clinical data indicating physical changes wrought by a larger family. In particular, second-time mothers are said to react faster to a crying baby. They also usually produce more milk and lower levels of stress hormones than first-time mothers.⁵⁹

As one- or two-child parents are denied the lessons of repeated child-bearing, so the parenting establishment moves into the breach. The success of TV's *Supernanny* and the rival *House of Tiny Tearaways* reveal a thirst for reassurance among credulous parents who no longer 'learn on the job'. This is a callowness which affects novice parents of all ages equally, if not all socio-economic groups. The middle classes, in the rootless, atomised search for a better life or job, are less likely to have an extended family on tap when the first-child comes. Having left home for university and beyond, few can call upon the experience of their own mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, on a day-to-day basis.

Simply because effective parenting has to be learned does not mean it has to be taught. The parental insecurity tapped into by television production companies and publishers has been seized upon by government. Announcing a £4m scheme allowing child psychologists to advise new parents and intervene when children get into trouble, the then Prime Minister Blair cited ‘the huge popularity of all these television programmes in which experts help parents with their problem kids’. The initiative was, he said, a response to ‘the parents’ cry for help.’⁶⁰ Modest at present, the sums directed towards government intervention in parenting are set to increase. Yet, for less needy groups in particular, the value-for-money of such schemes is highly questionable. One American study found they had virtually no impact on middle-class parents.⁶¹

Nanny state meddling in the lives of children is as old as the nation state itself. Relatively recent examples — mandatory education and the prohibition of child labour — were profoundly unpopular with some parents when introduced. But it is one thing to invite the state into the homes of failing parents, whose children are deemed at-risk by social services, and quite another to encourage all parents to view themselves as in need of official assistance.

We have not reached that stage yet. However, halting the mission creep of parenting professionals requires a recognition that many—particularly larger—families can provide their own bespoke solutions to the challenges of parenthood, through trial and error, which can never be replicated by an official or quango.

Parents of large families quickly learn they cannot run a busy home without help. Not from the state, but from their own offspring. Children in big families are actually needed at home; their active participation in the domestic maelstrom is a necessity not a luxury. Cooking and cleaning, mending and minding are not idle occupations doled out as a diversion as they might be in the relative peace of a singleton’s home. Children from large families are endowed with a skill-set which equips them for life and which the state is now floundering to furnish.

In 2008, for instance, the government announced it was making cookery classes compulsory in secondary schools for the first time. Research had shown that almost half of British schoolchildren had never cooked.⁶² A child of a large family is more likely to have used a saucepan and a washing machine than low-sibship counterparts, and having learned to iron clothes or change a plug is obviously of use once a child leaves home. Universities have noticed the deterioration in the preparedness of students for life away from the family nest and are offering crash courses to help clueless scholars.⁶³ It is a similar story in the armed forces, where children leave home for military service at an even younger age. A child from a larger family is also likely to find sharing a large dormitory with many others—a fact of martial life for many—much less of a trial.

Large families are rarely shielded from the financial realities of life. An emphasis on thrift, the value of food and domestic energy are characteristic of growing up in homes with high sibship. The act of purchasing is less common and more of an occasion when it happens.

The self-sufficiency of large families is also emotional. Research suggests children with siblings cope with divorcing parents in a more positive way than those without.⁶⁴

Whether it is the loss of a parent through relationship break-down or death, bigger families offer a support network of siblings. For middle-class families, often separated from an extended family, the supportive value of brothers and sisters is accentuated. They form a protective shield against family upheaval.

Children who grow up with siblings have fewer divorces as adults.⁶⁵ Some social scientists say that is not only because larger families encourage conflict resolution, but because gender complementarity is hard-wired into larger families with a mix of boys and girls. ‘Would you do that to your own sister?’ means nothing to a young man who does not have one.⁶⁶ A recent Texan study found men introduced to women for the first time were more at ease if they had sisters. Women with brothers found it easier to initiate conversations with men.⁶⁷

The enlargement of childhood into ‘adulthood’ has been a striking sociological phenomenon in Western societies. The new ‘kidult’ delays the rites of passage of adulthood—marriage, home-ownership and child-bearing—then elects to remain instead in a world of teenage music, video games and generationally indeterminate clothing. Surveys show a breath-taking shortage of emotional resilience. One revealed that a quarter of adults under 35 were scared of the dark.⁶⁸ Contemporary explanations for this social transformation include the cost of housing and student debt forcing young people back into the family home and delaying a decisive break with parents. Sibship is not considered.

The very concept of ‘growing up’ is different in larger families. Boys and girls frequently strive to differentiate themselves from younger siblings, embracing the trappings and mannerisms of a more advanced age to make the point. Whether it is the nine-year-old girl who wears make-up to look more mature than her younger sister, or the post-pubescent boy who triumphs in his newly sonorous voice, children from larger families aspire to man- and womanhood.

