

Family life: Is a fuller quiver really better?

Heidi Schlumpf | Jun. 25, 2010



The Novogratzes from "9 by Design" (from left): Tallulah, Robert, Five, Cortney, Wolfgang, Major, Bellamy, Hollander and Breaker Novogratz (© Bravo/Virginia Sherwood)

First there was "Jon & Kate Plus Eight." Then came "Kids by the Dozen," "Table for 12," and "18 Kids and Counting." Make that "19 Kids and Counting."

What's with this baby boom of reality shows about large families? Americans may not have enough kids for a baseball team anymore, but we're still fascinated by those who do. And cable channels are making big money off big families.

Curiosity about Jon and Kate Gosselin's sextuplets and twins made the TLC docudrama one its highest-rated series -- and that was before the juicy stories of infidelity and divorce. Encouraged by that success, TLC added to its family of big-family shows: "Kids by the Dozen" featured parents of more than 12 kids giving advice on everything from budgeting to keeping the romance alive in marriage, and "Table for 12" portrayed the everyday life of a couple with sextuplets and two sets of twins. But the Duggars of "18 Kids and Counting" are TV's biggest family -- the show's title had to be changed when they had their 19th child.

I had not previously gotten hooked on these big family shows. I was too busy, I guess, with my own two children. Wimp.

But that was before "9 by Design," Bravo's new show about a family with seven children. The twist? Bob and Cortney Novogratz own a New York renovation and design firm, so the show is part big-family reality show and part design-makeover show. Think TLC meets HGTV.

And, unlike the other bigger-than-life TV families, the Novogratz are really bigger than life. They are so hip (and Catholic -- but hip Catholics).

As a design duo, they buy rundown properties and flip them into spectacular spaces that resell for millions. As parents, they take the same kind of risks, but come off as laid-back and funky. Who else could name their fifth child "Five" and seem cool, not crazy?

Of course, parents of large families on TV have always been too good to be real. Who didn't want Mike and Carol Brady of the 'The Brady Bunch,' Tom and Joan Bradford of 'Eight Is Enough' and Cliff and Claire Huxtable of 'The Cosby Show' as their mom and dad?

Then again, the Novogratzes are real, or at least as real as an edited TV portrayal of them can be. Still, they come off as the purveyors of parenting cool. But while their creative parenting style and life may inspire me to try to do better with my miniscule number of kiddos -- or at least to redecorate my kitchen -- they do not prompt me to have more progeny.

I'm not alone. The average household size in the United States has been steadily declining, from 3.27 in 1950 to 2.03 in 2000. In 1970, 21 percent of households had five or more people; in 2007 only 10 percent did. During that same time the square footage of the average U.S. home has more than doubled, though.



Fifty years ago, many of those large families were Catholic, thanks to our church's

prohibition of birth control. Now that Catholics regularly ignore that church teaching, we have about the same number of children as the average American family.

But an increasing number of large families, including some of those on the reality TV shows, do base their repeat reproduction on their faith. They are part of a new evangelical movement that bases its rejection of any birth control (including natural family planning) on a literal interpretation of Psalm 127: 'Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord; and the fruit of the womb is his reward ... Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them ...'

Often called the 'Quiverfull' or 'natural family' movement, these evangelicals believe God is in charge of every area of life, including fertility and family size. 'It's about obedience to God,' David Bortel told *Newsweek* in a 2006 story on the trend. 'The Bible says that God is the only opener and closer of the womb.'

Some think these conservative Protestants probably picked up this theology from conservative Catholics with whom they have been aligned in fighting abortion and gay marriage.

They can have it.

While I understand the importance of keeping the unitive and procreative aspects of sex together, I don't think every single sexual act needs to be aimed at pregnancy. Couples can be open to children without having dozens of them. And, of course, there are lots of ways to be 'open to life' without birthing your own babies (says this adoptive parent).

You'll notice that the King James version of the 'quiver' psalm that the evangelicals prefer says, 'Happy is the *man*

...? In this case, the non-inclusive language is right on target. Big broods are enormously taxing on women -- physically, psychologically and financially.

Ask older Catholic women who were forced into constant reproduction by a church that threatened damnation if they called it quits after a handful of kids. These women spent literally all of their adult lives pregnant or nursing and shelved any ideas of a life outside the home (or even an empty nest in retirement). If divorced or widowed, they faced severe financial hardship with so many mouths to feed and tuitions to pay.

I believe God calls some families to have lots of children -- and some to have a few children, and some to have no children. I'm inspired by any family that opens its home to foster kids, foreign-exchange students, relatives, strangers, visitors, charitable giving and all the other ways we can fill our "quiver" with God's blessings.

Maybe TLC will do a show about a family like that.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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