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September 17, 2007 • Vol. 68 • No. 12

Michael Jackson's Kids: Inside Their World

By Alex Tresniowski

They wear masks, go shopping at midnight and have a mysterious nanny. So how come so many people say the children seem normal?

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It was just another ho-hum family outing for Dad and the kids. First they took a 40-minute tour of the

Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. "The children said 'cool' a lot, and they were calling their daddy's attention to things and asking him questions," says museum deputy director Don Lopez, who conducted the tour. After that it was on to the National Museum of the American Indian, where the kids joined along in a Yupik tribal dance (even Dad did some hoofing). Next morning a stop at the National Zoo for a peek at the pandas, gorillas and tigers. "The kids were really happy and excited to see all the animals," says spokesman John Gibbons, who accompanied Michael Jackson, 49, and his three children—who weren't wearing veils or masks that day—on their two-hour visit July 19. "I was struck," says Gibbons, "by how considerate and nice and normal they all were."

Wait a minute—is this Michael Jackson we're talking about? Is it possible the three children he is raising without their mothers around—son Prince I, 10; daughter Paris, 9; and 5-year-old Prince II, nicknamed Blanket—are having anything approaching a happy, healthy childhood? Could it be that the King of Pop is also the King of Pops? This is, after all, the man who was the subject of two major investigations into the possible sexual abuse of underaged boys (his first accuser declined to testify against him in a 1993 case but collected at least \$20 million in a

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civil suit; Jackson's 2005 child-molestation trial ended in his acquittal). What's more, sources tell PEOPLE they believe Jackson is seriously ill because of an addiction to prescription drugs. But as Jackson shops for houses in Maryland's tony St. Michaels community—getting ready to settle back in the U.S. after living in Ireland, Bahrain and England since 2005—several Jackson insiders, friends and associates interviewed by People say he and his children live far more ordinary lives than one might imagine.

By all accounts Jackson's children are bright, well-behaved and seemingly well-adjusted. Prince and Paris—whose biological mother is Jackson's ex-wife Debbie Rowe (see box); Blanket arrived via an unnamed surrogate mother in 2002—"think that they live a totally normal life, which is what Michael wants for them," says Las Vegas dealmaker Jack Wishna, who has worked on several Jackson projects. In Westmeath, Ireland, where the family lived in 2006 while Jackson worked on a new album, the singer cooked porridge for the children every morning and took them out to the movies—with no masks. "The kids had popcorn and soda and acted like any normal kids," says a patron at a showing of *The Santa Clause 3* in Mullingar, Ireland, last December. At a bookstore in Dun Laoghaire that fall, Jackson "was just doing his thing and the kids"—again, with no masks on—"would run over and say, 'Hey, Dad, look at this,' or jump on him, and he would always give them his attention," says Bert Wright, manager of Hughes & Hughes bookstore.

At birthday parties for Prince and Paris, "Michael bought lots of toys, balloons and big cakes and went all out for his kids, and they acted like they love him," says someone who was there for both events. This source says the children adore their father because he acts like a child himself, singing songs, getting giddy on trips, making everything a game. Even the veils and ornate masks he has his children wear on most outings are, observers say, not a problem because "the kids think it's just another game with Daddy."

One longtime associate who recently spent time with Jackson and his children remembers Prince and Paris "were running in and out and Michael was always very attentive to them." Another person who met with Jackson not long ago says the children "were all enjoying themselves and singing Beatles songs together." And when it comes to teaching his kids manners, associates say Jackson is a stickler. At a party this May in England, "he made sure that when they left, all the children went around and said goodbye to everyone," says a music producer.

But isn't this the same guy who dangled Blanket out a fifth-floor Berlin hotel window in 2002, who awkwardly forced a bottle into Blanket's mouth in the infamous ITV1's documentary *Living with Michael Jackson*, who nicknamed his son Blanket? To others with insight into how he is raising his children, the image of Jackson as Ward Cleaver just doesn't jibe. For starters some Jackson pals and family members take issue with the children's nanny Grace Rwaramba, a former production-company office worker who is now taking care of and homeschooling the kids (see box). "She started out as this naive African girl, and now she is hell on wheels," says one longtime Jackson associate. Says another: "Grace calls all the shots when it comes to Michael. She brought in the Nation of Islam and its security guards. Grace is the queen bee."

According to several sources, Rwaramba is preventing some Jackson family members from seeing him—and from helping him with what many sources claim is an addiction to prescription drugs. Jermaine Jackson confirmed to PEOPLE on July 21 that he's worried about his brother's health. L.A. attorney Tom Mesereau Jr., who defended Jackson at his 2005 trial, says, "I was approached by the Jackson family" to stage an intervention for Jackson last year but did not participate. A source close to the family confirms the Jacksons did attempt an intervention in Las Vegas in 2006; three of Jackson's brothers were there and sister Janet was on the phone. "Michael got pissed off and said he wasn't on drugs," says one family source. Several people interviewed also agree that because of Rwaramba most family members are "cut off—there is no communication with Michael," says a source close to the family, who adds that Jackson's brother Randy is afraid Michael will die just like [Anna Nicole Smith](#).

