

Emma Hayward reflects on combining clinical practice and family life



THE JUGGLING ACT

key points

- Combining parenting, clinical life and all the rest takes a lot of effort. But there are resources to help, not least in the church
- When children are little, communication beyond functional matters can suffer and this is where young parents sometimes need to call for help.
- There can be challenges for the doctor-parent who may worry about issues not noticed by the other marriage partner.
- One of the most endearing and enduring biblical pictures of God is that of a shepherd who 'gently leads those with young'.

Does your life feel like a *juggling act*? What balls are you trying to keep up in the air? Work, church, exams, marriage, friends, more exams, children? As God became 'flesh and dwelt amongst us',¹ we know he is interested in joining us as we face these challenges. So beginning with the analogy in the title, God is the *ringmaster* of the family circus: Lord over all, delighting in each and every act.

Many circus acts are like aspects of family life. Most are fun, exciting or exhilarating but there is one act that brings a melancholy note into the drama: the *clowns*. Though they may make us laugh, clowns' make-up often includes a tear. This act reminds me that not everyone is able to have children and that some people experience heartache as they wait for them. This was the experience of my husband Phil and me for three years before our first child came along. Going to a lively family church was difficult. Unthinking comments such as 'you

don't really know what life's about until you've had children' demonstrates how hard it can be for an infertile couple attending church Sunday after Sunday. For us and many friends, difficulty conceiving or facing miscarriage was the first time we had faced medical need in our own lives. For all the joviality we may have presented at church, this was a time when many a tear was shed.

The *conjuror* reminds us that sometimes things are not all that they seem. It is common for parents to feel that they are never quite on top of things, whilst apparently, everyone else is doing fine. We had one friend who thought that we always had a tidy house, but she only visited on Mondays, just after the cleaner left!

Most of the time we only see the juggling balls that other people keep in the air, not the ones they don't. We don't see strained finances, marital discord or children tired from a long day in nursery. For most medical couples who have children, life after maternity leave is much like walking a

tightrope. You may think that you have the work schedule and childcare all worked out, but what if your child is ill? Or the childminder is ill? Or the nursery gives you four weeks' notice of shutting down? Then there is the guilt of never quite feeling you have done enough at work but also never quite feeling you are a good enough parent.

There is a proverb: 'it takes a village to raise a child'. We realised the truth and wisdom in that proverb after some initial heartache. The nuclear family really doesn't have all the needed resources within itself – you need the wider community to help share the burden. Years ago families lived much closer together, so it would be common for the aunty next door or the in-laws down the road to provide regular practical help. This is not necessarily the case anymore, with families spread out across the country or even the globe. Getting the help you need, when you need it most can be a real struggle without church family and friends close by.

The co-ordination and teamwork of the **trapeze artists** can symbolise marriage. When children are young it can be incredibly difficult to do anything other than play 'baby ping-pong': one of you holding the baby while the other attempts to get chores done. There is communication, but it is mostly at a functional level. If the communication is always about the practical, everyday things, it can be harder to spot when our partner is stressed or depressed. Like a trapeze act, marriage with children takes a lot of practice, especially when both of you feel the most in need of sleep. Difficult conversations take energy as well as time and there were times when we asked our vicar to help us communicate better (see acrobats, below). Further advice for budding 'trapeze artistes' would be:

- Give each other protected sleep time (one of us covered until midnight and the other took over from then until 6 am. We still alternate weekend lie-ins)
- Notice when the diary is getting full and make sure you book 'keep free' weekends every few weeks.
- Discuss your priorities and agree them together. (We are not sure how this became a tradition, but every New Year we sit down and chat about our hopes for the year ahead. This helps us to be accountable to each other and to make sure we are both focused on the same goals.)

The **acrobats** demonstrate the need for a supportive community. For us, it has been our church family and close friends. When a baby is small it is common to feel quite isolated and the routines can be repetitive. Even though getting out of the house with a baby can feel like organising a major expedition, it was worth the effort to get to toddler groups. Our children remain friends with children they first met as babies and it gave us opportunities to make new friends too. Having experienced the benefits of a strong community around us, we are now in a position to provide that

for others, though the work of Safe Families (www.safefamiliesforchildren.com)

The **knife-thrower** has a narrow margin of error. This is akin to being a medic and dealing with your own children's health. The majority of the time our children get looked after at home, with Dr Mummy calmly reassuring non-medic Daddy that all is well. However, there have been times when as a doctor and parent one can feel deeply concerned about a sick child, worrying over possibilities that would never have occurred to a non-medic. It appears, to the untrained eye, that it is possible both to over and under-medicalise your child's health at the same time. Part of the difficulty is not taking a proper history because you are so immersed in the situation. It is difficult to have perspective when it is your own child/ren who are unwell.

The **strong man** in the circus lifts weights, but perhaps none as heavy as the guilt that can pervade parenthood. Some people feel terrible that they rely on others for childcare, and miss bedtimes and school runs due to on-call commitments. This is difficult but can be mitigated. Our children know that Mummy works a lot, but they also know that she is on the front row at the school concert or nativity play, cheering them on when she needs to be. There are no perfect parents and the desire to be the perfect parent can often lie behind our sense of guilt. We reflect on our own childhood and want to be like our parents or better. We have to work within our own limitations and with them, rather than being crushed by multiple responsibilities.

Elephants represent distant lands. Prior to having children, we were involved with a charity in Ukraine. We assumed that overseas mission would come to an end with the arrival of our daughter but when I was invited to join a PRIME trip to Russia, it seemed right to go. A second trip was more testing as our youngest developed an unusual health complaint ten days before it started. This contributed to more noticeable homesickness and concern at being so far away. (But the children were apparently oblivious to their mother being abroad at this time of need and took it all in their stride.)

Having taken a look at the different acts of the family circus, we revisit the **ringmaster**. Our youngest made a surprise entrance at 6:30am one morning, jumping into the kitchen declaring 'I am here!' He expected that this announcement would make us happy, and it did.

Extended prayer and Bible study may not always be possible and a small child licking your nose is a significant distraction from worship. However, the heavenly Father 'gently leads those that have young'² and he is pleased to hear his children say 'I am here' no matter what time of day.

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references

1. John 1:14
2. Isaiah 40:11