Large families mean less pressure on children

A recent Unicef study showed that British children were the developed world’s most miserable.⁶⁹ A growing number of children struggle with poor emotional health, a situation which has prompted responsible figures to call for happiness lessons at school.⁷⁰

Affluence certainly does not guarantee relatively wealthy children a sunny disposition: in fact, it may bring on the clouds. Their rates of clinical depression were three times that of poorer contemporaries in one study⁷¹. Indeed, some of the factors which trigger depression might be almost uniquely middle class. The very wealthy do not need children to win their way into good schools. Nor do the truly well-off lust after the social cachet provided by a high-achieving child. The socially secure have less need of status symbols. By contrast, middle-class parents have good reason to be pushy, and the pressure applied can be

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overwhelming for ‘hurried’ or ‘rushed’ children and their ‘hyper-parents’.⁷²

It is one of the reasons middle-class parents are having fewer children. They hope to concentrate their efforts, focusing on quality not quantity. Aspirational parents with one or two children cannot, *ipso facto*, afford to write-off an underperforming child. Those compelled to do so sometimes blame ‘inadequate’ teachers and schools or, if the problem looks irremediable, learning difficulties. A child with Asperger’s syndrome or autism is described as being ‘on the spectrum’. However, the spectrum recognised by the parents of large families is one where genetics or Providence (according to taste) provides limitless variety. When the renowned biographer Lady Longford was asked why she had eight children, her answer was, in part, ‘curiosity’. Her children were strikingly different examples of humanity and she could scarcely wait to see the next.

The parents of large families come to recognise that not all their offspring can, or should be, top of the class. Conversely, they can afford to be more cavalier since they are likely to find at least one naturally-gifted scholar in their brood. As mother-of-four and author of the *Parent Trap* Maureen Freely wrote: ‘You might still be trying to live out your fantasies through them, but that still means fewer fantasies per child.’⁷³

Many well-meaning parents have created a bubble of entitlement around their offspring. The only people capable of puncturing it with ease are other children. An adult stops short when a child yells: ‘you’ve no right to do that!’. Yet misbehaviour, especially in public, will be censured vehemently and rapidly by a sibling. When a miscreant cries out ‘you can’t touch me!’, his father might heed the warning. His brother almost certainly will not. Political correctness dictates that only members of an oppressed group have the right to address each other on equal terms; that only a black male can use ugly racial epithets to another black man.

Similarly, familial relativism means that only a sibling can upbraid a child with a robustness denied to parents.

In a sense children now only have responsibilities to other children. Ergo, higher sibship brings a greater sense of accountability. The bigger the family, the weaker the writ of children's rights runs. In larger families, offspring outnumber parents and it is children who set the collective ethical tone.

Fertility correctness

Familial relativism has parallels with cultural relativism. The drift towards low sibship as an expression of 'fertility-correctness' is perpetuated and augmented by fashion.⁷⁴ The power of the norm is highly seductive for parents who want to experience parenting without enduring a decades-long 'parenting emergency'.⁷⁵ Some developed countries now, arguably, have a one-child policy by example, not compulsion.

There might even be similarities with multiculturalism. True egalitarianism is vexingly difficult to achieve; witness the current woes of the white working class. Equally, the pretence that no family size is more equal than another is precarious. Population politics are a zero-sum game: a dominant one-child philosophy is emerging, to the effective disadvantage of the old favourite. Cheerleaders for the only-child model chide parents about the consequences of a bigger family on existing offspring. The middle-child—that totemic by-product of a larger family—is

Some developed countries now, arguably, have a one-child policy by example, not compulsion.

stigmatised with a conviction once reserved for only-children.⁷⁶

In the US, big families, once the bedrock of a particular kind of American dream, can now face derision.⁷⁷ In Britain, high sibship provides an end-of-the-pier act for the producers of reality television.⁷⁸

Mothers, in particular, are invested with 'Superwoman' powers if they hold down a senior job and have several children. Some parents with big families claim they have grown inured to slurs that they are 'freakish'.⁷⁹ Few television advertisements show a family with more than two children. Many feature just one. Mainstream depictions of a large family almost possess the power to deliver a visceral shock to expectations.⁸⁰

Choice has become increasingly Hobsonian for middle-income earners. The only child—once pitiable—is now fashionable.⁸¹ A growing canon of work exists to justify the decision to restrict family size in the interests of the environment or career. Respectable authors sidestep a substantial body of evidence to argue that only children suffer no material disadvantage by dint of their solitary status.⁸² In place of the large family they cannot have or do not want, parents of singletons incorporate nephews, nieces, Godchildren, and the children of friends into the 'analogue family'⁸³ unit. Those denying that children of low sibship are in any way disadvantaged are the intellectual midwives to a new demographic order: 'A world never before inhabited: a world in which the only biological relatives for many people—perhaps most people—will be ancestors.'⁸⁴

[1] Kirby, J. *The Price of Parenthood*, London, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005, p.15. From 1970 to 2000, among parents in the top groups (higher professional and managerial occupations), the number of births increased by about a third.

