

Emma with her children: Georgia, 22, Harry, 16, and Freddie, six



3 kids 3 decades

A MUM FIRST AT 25, THEN AGAIN AT 30 AND 40, EMMA BURSTALL REVEALS WHY 15 YEARS OF NAPPIES WORKED FOR HER

PHOTOGRAPHS ANDREW MONTGOMERY

Pushing my six year old, Freddie, on a playground swing, he squeals, 'Higher, Mummy, higher!' 'How old is he?' asks the smiley woman playing with her daughter beside us. We start chatting – about schools, inevitably, and fun places to go locally with young children. Freddie suddenly starts waving

excitedly. He's spotted his sister, Georgia, who's looking gorgeous in skinny jeans and a sloppy jumper, long hair piled up in a messy ponytail. At 22, she's more than 15 years older than him.

'My daughter,' I grin to the intrigued woman. I can see the cogs whirring in her brain. *Daughter? That girl's old enough to be the boy's mother... How old's this mother? Must've have been married*

before... Maybe the little boy is really her grandson...

I decide to throw in a comment about my 16-year-old son, Harry, too. Then I add with a cheeky flourish, 'And all with the same husband!' This is when it all gets a bit much and the woman slopes off to another corner of the playground.

I'm totally used to this sort of incomprehension. In fact, some days

I rather enjoy raising eyebrows with my unconventional family. I've had a child in each of the last three decades: Georgia, when I was 25, Harry at 30 and Freddie, when I was 40. Unusual, I know.

On other days, though, I feel weary having to explain myself, to persuade people we're not that extraordinary. After all, my kids, though far apart in age, still argue over the last Penguin biscuit (yes, even the 22 year old, who doesn't always win) and fight over the remote control.

Freddie will still say, 'It's not fair. Georgia's bedroom's bigger than mine.' The fact that he might follow this up with, 'Mummy, why is Georgia's boyfriend *in* her bed?' is, I'll concede, rather less typical.

I can't pretend that I had it all mapped out in advance. What actually happened is this: Georgia was a happy surprise. My husband and I fell in love with her instantly, but coping with sleepless nights and childcare was hard, when we were barely out of university, earning a pittance on a local newspaper in Devon, with none of our friends in the same boat as us.

My husband was adamant he didn't want any more children. But I did. We went through several years of soul-searching, but eventually he relented and along came number two. By then, we had a house in London and I was set up as a freelance writer, which made childcare easier, as I became one of life's jugglers.

A few years after Harry, I badly wanted that third – perhaps it was being one of three myself. However, a health scare put paid to that idea, until my late thirties, when I was able to cajole my husband into a final addition.

When I became pregnant with Freddie, some friends thought I was completely mad. 'How could you go back to all that?' they asked, bemused. 'Think of the dirty nappies and sleepless nights. Your kids are practically grown-up. You could be looking forward to your first cruise!' But I'd had nearly a decade of sleepless nights – I wasn't worn out in the slightest; I was rejuvenated. Besides, the idea of a cruise fills me with horror.

Instead, aged 40, we plunged into parenthood for a third time, excited at



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the prospect of our family evolving again. Yes, it means my child-rearing years stretch on into the distance, but it still feels like the right thing. Although I prefer not to think about the fact, we'll probably still be paying university fees well into our sixties.

Having had plenty of time off in-between each of my offspring, I'm enormously relieved that I've never had to cope with that 'three under three' syndrome. You know, the one where the mother looks as if she's been in a car crash, or has stumbled on to the set of the wrong movie?

I shudder when I see young women struggling with double buggies, sometimes with a third infant perched on the back. Or watch them in Pizza Express, vainly attempting to talk to their partners, while the kids sling dough

balls at each other and poke colouring pencils up their noses.

One kamikaze toddler at a time was enough for me. And I've never understood the concept of 'wanting to get it all with over with quickly', either. The delight of big gaps is that you have lots of time to enjoy each child individually. And, of course, the older ones help out, so you can still have a life yourself.

Being a mother at 25, 30 and 40 means the experience of motherhood was different each time, too. At 25, I was just a girl, really. In old photos with baby Georgia, I look about 12 – all wide-eyed and filled with wonder. We had hardly any of the swanky equipment we're now led to believe is essential. I bathed Georgia in a washing-up bowl, until she was big enough to go in the bath, and lugged her in and out of the car in her carrycot. We couldn't afford a babyseat, so we bought special safety straps from Mothercare, instead.

