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## **The extraordinary life of Michael Jackson's children**

**The greatest mystery of all was how Michael Jackson fulfilled his role as a father**



(Mark J Terrill)

A life more ordinary for Paris Prince and Blanket, at their father's memorial service in July in Los Angeles



(Olaf Selchow)

Jackson was criticised for dangling Blanket over the balcony of a hotel in Berlin in November 2002



(Kevin Mazur)

Jackson was said to be a very loving father. Here he is in rehearsals for his planned shows in London, two days before he died

(Mark J Terrill)

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The eccentric, chimpanzee-hugging, pyjama-partying, drug-addicted Michael Jackson never ceased to intrigue. As he remained hidden behind high walls with his children, the greatest mystery of all was how he fulfilled his role as a father.

Even though many doubt that Jackson was the biological father of three children, the lament of Paris, his 11-year-old daughter, at his memorial service in July was genuinely moving. "Ever since I was born, Daddy has been the best father I can imagine ... I just want to say I love him so much." The event, which was show business in the key of mourning, served as a reminder that three children, more vulnerable than most, had lost the only parent they knew.

Jackson's obsessive desire for privacy was often counterproductive. The more he tried to quash stories, the more bizarre they became. Yet the children's lives remained as opaque as the face masks which he insisted they wore in their rare public appearances. (On these occasions, the press was often tipped off in advance by Jackson's press officer — one of his many contradictions.)

There have been few reliable accounts of Jackson's performance as a parent. Many of those involved in the lives of the Jackson children — as teachers, carers or simply as family friends — were reluctant to speak of their experiences while Jackson was alive, bound either by a sense of loyalty or by confidentiality agreements.

Since his death, however, *The Sunday Times Magazine* has spoken to family, friends and business associates, who are opening up for the first time about the children's closely guarded lives and the extraordinary extent to which Jackson partitioned off their world. That world collapsed on June 25, leaving Prince Michael, 12, Paris, 11, and Prince Michael II, known as Blanket, 7, perilously exposed to a raft of family feuds, lawsuits and disputes over money and religion. Michael Jackson's reckless addiction to drugs ended up thrusting Paris into the limelight in front of a television audience of millions at the very age that he emerged as a child star.

Until now, Tony Buzan, a wealthy author and educational consultant, has never spoken publicly about his experiences with the family. Talking at his house in a leafy, residential estate high on the banks of the Thames near Marlow, he gives us a considered, first-hand assessment of Jackson's role as a father. He always regarded Jackson as a good friend, remaining silent and loyal to the end.

Buzan's writings on brain development via a technique he calls mind-mapping have earned him an international following and the post of "thinker in residence" at Wellington College, an independent school in Berkshire. He was teaching in Singapore in 2006 when he received a call from his friend, Sheikh Abdulla bin Hamad al-Khalifa, of the Bahraini royal family.

"Hamad said, 'A fan of yours would like to speak to you.' Then an unfamiliar voice came on the line. 'Hi, it's Michael.' He was speaking in his natural voice, not the high whisper he used in public." Over the next 45 minutes Jackson raved to Buzan about one of his books. He wanted Buzan, he said, to explain his ideas to his children and to "teach them how to think".

Buzan promptly flew to Bahrain, checked into a five-star hotel and spent a week commuting to the Jackson family's rented palace in the desert. He was met at the gate by Jackson and a servant, a man Jackson referred to as a "butler", who acted as a general housekeeper. Buzan was immediately struck by how attached the children were to their father.

"I would watch them coming and going from the international school every day. They left happy, and came back happy. On their return those three kids could not run any faster from the car to get to hug their daddy."

The house itself had been converted into a shrine to Jackson's cultural enthusiasms. "It felt like the Sistine Chapel, filled with renaissance art. There were giant prints of paintings by the likes of Raphael on every wall." Bizarrely, the first thing Jackson did on Buzan's arrival was to quiz him about Leonardo da Vinci. "He was fascinated by the idea of geniuses, from Alexander the Great to Charlie Chaplin and Muhammad Ali, but he didn't consider himself as one of them. He was very humble. He saw himself as a student."

Buzan was surprised to discover that Jackson was an indulgent father, "not one of those hot-housing parents, forever forcing the children to play chess, take dance classes or learn instruments". In the evenings they cuddled up together on the sofa to watch DVDs. Alongside

the old masters, Jackson had hung larger-than-life-sized photographs of his children, which greatly amused them. “Michael had a massive printing machine.”

The elder children are remarkably focused, according to Buzan. “They are fast learners like their father, who was probably the best pupil I’ve had.” Buzan witnessed no tantrums or raised voices. “The kids seemed to enjoy each other’s company. It’s unusual in groups of three, where tensions can often arise.”

They are very different personalities. Buzan describes Prince as “a very bright, witty but serious little boy. In a class he would be the child the teachers noticed. He was confident and very quick on repartee”. Paris, by contrast, “was a sedate princess. Very independent, contemplative and self-contained. She was quiet but kind, always offering things. She had great poise and presence and she was very good with the boys”.