[2] Margo, J, Dixon, M., *Population Politics*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research, February 2006, p.63.

[3] Lessware, J., 'Family size declines as cost of children rises', *The Scotsman*, 10 April 2006. Survey of 2,428 adults.

[4] Carvel, J., 'Finance biggest deterrent to having children, report says', *The Guardian*, 4 October 2006. Based on a survey of 795 adults by the Future Foundation, half of all childless adults under the age of 45 were postponing having a family until they could move to a bigger home.

[5] Arbour, T., 'Families lose out with housing policy based on one-bed flats', *Public Servant Daily*, 1 August 2006. *Size Matters*, a study by the London Assembly planning committee, showed that houses with three or

more bedrooms now make up one in five of properties built in London, compared to a third ten years earlier.

[6] McGhie, C., 'Meet the McKinleys, like any growing family, they need an extra bedroom - they just don't want to stump up half a million for it', *The Sunday Telegraph*, 3 December 2006.

[7] *ibid.*

[8] Bradshaw, J., Finch, N., Mayhew, E., Ritakallio, V., Skinner, C., *Child Poverty in Large Families*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, June 2006, p.10.

'For unemployed families net income of a 3+ child family on Income Support relative to both a childless couple and a one-child couple has improved since 1988. However, for employed families, the net income of a 3+ child family on average earnings relative to a childless couple has remained constant and has fallen relative to a one-child couple since 1972.'

[9] Budworth, D., 'How much have living costs gone up really?', *The Times*, 14 January 2006. 'Middle-class households can expect to see half their

income disappear in taxes, either when they earn it, or when they spend it.'

[10] Young, T., 'Status anxiety', *The Spectator*, 19 January 2008. 'I needn't worry any more about how I'm going to afford to educate my offspring. Sending four children to fee-paying schools is clearly out of the question so they'll just have to go to the local comp... Having another child may be the perfect solution to my chronic status anxiety.'

[11] 'Secret plan to end pupils' right to go to sibling's school', *Daily Mail*, 23 October 2006.

[12] Hinsliff, G., Davies, C., 'School holiday chaos hits families', *The Observer*, 24 February 2008.

[13] Hyde, J., 'Yes, you with the double buggy. If you want to see your kids again, cough up...', *The Times*, 2 December 2006.

[14] www.4ormore.co.uk

[15] London Borough of Richmond Upon Thames.

[16] Wilson, G., 'Families face £120 a year tax on rubbish', *Daily Telegraph*, 17 December 2007.

[17] www.optimumpopulation.org/

[18] SEPA news release, 18 February 2002, quoting Scottish Environmental Protection Agency chairman Ken Collins. <http://www.sepa.org.uk/news/releases/2002/pr027.html>

[19] Walters, B., 'Personal carbon trading', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2007 187 (11/12): 668.

[20] Fawcett, T. et al., *Lower Carbon Futures*, Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, 2000.

[21] Lewis, M. *Unilever Family Report 2005*, London, Institute for Public Policy Research, p.5.

[22] Liu, J, Daily, Gretchen, Ehrlich, P, Luck, G. 'Effects of household dynamics on resource consumption and biodiversity', *Nature*, 12 January 2003.

[23] Longman, P., 'The Global Baby Bust', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June, 2004.

[24] Hewlett, A., *The War Against Parents*, New York: Mariner, 1998, p.225.

[25] Murray, A., *From Boom to Bust*, London: Centre Forum, 2007. A third of all children in Spain will soon be singletons on current trends. The proportion of parents with only one child rose from 7.5 per cent for women born in 1940 to 28 per cent in 1965. See also ONS *Social Trends 2007*. In the UK, a quarter of all children are now singletons.

[26] Di Giovanni, G., 'One child can be enough', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 May 2007.

[27] Benatar, D., *Better Never to Have Been*, Oxford University Press, p.207. Benatar offers a *reductio ad absurdum* for the child-free movement when he argues that all child-bearing should cease in the interests of human happiness.

[28] Brooks, L., *The Story of Childhood*, Bloomsbury, 2006, p.190. 'There is nothing to suggest that only children are much different from other children brought up with few siblings.' See also: Cockrell, S, O'Neill, C, Stone, J, *Baby-proofing your marriage: How to laugh more, argue less and communicate better as your family grows*, Collins, 2007, p.186. 'A caveat for those with one child. It is not our intention to suggest anywhere in this chapter that a family with one child is not a complete one.'

[29] Laybourn, A. *Only Child: Myths and Reality*, University of Glasgow, Centre for the Study of Child and Society, 1994.

[30] Kitzman, Cohen and Lockwood, 'Are only children missing out?', *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, pp.299-316, June 2002. The authors looked at 139 children of elementary school age and found that although singletons had the same number of friends as children with one or two siblings, they were less 'liked' by their classmates. The authors said that 'having a sibling may be especially helpful for learning to manage conflict'.

