

> **MOTHER LOAD**

Divonne Holmes a Court reaches out to parents

PAGE 49



> **ASIAN IDOLS**

Singing their way from rags to riches

PAGE 52

> **DIANA DILEMMA**

What if the people's princess had lived?

PAGE 50



sunday
extra



► **DIVONNE HOLMES A COURT** PRODUCER/PARENTING ADVOCATE

'I'm very dogged. I just deny that things are not possible.'

Her own miserable childhood was one of the driving forces behind this high-flying mum's passion for good parenting, **Danielle Teutsch** writes.

IS there anything that Divonne Holmes a Court cannot do? The former New York lawyer and television producer with a degree in psychology, who married into one of Australia's wealthiest families, is attractive, svelte and rubs shoulders with Sydney's A-list. Oh, and she's had twins - twice.

Last week, she was seen alongside the Prime Minister at the launch of a free parenting DVD as part of the Raising Children Network website. The DVD is Holmes a Court's pet project, and she spent countless hours trying to distil the multitude of parenting opinions from different interest groups into simple, practical advice.

The secret to her being able to take on the role of executive producer of the DVD in the past year is simple - she adopted a strategy of sleeping only every second night. "I just figure, I'm on this earth for two seconds in the grand scheme of things," she says. "I'm very dogged. I just deny that things are not possible."

But before you sigh and say "not another super woman", the 41-year-old is happy to reveal that life has doled out its fair share of heartache, and that she does not have all the answers to parenting. In fact, she admits to being flummoxed when she first came home from hospital with her IVF twins, George and Robert (pictured), eight years ago. She sums up her prior knowledge of parenting as "zippo", and was not exactly flooded with maternal instinct either. Her upbringing had left her with no template for parenting, and a profound lack of confidence in her abilities.

Holmes a Court, a self-confessed "shy, anxious person", was convinced she was going to "mess it up". "You think, this is supposed to come naturally," she says. "Then you think there is something wrong with you. I thought I was going to be a disaster."

So she did the only thing she knew how to do well - she hit the books and read everything she could find about parenting.

"I definitely became more confident after the 2000th page," she says. She went on to have a second set of twins, Elsa and Madison, now three years old.

Holmes a Court is passionate about improving the lives of children by making sure parents have access to good, scientifically based information.

That is the rationale behind the charitable organisation Smart Population Foundation, which she founded in 2002, and the Raising Children Network website, of which she is an executive. "At my core, my heart is with every kid who is looking at the ceiling feeling tortured by life," she says.

Holmes a Court knows how that feels. She had a miserable childhood in Germany, a peculiar mix of privilege and neglect. Her father was a high roller who gambled at the world's most exclusive roulette tables, and the family often holidayed in the French Riviera.

"It was like something out of a James Bond movie," she recalls.

When her father gave up gambling, he became a commodities trader, at one stage losing \$30 million.

Holmes a Court describes her parents as authoritarian and neglectful, and says they didn't hesitate to use physical punishment as coercion. As a result, she had no friends and did poorly at school.

By age 14, she was having suicidal thoughts. "Their style was: 'Do it because I say so.' It's almost like being

a prisoner of war - you can't get out," she says. Holmes a Court left home at the first opportunity, when she was 15, to live with a kind-hearted aunt. She blossomed academically, completing a degree in psychology at New York's Columbia University and a law degree from Boston University.

She was working as a corporate lawyer when she was set up on a blind date with Peter Holmes a Court, son of billionaire businessman Robert. She was 25, a cynical, hard-bitten New Yorker who had "given up on men". He was 21, reading law at Oxford and innocent to the ways of the city.

The tale of their disastrous first date at the theatre has almost passed into legend. She snubbed him throughout the evening and when he asked her out for a bite to eat afterwards, she tartly replied: "I don't eat dinner." The line eventually found its way into a *Seinfeld* episode, Holmes a Court says.

Despite the shaky beginning, the romance took off, and the pair were married in 1995. They moved to Sydney in 2000 and Holmes a Court became an Australian citizen in 2004. She credits her husband, the executive chairman of the South Sydney Rabbitohs, for building her self-confidence.

"He's an incredibly warm guy," she says. "He's made me feel good about myself."

Holmes a Court has never been dazzled by the money and status of her in-laws. Her own childhood experience showed her the precarious nature of wealth, and being a New York attorney gave her an insight into the machinations of power.

From 1996 to 2000 she was a director of Back Row Productions, producing various television and live events. Actor Russell Crowe and wife Danielle Spencer are good friends, and she can get a politician on the phone in minutes. But she is, at heart, a science geek. Her only magazine subscription is to *New Scientist* and she has told her husband that her dream date would be dinner with a quantum physicist. The couple sponsor the Australian Museum's Eureka Prize for Science Teaching.

Her love of logic and academic rigour means she is a walking encyclopedia of all the galaxy of parenting methodologies that exist, from pediatrician Dr Spock to Supernanny. On her bookshelf at home, there are at least 100 titles on the subject. But her guiding philosophy when it comes to being mother of her own four children is decidedly unscientific. Put simply, she tries to remember that she, too, was once a child.

"One of the key things about parenting is empathy. I've ended up looking at life from their perspective," she says. "It's so much more powerful than anything else."

The free DVD can be ordered from www.raisingchildren.net.au

She sums up her prior knowledge of parenting as 'zippo'



Picture: ADAM HOLLINGWORTH