

Perception and Reality

I have a book (unrelated to homeschooling) entitled *Perception And Reality*. Watching an old video recording of my older, now adult, children when they were very young reminded me of that. One's perception of the age of one's children isn't necessarily closely related to reality: it is more closely related to the stage one's family is at. Last week I was at home with only our three youngest children (aged four, eight and ten), and it was an interesting experience. When our oldest child was just six, as in the video recording, we thought he was really pretty grown up – well, he was the oldest! We expected a high level of self-control, contribution to family jobs, obedience and attention to siblings' needs. We spent a lot of time supervising, correcting and intervening. Moving on twenty years (our oldest turned twenty-six this month!) and I realise that his youngest siblings have had quite a different experience of childhood.

In some ways the youngest children are more 'grown up' at the same ages than the older ones were: they watch films I would never have permitted the older ones to watch at the same age, they wear clothes the older children would not have thought to want to wear, and they go to bed later! But in many ways much less is in fact expected of them. They do not automatically assume responsibility for household jobs the way the older ones perforce had to, since there were no older siblings around to do it for them. I realise I have not been as demanding of details with the younger ones, largely because I have been so occupied helping the older children through the ups and downs of adolescence; I have intervened less in their interactions with one another, and they have spent a lot more time playing unsupervised. I think they also spend more time out of my sight and hearing than the older ones did, reflecting what is in some ways a much greater degree of independence. There are advantages and disadvantages to whatever position one has in the family, just as there are with so many things.

Another way in which the older ones received much more of my time was in basic instruction: catechism and manners. Because you have told the older ones repeatedly to eg. look directly at people when you speak to them, you feel that you have been teaching such things to your children since forever, so presumably they all must know it. Unfortunately, they don't. At least, not always. Some things get passed on painlessly from older to younger without adults intervening – how to tie shoelaces or ride a

two-wheeler, for example – but some things don't, such as the difference between the Incarnation and the Immaculate Conception. I have to constantly remember that the younger ones also need to be taught what you assume is basic knowledge (and therefore must surely necessarily already be known!).

Of course, when the older ones are growing up the younger ones take up a fair bit of physical time, as babies and young children do. By the time the younger ones are getting to the same stage, there are usually fewer babies about, but as parents we are older, and in my case much less energetic. When the older ones were in primary and early secondary years we did lots of 'theme work', requiring a good deal of time, thought, energy and input from me; a lot of fun, and a very effective means of teaching. I am too tired now to do that most of the time, so the younger ones do a lot more book work. But they also have a lot more formal extra-curricular activities such as music lessons. Either has advantages; but it does affect the way in which I teach, and therefore in a way the kind of relationship I have with the children.

We are all at different stages of family life, and sometimes it is good to remind ourselves of this fact. Rules and expectations differ anyway from family to family; but they can also be influenced by the stage of family life we are experiencing. I found it very useful to spend a week with only my younger children, and realise the gaps and deficiencies. When the children are all young, it is easy to have a compact, cosy, protected family unit, with all undesirable influences filtered out and a high level of control, but you cannot continue this as the older children grow without imposing an undesirable rigidity and exclusiveness. Older children bring back to the family home influences and experiences you could easily prevent them from having endured as littlies, but from which you cannot then easily protect their younger siblings – and perhaps that is not always a bad thing. By the time the littlies are going through their own agonies you have a lot of experience to call upon in helping them. Often you get it wrong the first time, but then you have better insight the next time. Often you seem to have failed; but you can't give up – the younger ones are still there, still needing you. Raising a family is a complex, changeful and challenging task, which requires full time attention; but I can think of nothing more rewarding.

Sarah Fanning