[31] Green, M. 'Plays well with others?', *Financial Times*, 4 May 2007. The conclusion is based on data from the National Child Development Study.

[32] Downey, D., Condron, D., 'Playing Well with Others in Kindergarten: The Benefits of Siblings at Home', *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 66, May 2004, Ohio State University.

[33] Miller, N, Maruyama, G. 'Ordinal position and peer popularity', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1976, pp.123-131. In their study later-born children were found to be more popular among peers than older children. They suggest that later-born kids have to develop social skills to negotiate with, accommodate and tolerate older siblings. These are the skills that make them more popular.

[34] Kluger, J., 'The new science of siblings', *Time*, 10 July 2006, cites work by Laurie Kramer, professor of applied family studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He is said to have found that, on average, siblings between three and seven years old engage in some kind of conflict 3.5 times an hour.

[35] *Cow PR*, Sabrina Lynch, May 2007. 'All hush and no play makes for unhappy families', A survey of 1,400 parents and 2,000 children showed

that arguments were more likely among siblings in larger families. Children argued three or more times a day if there were five in the family. Dr Dorothy Einon, a child psychologist at University College London said: 'It's a healthy part of the development of their children. By honing their social skills through interactions with their siblings young and old, they learn how to compromise.' Press Association 14 May 2007.

[36] Bryant, B. *Sibling Relationships in Middle Childhood*, University of California, Davis, p110, 'Hartup's (1976) formulation that aggressive encounters are particularly relevant to child-child relations. He argues that aggressive encounters experienced in child/child relations are more important contributors to the development of successful control of aggressive motivation than aggressive encounters experienced in parent/child relations. Expressions of aggression among siblings in childhood rarely terminate the sibling relationship.'

[37] Dumont, A., *Depopulation et civilisation: Etude demographique*, Paris. Lecrosier et Babe, p.41, 1890.

[38] Steelman, L., Powell, Werum, R., Carter, S., 'Reconsidering the Effects of Sibling Configuration: Recent Advances and Challenges', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 243-269, 2002, cites Blake (1989) who documents a negative link between size and children's participation in activities such as dance lessons and travel. Also cited is Mercy, J.A. and Steelman, L., 'Familial influence on the intellectual attainment of children', *American Sociological Review*, 47, 532-542, 1982. They report a similar pattern but focus on such activities as television viewing (positively related to sibship size) and reading (negatively related to sibship size) that impact intellectual ability. Parental time spent with children, encouragement of children's educational expectations and aspirations, investments in educational materials (e.g. books, newspapers, a study place) also are negatively linked to the size of sibling group.

[39] Zajonc, R. Work at Stanford University cited by www.child.com, 2006. The negative impact on academic results is reduced if children have high earning parents: 'For every additional \$10,000 parents earn, children's SAT scores go up by 15 points.'

[40] Collange, C. *Dear Children: The case for larger families*, London: Arrow Books, 1989. First published in France as *Cher Enfants*, Fayard, 1987. Collange quotes Edwige Antier, a French paediatrician, who says: 'A mother's heart grows bigger according to the number of children she has.'

[41] Guo, Van Wey, L. 'Sibship size and intellectual development: is the relationship causal?', *American Sociological Review*, 64, 1999, pp.169-87.

[42] Gary-Bob, R., Picard, N., Prieto, A. *Birth Order and Sibship Sex Composition as Instruments in the Study of Education and Earnings*, Paris: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Qualifications, February 2006.

[43] Salvanes, K., Devereux, P., Black, S., *The More the Merrier? The effect of family size and birth order on children's education*. Centre for the Economics of Education, LSE, 2005.

[44] Iacovou, M, *Family Composition and Children's Educational Outcomes*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2001, p.25. Data 'shows that the penalty associated with being an only child, rather than one of two, ranges from less than 1% to 22%. The elder sibling of a two-child family does better than an only child by ten per cent on the measure of attainment in English 'O' level, but does 25% better in maths.'

[45] Teaching and Learning in 2020 Review Group, 2020 Vision, December 2006. <http://publications.teachernet.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/6856-DfES-Teaching%20and%20Learning.pdf>

[46] Margo, J., Dixon, M., Pearce, N., Reed, H., *Freedom's Orphans*, IPPR, November 2006. <http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=496>

[47] Kirby, J. *The Price of Parenthood*, London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2005, p.15. The number of babies born in 1970 to mid-range occupational groups (broadly: skilled or technical intermediate occupations and own-account workers) who already had three or more children was 46,000. By 2000 it was 12,000. See also Murray, A. *From Boom to Bust: Fertility, ageing and demographic change*, Centre Forum, 2007, p.56. 'It is disproportionately the educated middle classes who have small families....in the UK the gap in fertility between social classes is particularly stark.'