Georgia came everywhere with us. At parties, she'd sleep in her pram, or kip down in an empty bed. She also, very quickly, became adept at snoozing on my lap in restaurants. She was nothing, if not adaptable.

By the time Harry arrived, we had more money, a three-bedroom house and a tiny garden, of which I was inordinately proud. I embarked on my sensible mummy phase. I had my long hair cut short, wore comfy shoes and ferried Harry in his smart new Carrytot to and from Georgia's school, ballet and piano lessons. When not at work, I even embraced mother-and-toddler coffee mornings.

As many of my friends, by now, had babies themselves, we'd spend weekends at each others' houses, talking nappies and teething problems. As Georgia was older, she'd usually bring a friend to keep her company.

By the time I had Freddie, though, I'd hit 40 and no longer felt remotely sensible. I abandoned the comfy shoes and grew my hair again. I went part-time at the magazine where I worked, ☛

joined a gym to shed my baby weight, met a whole new circle of friends and wrote my first novel. Far from feeling tied down again by a new infant, I felt the world opening up. Plus, Georgia was old enough to babysit now, which meant I could still go out.

Freddie was a remarkably content baby and has benefited, I think, from my experience. It was wonderful knowing that, if I left him crying for a few minutes in his cot, he wasn't going to come to any harm. He slept like a dream and generally knew – and still does – that no means no.

I'd be lying, however, if I said there weren't downsides, too, though more from the children's point of view than mine. Georgia and Harry say they wish they were closer in age. They played together for a while when they were small, but soon grew apart, and it's fair to say that they have little in common right now.

As for the brothers, they dote on each other. Harry will hoist Freddie on his shoulders and carry him when he gets tired. They play PlayStation and rough and tumble. But, understandably, Harry also gets bored of being followed around, and annoyed when I ask him to quieten down

because his little brother's asleep. Growing up surrounded by teenagers and twentysomethings means Freddie is as comfortable discussing AS levels and Amy Winehouse as pirates and *Doctor Who*. The other mothers at his school comment on how articulate and older than his years he seems. Maybe this is a bit sad, though – a sign of a childhood cut short?

The other day, he had a friend to tea and explained in graphic detail over spaghetti bolognese exactly how babies are born. 'But what's a "gina"?' I heard the friend inquire, puzzled. Before I had a chance to intervene, Freddie stood up on his chair and announced: 'It's what girls have, instead of a penis. It's a little hole that gets bigger, then the baby pops out and it hurts a lot, then it gets smaller again.' This was accompanied by helpful hand gestures.

I blame Georgia or Harry – it certainly didn't come from me. I giggle about it, but I felt rather ashamed having to break it to his friend's mum that her son would no longer be satisfied with storks and gooseberry bushes. And, of course,

I wondered whether it was appropriate for Freddie to be quite so well-informed at his tender age.

However, I refuse to beat myself up. The fact is, 'blended families' are everywhere now, with step-siblings and half-brothers and sisters of different ages all living under the same roof. I comfort myself, too, with the knowledge that, large gaps aside, my kids will always have each other. And, as they get older, the differences will seem less huge.

But there's no doubt that having such widely spaced children can give rise to some bizarre situations. On Georgia's boyfriend's first-ever visit to our house, Freddie asked in a loud voice if they were going to get married. 'We're a bit young,' the poor guy spluttered.

On holiday last summer – that's me, my husband, Georgia, Georgia's boyfriend, Harry, Harry's mate and Freddie – we seemed to occupy different time zones. Georgia and boyfriend would get up late, do a spot of sunbathing, disappear for an afternoon 'nap', then go out bar-hopping at night.

Harry and his mate tended to stay indoors all day then emerge, vampire-like, at sunset, when they'd saunter into town, smelling of aftershave, to check out the 'hot chicks' (their words, not mine). Meanwhile, Freddie was up at 7am, all set for a few violent sword fights before breakfast, followed by non-stop pool games. Then he'd tumble into bed at 8pm exhausted – as were we.

I'm glad to say that my late addition has finally cured me of my two decades of broodiness. 'Hallelujah!' I hear my husband rejoice. However, I have a recurring nightmare that, in two or three years' time, when Freddie's still only eight or nine, Georgia will take a leaf out of my book and announce that there's a little surprise on the way.

'But it's a big responsibility,' I say to her in my dream. 'Don't you want to wait?'

'Don't worry, Mum,' Georgia beams. 'You're already looking after Freddie, what's one more baby?'

Emma Burstall's first novel, Gym And Slimline (Preface, £6.99) is published on August 21st

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Emma at 25, with baby Georgia