Through his publicist Raymone Bain, Jackson denies taking drugs or being in poor health; Bain also says Jackson is fully in charge of his life. "Right now Michael is on the East Coast looking at houses and enjoying himself on vacation," Bain told PEOPLE in July. "He's talking on the phone every day. He is very engaged and active." Adds the Rev. Jesse Jackson, a longtime friend and adviser: "I was with him [in July] and he was healthy, spry, effervescent. After all the pressure of the trial, it weakened him to some extent, but he bounced back."



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Jackson has other problems that could affect the lives of his children. In 2006 he signed a \$330 million refinancing agreement against his principal asset—a 50 percent stake in the music-publishing catalog that includes more than 200 Beatles songs, which is worth at least \$1 billion—to prevent him from defaulting on his many other loans and from losing Neverland, the 2,700-acre ranch that has sat unused since his 2005 trial. Yet Jackson's runaway spending continues, say sources, to the tune of at least \$1 million a month. To pay for his lavish lifestyle, Jackson may have to refinance his share of the catalog again, or, more improbably, return to show business. Last year Jackson flirted with headlining a show in Las Vegas but never followed through.

Their father's money troubles aside, there's also the issue of the veils and masks the Jackson children wear on most public outings—don't they draw more attention than they deflect? "The primary reason for seeing the children all dressed up like that is for the attention that Michael will get for himself," says Jackson family confidant and coauthor of *Michael Jackson: The Man Behind the Mask* Stacy Brown, voicing an opinion shared by others who know Jackson. What's more, "the masks could send the message to the children that they need to be fearful of people," says Dr. Dorian Traube, a University of Southern California social worker specializing in adolescent development. "They could end up feeling that there is something wrong with them and that nobody can see them." And can it be good for the children to travel quite so much? Since abandoning Neverland in 2005, Jackson has hopped the globe, spending time on at least three continents. "The kids are always moving from place to place, and they don't have any playmates," says a source close to the Jackson family.

But even this source concedes the children seem to be doing extremely well so far: "They are so smart it's incredible. Prince is a hilarious little boy, and Paris is a real girl who likes girly things." Stacy Brown, who admits he is "no supporter of Jackson's," says, "I don't believe he should have these children. I worry about them. But they seem to be pretty normal. And Grace genuinely loves them."

A family unlike any other, perhaps, but still, it seems, a family. "What I like about his children is that they don't act like privileged kids," says Jamie Foster Brown, a journalist who accompanied Jackson and his children on a trip to Japan this March. "They're just cordial and friendly and playful, and they like to play jokes on their daddy. Michael would say, 'Blanket, don't do that!' and Blanket would say, 'Okay, I won't,' and then would do it again to tease his dad. They are all very comfortable with him. He is raising his children well."

Prince Michael Jackson I • Age: 10
"He's very good at making people laugh," says a Jackson friend

Paris Michael Katherine Jackson • Age: 9
Jackson's fame "doesn't even seem to faze her," says a pal

Prince Michael Jackson II a.k.a. "Blanket" • Age: 5
At Disneyland, he "really liked Peter Pan," says a friend

Contributors: Reported by Champ Clark/Los Angeles, Frank Swertlow/Los Angeles, Drew Tewksbury/London, Monique Jessen/London, Mark Gray/Las Vegas, Wendy Grossman/Washington, D.C., Alexandra Rockey Fleming/Washington, D.C., Linda Marx/Miami, Tiffany McGee/New York City.

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Mj's Mysterious Nanny

She started as a clerk charged with filling out insurance forms at Michael Jackson's former production company, but insiders say Grace Rwaramba, 40, is now one of the most influential people in his life. "She's a power broker," says one longtime associate. "Michael took her out of the office and made her the nanny, and now she is the closest person to him." According to sources, Rwaramba is responsible for financial decisions, arranges Jackson's security and homeschools his children. Rwaramba, who comes from Rwanda, married Stacey Myron Adair in 1995 (they divorced in 2003). She has a business degree from Atlantic Union College, but it's not known if she has credentials to work in child care. Members of Jackson's family worry she influences him too much. "We have to get her away from him," Michael's brother Jermaine told PEOPLE. But Jackson's rep Raymone Bain says Rwaramba "lives a very private life and has done nothing wrong. She's being attacked for her professional relationship and proximity to Mr. Jackson."

Where Is Debbie Rowe?

Whatever happened to Debbie Rowe, the dermatologist's assistant who, Jackson told the world, bore his first two children "as a present" to him? Rowe, now 48,

married Jackson in 1996 and divorced him in 2000; one year later she relinquished all parental rights, saying "Michael ... is doing so well without me." But in 2004 she applied for temporary custody of Prince and Paris, telling a court she was concerned that Jackson's child molestation trial would get in the way of his parenting (her parental rights have since been restored). Still, Rowe testified that Jackson was "a good father," and in 2006 they reached a private settlement regarding the children. Sources say she had no contact with them when they lived outside the U.S. but now sees them on occasion. Rowe, who is single, breeds racehorses in Palmdale, Calif. Says her former attorney Iris Joan Finsilver: "Her life couldn't be better."

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