[48] Asthma UK website. It claims the NHS bill for treatment is almost £1 billion. The cost of treating a child is significantly higher than that of an adult with one in ten children requiring some level of treatment. http://www.asthma.org.uk/news_media/media_resources/for_1.html

[49] Katz, I., et al. *Chest*, the journal of the American College of Chest Physicians 1999, vol. 116, n°3, pp. 614-618. The cause is still the subject of scientific debate. But the statistical link is clear. In a recent Israeli study of half a million army conscripts, almost one in ten only-children developed asthma. In the largest families the chances of developing the condition were closer to one in 200.

- [50] Lamb, M., *Sibling relationships across the lifespan*, University of Utah, 1982, p.5. 'Siblings commonly become primary confidantes and sources of emotional support in preadolescence. During adolescence, when parents and children often have difficulty communicating about emotionally laden issues such as sexuality and the use of recreational drugs, and friends of both sexes prove fickle and unpredictable, siblings provide the most reliable and consistently supportive relationships.'
- [51] ChildLine website, August 2004. The number of children counselled for bullying rose 42 per cent, the biggest rise in the charity's 18-year history. Bullying Online, National Bullying Survey, 2006. The survey questioned more than 8,000 pupils, parents and teachers and found 69 per cent claimed they had been bullied. Peer support was considered the second most effective anti-bullying method, after counselling. The report's conclusion is to 'put more money into training'.
- [52] Edwards, R., Hadfield, L., Mauthner, M., *Children's Understanding of their Sibling Relationships*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation for the National Children's Bureau, 2005, p.58.. The study involved 58 children aged 7-13. It concludes: 'Children often said that having brothers and sisters meant there was always 'someone there' for them, and gave an emotional sense of protection from being alone. 'The potential benefit of both older and younger siblings as a resource could be recognised in initiatives to deal with bullying in school and outside the home.'
- [53] Furedi, F., *Paranoid Parenting*, Allen Lane, 2001, introduction p.15.
- [54] Palmer, S., 'Boys must be boys', *Sunday Times*, 18 November 2007.
- [55] Freely, M., 'Four is the new three', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2007. 'There's a buzz in a house that has four children in it that you don't get if you stop at two or three. It comes, I think, from the number of relationships that are going on at the same time. If you include two parents in the equation, the total is 15: five plus four plus three plus two plus one. Because each child has such a distinct personality and interacts in such a different way with each of the other children, you never quite know what's going to happen next. The idea that you can shape your children in your image goes right out of the window.'
- [56] Collange, C., *Dear Children: The case for larger families*, London: Arrow Books, 1989.
- [57] Nixon, D., *Today's Parent*, Dec/Jan 2001, pp.114-118. 'The problem is, with just two kids, there's no real opportunity to learn from experience. The minute you've figured out one phase of the game, you are on to the next.'
- [58] Cockrell, S., O'Neill, C., Stone, J., *Babyproofing your marriage*, London: Collins, 2007, p.186: 'as it gets harder, somehow it gets easier too....we surrender to the madness.'
- [59] Ellison, K. *The Mommy Brain: How motherhood makes us smarter*, Basic Books, 2005, p.47.
- [60] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/migrationtemp/1534774/Blair-proposes-network-of-27Supernannies%27.html>
- [61] Owen, M., Mulvihill, B., *Benefits of parent education and support program in the first three years*, *Family Relations*, 43, 1994, cited by Furedi, F., *Paranoid Parenting*, p.166.
- [62] <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/7200949.stm>
- [63] Gordon, B., Hogg, S., 'Why students can't cook, won't cook', *Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 2004. Only a minority of children are now taught traditional home economics. Research by The Guide Association found that four in ten British schoolgirls had never cooked. According to Kat Fletcher, president of the National Union of Students (NUS), too many undergraduates arrived at university without basic cookery knowledge and turned to convenience food. Cambridge University is so worried about the ability of its undergraduates to feed themselves that it has planned a series of cookery courses. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1467748/Why-students-can%27t-cook%2C-won%27t-cook.html>
- [64] Forehand, R., Wierson, M., Armistead, L., Kempton, T., 'A short-term longitudinal examination of young adolescent functioning following divorce: The role of family factors', *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology* 19, 97-111, 1991. Report found that teachers' ratings of children who experienced divorce was more positive for those with siblings than for only children.
- [65] Green, M., 'Plays well with others?', *Financial Times*, May 2007. Only children are more likely to change partners through divorce or separation than those with siblings.
- [66] Mosher, S., Population Research Institute website. 'Boys who have sisters learn the dignity of women. They learn to treat other girls and women with respect, as they consider how they would like their own sisters to be treated. Girls who have brothers learn the complementarity of men and women.' <http://www.pop.org/>
