

Twelve kids and counting

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What drives some women to keep having babies? One mother describes her big happy family

You might expect a woman with 12 children to be feckless, fanatically religious or have a touch of the Vicky Pollards. So Karan Johnstone, whose twelfth baby, Cooper, is eight weeks old, is a surprise. She is smart and sharp, knows exactly what she's doing and is about to launch her own children's clothing business.

Johnstone, 39, who had her first baby when she was 19, did not set out to have a supersized family. As she unloads internet groceries in her spotless stainless-steel and beech kitchen in Ormskirk, Lancashire, she explains in a gentle Liverpudlian accent: "I find being a mother really easy. It wasn't that I wanted more and more kids, I just couldn't bear the thought of not having another baby. The best time for me is when they are newborn; there is nothing like that newborn baby smell. But those first few weeks go too quickly. Right through this last pregnancy we said this is definitely the last, but now I get broody just looking in the mirror with Cooper!"

It's clear that Johnstone is the parent who wants to keep on having babies; her mild-mannered Scottish husband, Ellis, 35, who runs his own property maintenance business, goes along with it good-naturedly. "When I was young I wanted to get married when I was 30, have a couple of kids and be the normal average family," he says. "But I'm used to a big family now; you just get on with it. Our life is just the same as everybody else's, except we're busier." The couple met when Ellis was 19 and Karan was 23 and had two young sons, Santiago (now 19), and Roman (now 17). By the age of 25 Ellis found himself with seven children to support and went to his GP about a vasectomy. It was a turning point for Karan. "At first I thought it would be fine, but when he came back from the doctor's I was really panicked. That's when I realised that Ellis having the snip wasn't a good thing for me. Psychologically, if I knew that I couldn't have any more babies, it would be horrible. So we had a few heated discussions about it and that was it."

Amazingly Karan hates being pregnant and suffers terrible morning sickness, although until No 10 she got her figure back within the week. She dreads Caesareans because she needs to get home to cook the dinner. She doesn't use contraception because the Pill makes her sick and other methods "aren't exactly the nicest to use". So if pregnancy happens, it happens, and she has even conceived within days of giving birth - Ellis and Demi, 14, are only nine months and nine days apart, while the widest age gap is three years.

Hormones are partly to blame

Karan's longing for another baby often peaks in the first weeks after giving birth; when Cooper was three days old she burst into tears at the thought of not having a thirteenth child. She recognises that hormones are partly to blame. Scientists have found that skin contact between mother and baby straight after birth increases levels of the hormone oxytocin in the blood. It is known as the "attachment hormone"

because it induces feelings of euphoria and love, and plays a crucial role in mother-child bonding. Karan says the feeling has now worn off, but she doesn't rule out the idea of another baby, although she worries that she is getting too old.

The logistics of family life are mind-boggling. The Johnstones are facing the empty nest at the same time as coping with a newborn baby, plus all the stages in between, from potty training to teenagers who need a lift home at 1am. Karan desperately misses her eldest, Santiago, 19, since he moved in with his girlfriend this year. To fit everyone in Ellis has converted two terraced houses into one, making a garden that's big enough for swings, paddling pool and the children's vegetable garden. They recently installed an extra-large cooker so that the whole family can eat at the same time. There's a rota for washing-up and sweeping the floor.

Thrift is of the essence, so grandma makes a lot of the children's clothes and Karan cooks most meals from scratch; spag bol and roasted veg are favourites. She manages most meals for £10-£15; the weekly internet shop costs between £150 and £170 (if she goes to the supermarket she needs three trolleys). The family travels around in a 13-seat minibus, and children go to McDonald's once a year, on Christmas Eve. Holidays are spent on campsites with no shop.

The last time the couple went out on their own was four years ago; otherwise, the only chance for peace and quiet is when Karan is in labour. "Maybe I would like us to go out more on our own, but it's not really important," Karan says. "If Ellis and I tried to set aside time on our own we would have such a stressful life because one of the children always needs something; it's just not going to happen."

Neither parent feels any need to justify the size of their family, although they are aware of veiled criticism. Ellis's line is that they work hard to support their children, with no outside help, and the size of their family is nobody else's business. Karan, meanwhile, makes you feel that it's the rest of the world who is mad not to want big families. Admittedly, all is calm when we meet because most of the kids are at school, but she remains unflustered even though the baby is fractious and Meadow, 3, is wearing her potty on her head. She is clearly not boasting when she says she's a good mother. "Motherhood is just so natural for me and I used to think everyone felt the same. I think a lot more people could, but parenting is just too stressful nowadays; that whole idea that you've got to have X amount in the bank and a big house and this and that before you can have a baby is all too planned. It's so unnatural."

"They get more attention than other kids" When I ask whether it's humanly possible to give each child what they need, she is firm. "Obviously the younger ones get more attention, but the older ones know that I'm always there and if they want my attention they've got it. They get attention from each other too; they all muck in together. In fact, they probably get more attention than some other kids whose parents are both working." Her views on modern diktats about parenting are equally forthright. She does her best to be strict and laidback at the same time.

She gave up breast-feeding after two difficult weeks with her first baby and tried again with her third, but it caused such agonising afterpains that she gave up for good. "They say it's bad if you don't breast-feed, yet I've got the healthiest kids I know," she says.

Karan traces her lifelong love of newborns back to her baby sister, who was born with spina bifida when Karan was 4, and who spent much of her childhood in and out of hospital. Karan also has two older brothers and a foster brother. Family life was never the same after her father died of cancer when she was 12 and her mother later remarried a widower with two children. But Karan refutes any suggestion that her own large brood is an attempt to recapture what she lost as a child.

“It’s the opposite,” she insists. “Before my dad died my childhood was absolutely brilliant. I want to make my kids have as many good childhood memories as I did.”

Cutting Edge: 13 Kids and Wanting More, Channel 4, Thursday, May 22, 9pm

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article1757885.ece>