- [67] Ickes, W., 'Self-Monitoring in Social Interaction', *Journal of Personality*, 74, pp.659-684.
- [68] Jones, A., 'Young adults avoid grown up behaviour', *Press Association*, 7 December 2006. A study of 2,000 adults aged 25 to 34 found that one in four were still afraid of the dark. Half did not 'feel grown up'.
- [69] Unicef, Innocenti Research Centre. Study put UK last in table of 21 developed nations. http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf
- [70] Two per cent of British children under 12 struggle with significant depression. The figure rises to five per cent among teenagers. Professor Richard Layard advocates happiness lessons in school. <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/centrepiece/v12i1/layard.pdf>
- [71] Levine, M., *The Price of Privilege*, New York, HarperCollins, 2006. Cites studies of girls from 'financially comfortable backgrounds' in the USA where rates of clinical depression run as high as 22 per cent—three times the national average. Rates of adolescent suicide in the US have quadrupled since 1950. (p.7.)
- [72] Donnelly, L., 'Mothers can't manage two hours' peace', *Sunday Telegraph*, 18 November 2007. Survey of 1,600 mothers by Mumsnet found one in ten kids were signed up to an out-of-school activity every day of the week. Two-thirds of over-fives took part in two or more classes weekly. More than a third of mums were worried that they should be providing even more clubs to keep their children stimulated. See also: Furedi, F., *Paranoid Parenting*: 'A recent study by the Future Foundation in March 2000 confirmed that the amount of time invested by parents in their children's upbringing has more than trebled over the past three decades. British parents now devote an average of 85 minutes per day to each child, compared with a mere 25 minutes a day in the mid-1970s...' The conclusion of the report was that: 'Parenting is going to take up even more time and energy in the future as the desire to be an accomplished parent increases.'
- [73] Freely, M., 'Why four is the new three', *The Guardian*, 22 May 2000.
- [74] Kohler, H., Billari, F., Ortega, J., 'The emergence of lowest-low fertility in Europe during the 1990s', *Population and Development Review*, 2002, pp.641-681.
- [75] David Guttman, cited by Hewlett, S. in *The war against parents*, New York: Mariner, 1998, p.96.
- [76] Newman, S. Interviewed by ABC about *Parenting an Only Child*. 'It takes very conscientious parenting skills to make that middle child feel special. You want to give that middle child extra attention.' <http://www.abnews.go.com/GMA/Family/Story?id=2178396&page=2>
- [77] Coontz, S., *The way we never were*, New York: Basic Books, 1992. 'In the 1950s [big families] were socially acceptable. Now, polls show people are suspicious of them.' Cited by Herrmann, A. 'Cheaper by the dozen', *Chicago Sun-Times*, 2 January 2004.
- [78] Channel Five, *Ten Kids and Counting*, 19 March 2007. The programme focused on the problems faced by parents (the Lewis family in Bournemouth had to replace their washing machine and dishwasher every year because they ran day and night). 'We are like the manager and manageress of a hotel' they confessed. The Wilson family's weekly shopping include 500 bags of crisps. In particular the programme makers focused on the desire of at least three of the five featured mothers for more children.
- [79] Foreman, A., 'Why big families really are best', *Daily Mail*, 27 February 2007: 'Strangers invariably regard us as freaks.'
- [80] www.largefamilies.com: now taken over by a commercial enterprise. The homepage previously showed a family of six children and two parents holding hands on a beach.
- [81] *ABC News*. The number of American women who have only one child has doubled over the last two decades. In US metropolitan areas, 30 per cent of parents have one child. <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/Story?id=3488411&page=2>. See also: 'Shrinking families: the empty nursery', *The Economist*, December 2000. In Portugal the national figure is over 30 per cent.
- [82] Iacovou, M., *Family Composition and Children's Educational Outcomes*, Institute for Social and Economic Research, June 2001. 'Only-children have significantly poorer educational outcomes than do children in two-child families. Only-children's disadvantages are partly related to other factors, such as being more likely to have divorced parents, but even when these factors are taken into account, a certain level of disadvantage remains for only-children. Only-children do especially badly in mathematical subjects. This suggests that language skill and number-based skills are acquired differently, and that mixing with other children may play an important role in the acquisition of mathematical skills.
- [83] Meyer, C., 'Nuclear implosion', *Time*, 26 September 2006. Citing research by the Future Foundation.
- [84] Eberstadt, N., *What if it's a world population implosion? Speculations about global de-population*, Harvard Centre for Population and Development Studies, 1998. See also: http://www.family.org.au/Journals/2000/population_trends.htm

High culture for all

The Civitas/ New Model School supplementary schools project is introducing hundreds of children to the riches of our culture

Robert Whelan

‘Civitas... runs 14 supplementary schools, teaching ten-year-olds how to read in out-of-hours classes... It’s a 21st century equivalent to Ragged Schools - just as in Dickensian days, schools to educate the poor depend on charitable donations. And as in Dickensian days, it’s a cause well worth donating to.’

Fraser Nelson, Spectator
‘Coffee House’ Blog,
11 July 2008

Many schools are afraid of teaching high culture now. There is a feeling that it is too difficult for modern children, and that they can only identify with things they recognise from their everyday lives. The effect of this is to lock children into a very narrow range of often disedifying experiences and influences. They never get the chance to use their imaginations to access the wider world of other people’s experiences – what Mathew Arnold famously described as the best that has been thought and said in the world.

The Civitas/ New Model School supplementary schools project,

currently educating 350 children in 14 schools nationwide, works on very different principles. We begin from the assumption that it is absolutely vital that every child should acquire mastery of maths and English as quickly as possible. This is fundamental: without a firm grasp of basic skills, other areas of the curriculum must remain out of reach. When children come to us we often find they are effectively illiterate and innumerate, or at least have skill-levels that are several years below their biological ages. Clearly these problems must be addressed, and in some cases children do nothing but learn to read for the first few weeks.

However, when the initial hurdles have been cleared, we address the children’s need to be introduced to the world of imagination and high culture. We do not accept they ‘they are not up to it’, or ‘it’s not for the likes of them’. Culture is for everybody, and our constant experience is that children from all backgrounds can respond to it if they are properly taught. The world’s great works of art and literature have been impressing themselves upon the minds of men and women for centuries. Why should we assume the present generation is deaf to their call?

Matilda Maxwell and Michele Ledda write below about their experiences of teaching ancient Greek culture. For the last two years I have been teaching English to the older children (Years 7 – 10) at the Bethnal Green school where we have studied *The Turn of the Screw* and *Washington Square* by Henry James, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell and *The Time Machine* by H G Wells. We have spent the last term studying Samuel Johnson’s great poem ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’, and on 12 July we had a most enjoyable visit to Dr Johnson’s House in Gough Square where the boys read extracts from the poem in the Dictionary Garret – the very room in which Dr Johnson wrote his Dictionary of the English Language. Journalist and author Andrew Billen judged the essay competition and presented the prize – a beautifully illustrated edition of *Gulliver’s Travels* – to Rajen Paul. Rajen’s essay on Dr Johnson’s philosophy shows a maturity beyond his fourteen years (see back page).

We depend entirely on the voluntary donations of our supporters to carry on with this work, as we accept no statutory funding, either directly or indirectly. The way in which our friends have responded to



Seven-year-old Owen Andrews gazes through the 24" telescope in the Royal Observatory

the children's needs has been truly humbling. It is thanks to their generosity that we can help children who don't go to the best schools, and who come from areas characterised by high levels of deprivation, but who, nevertheless, need to be led down the rabbit-hole and through the back of the wardrobe; to voyage with Odysseus and joust with Lancelot; to travel in the Time Machine and gaze into space at the Royal Observatory. Thank you for your support.

The orders of architecture

For the last year I have alternated History and English lessons each week with all of my supplementary school classes. Initially, the children were not keen on the idea. I was met with the usual chorus of, "History is well boring,

Miss!" or "What's the point in it, Miss? Can't we just do maths?" While I welcomed their enthusiasm for maths, I did my best to explain to them all what the value of studying history is. I wanted them to know how many fantastic stories there are out there that are also true stories, and that in any century we studied, their ancestors were wandering around somewhere in the world. The past may seem distant, but it is also connected to them. Their curiosity was piqued; the lessons began.

For the whole of the Spring Term, we studied the Ancient Greeks in our history weeks. I prepared sheets for them which they took it in turns to read aloud to the group. We discussed any new words, or tricky ideas and then they answered comprehension questions on the passages. Two history weeks in particular were surprisingly popular. The first was on Greek architecture. We talked about the design of amphitheatres and acoustics. We also discussed the three different designs of column (Doric, Ionic and Corinthian) which the children dutifully drew into their books and labelled. The idea of 'regurgitation' in history lessons has been criticised recently by the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. Nevertheless, the following week several children came to the class bubbling with enthusiasm telling of columns they'd spotted around the city that week, and how they told their mother or brother all about its design. The second week that seemed particularly resonant was about Athenian politics and

justice. The children loved the concept of being able to have a say in what happened around them – as well as learning about how the slaves would run through the Agora with their paint-soaked ropes to identify those naughty citizens who were not in the Assembly when they should have been.

In an English week towards the end of term, I decided to do Greek prefixes and Latin words in English – to show them another way in which the legacy of the ancient world is still with us. The effect of this lesson was priceless. Every single child had a 'Eureka!' moment when they learned that micro means small and suddenly all these words – microchip, microwave, microscope – made sense. Their eyes shone.

Last term we studied *Great Tales from English History* inspired by the book by Robert Lacey of the same title. We covered 700 years of British history in seven weeks – the topics included the Black Death, William Caxton, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Isaac Newton, Dr Samuel Johnson and the Christmas match on the Western Front in 1914. The children thoroughly enjoyed themselves and now have a framework within which to place the history they learn in future.

Matilda Maxwell (Kilburn, King's Cross, Bethnal Green, Wapping and Camberwell supplementary schools)

A voyage of discovery

At our Saturday school in Bradford, given the limited amount of time, we have two priorities in our English lessons. One is to ensure that our pupils master the basic skills in English, learning to express themselves clearly and correctly in writing. The other one is that they study some of the most important literary classics.

I decided to start with *The Odyssey*, as I thought that it was an ideal introduction to the Western canon for my class of eleven- to fifteen-year-olds. Not only is the archetypal adventure story particularly appropriate for teenagers, but it also represents, in Ulysses' curiosity, wisdom and ingenuity, the qualities that have led humanity, through millennia of struggles, discoveries and inventions, from the caves to the modern age. Therefore, *The Odyssey* embodies the human thirst for knowledge that should be at the centre of our education system.

Perhaps the episode that best conveys Ulysses' curiosity is when he sails past the Sirens. The simplest option would be to plug his ears with wax, just like his crew, and safely sail past the danger zone. But Ulysses cannot live with the thought of having gone by and not heard the irresistible song, even if he knows that the experience will be more torture than pleasure. The pleasure comes afterwards, in being the only man that heard the Sirens' song and lived. It is this same 'insatiable curiosity'

that can motivate children to go through the pain of hard work in order to learn the school subjects.

I wanted my pupils to learn the story and the names of the main characters, both the Greek and the Latin versions, including the spelling. This is part of becoming acquainted with names and stories that provide the context for so many great works of the literary canon, ancient and modern. Hopefully one day some of these students will be able to study James Joyce's *Ulysses* and finish, so to speak, where they had started.



Misbah and Zara on the Birmingham summer school outing to Blakesley Hall

Before reading *The Odyssey* I introduced the context. For example, it is essential to know about the Trojan War. It is important to know the story of the Judgment of Paris and to explain that Athena was born from Zeus' brain and represented wisdom, which explains her predilection for Ulysses. I also told the children about the importance of Ulysses in Western

literature and what he represents as a human type. Dante, who could sum up a whole life in a few lines, has Ulysses tell the story of how he and his crew finally met their fate in old age, swallowed by a whirlpool in punishment for daring to sail beyond the Columns of Hercules, the limits set by God to the human world. When, after a long voyage, they arrive at Gibraltar, Ulysses, the great persuader, addresses his shipmates: 'Oh brothers, who through a hundred thousand dangers have arrived to the West, let's follow the sun. Let's not deny ourselves the experience of seeing the uninhabited world. Consider your nature: you weren't born to live like brutes, but to follow virtue and knowledge.'

I used the children's version of the *Odyssey* by Robin Lister, which is simply and beautifully told. The pupils read some chapters for homework, but I wanted to make sure that some crucial chapters, in particular the return to Ithaca and the final revenge, were read in class. I asked the pupils to write some comprehension questions and character analysis. I gave them some spelling tests on the characters' names and at the end I asked them to write a short essay, but most of all I wanted them to remember the story. 'Odysseus has a voyage that he will never forget,' wrote Saumitro in his essay. I know they won't forget it either.

Michele Ledda, Yorkshire organiser, Bradford and Keighley supplementary schools



Journalist and author Andrew Billen presents Rajen Paul (14) with the first prize for his essay ‘Life Protracted is Protracted Woe: Dr Johnson’s philosophy in ‘The Vanity of Human Wishes’. The following extract from Rajen’s essay shows a remarkable grasp of Johnson’s state of mind when he wrote the poem.

“The Vanity of Human Wishes” is Johnson’s version of the tenth satire of Juvenal, who was a Stoic during the time of the Romans. Juvenal believed that, as humans, we should fight back against suffering. He thought that pain and sorrow were an inevitable part of life and that there was no point in complaining about them. You should just put up with your troubles and try your best to minimise the intensity of the situation rather than hope that it will go away altogether. As a Stoic, he was very impassive, not showing any emotion towards matters. Especially renowned for his patience in the face of adversity, his tenth satire conveyed how each career and stage within life leads to its own troubles.

‘What Johnson did was to put it in his own format, giving his own examples but giving out the same message: there is never an easy path through life, nor will there ever be one. He himself had gone through many problems and he obviously wasn’t very happy about it. He was now spending lengthy periods of his time on the dictionary. The fact that this task

had to be carried out in poverty without the companionship of his wife didn’t help “brighten” him up either. In his own eyes he had seen hurdle after hurdle, and was convinced that even after overthrowing them one at a time there was no escape from the clutches of sorrow. He was lost. Lost in thought. Lost in his will. His mind was telling him he had nothing to live for, nothing to look forward to.

‘He had had enough of life and probably sought refuge in Father Time and his scythe.’

**Rajen Paul,
Year 9, aged 14.**



Monisha Purokayastha enjoys a morning spent learning about life in eighteenth-century London at Dr Johnson’s House.

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