Four-year-old Blanket was “just wild, a little dynamo, always on the move, tumbling, hanging off the furniture. He was like a mini-Michael. I saw Blanket do lots of dance routines”. In Buzan’s opinion, Jackson was clearly Blanket’s biological father. “He has the same eyes.” He added that his skin was much darker than that of the other children — his complexion made him look Mediterranean.

At mealtimes, there would be “beautiful vegetables, fresh seafood, hummus, fruit juices, no alcohol. The children were respectful but would push the boundaries.”. Perhaps they were bored: for all his apparent interest in fatherhood, conversation around the table was usually led by Jackson talking about himself and his career.

“Michael talked a lot about creativity and the process of being a star and about the naysayers in his past who had said you can’t do this or that before he did it. He loved a challenge. *Thriller* had been his ultimate achievement and now people were saying that he couldn’t repeat it. He felt he could comfortably outdo *Thriller*.”

Jackson also opened up to Buzan about his own upbringing. Tellingly, he said nothing about the beatings he endured from Joe, the family patriarch, recently confirmed by his elder brother Marlon. “He talked about how wonderful it was to have Elizabeth Taylor as an aunt figure and Fred Astaire showing him dance moves. How he loved singing and dancing with his family, travelling the world with the Jackson 5.”

Yet even the loyal Buzan noticed that none of the children mentioned any grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins — there were no family photographs of the extended Jackson clan. Nor did they ever mention religion. “Michael would talk to them about many great figures from the past, but I never heard him refer to Jesus.”

The children and their father were physically and emotionally sealed from the rest of the world — a reflection, perhaps, of Jackson’s desire to hide after the public circus around his acquittal in 2005 of damaging child-molestation charges.

Only once did Jackson allude to any scandals in Buzan’s company. He was still smarting at accusations that he was a “mad, bad dad” after he had dangled Blanket, then just nine months old, out of the window of a Berlin hotel room in 2002. “Michael was indignant about that,” says Buzan. “He said, ‘I’m a dancer, one of the fittest, strongest people in the theatre. I lift and carry adults with no difficulty.’ ”

The balcony moment has been interpreted by many as a sign that Jackson's dependence on drugs was clouding his judgment. Buzan saw no evidence of drug abuse in Bahrain, but he often noticed his hypersensitivity to sunlight — he was with Jackson during a car journey when the sun crept around the sides of his shades and momentarily dazzled him. "Michael cried out in pain and involuntarily ducked his head." Such hypersensitivity is a well-known side-effect of opiate abuse, which shrinks the pupils. A family friend and business associate in Bahrain told us that strong prescription drugs definitely featured during his stay there. In one highly embarrassing incident for Sheikh Abdulla, Jackson's host, an aide to the singer was apprehended by customs officials at Manama airport carrying a huge consignment of synthetic opiates. Among them was OxyContin, a cancer medication popularly known as "hillbilly heroin".

The children's sheltered existence ended just after midday on June 25. Dr Conrad Murray, who appears to have medicated the star on demand, had earlier given Jackson an intravenous dose of the powerful anaesthetic propofol, to help him to sleep.

When Murray found he could not revive him, he called Prince, the eldest child, up to the second floor of the family's Bel Air home, which Jackson had rented while he prepared for his O2 concert series in London. Why the doctor, who is under suspicion of homicide, felt the need to involve a 12-year-old in this emergency is not clear.

The children had grown up seeing doctors come and go to treat their father for insomnia, a condition for which he had sought medical help since 1997. Jackson's reliance on medics greatly alarmed his friend, the Indian physician Deepak Chopra. "Michael would go to great lengths to get what he wanted. If one doctor didn't give it to him, he would try another. It was an addiction that was created and perpetuated by drug-pushing doctors, and their co-dependent relationships with addicted celebrities."

To Prince, Paris and Blanket, Jackson wasn't a drug-addled star, he was simply an insomniac. "I didn't get a whole lot of sleep last night," was his constant refrain. He would tell the children how he liked to spend his sleepless nights shopping on eBay. At a meeting at the Bel Air house with Kenny Ortega, his show director, Jackson claimed he had been up all night "working on music. That's when the information is coming".

As one family friend, who prefers to remain anonymous, remarks: "Children will adapt to whatever situation they come into, as long as the parents are there for them. And even though he often got up late, Michael was always there." To allay any worries the children might have, he referred to his sleeping medicine by a healthy-sounding term every child understands: "milk".

Kai Chase, the family chef, got used to seeing Murray the milkman arrive every morning and stay until late in the evening. On several occasions, Chase noticed, Murray would stay the night. Like Buzan, she never saw any sign that Jackson was on drugs or in poor health, although she never questioned Murray about the pair of oxygen cylinders he would bring down after his morning consultation.

It was no surprise to Chase or to the children that Murray and Jackson still hadn't appeared by the time she began to prepare lunch on the morning of June 25. "I thought maybe Mr Jackson was sleeping late," she said. Minutes later, as the paramedics pounded up the stairs,

Chase, the children and the nanny stood in a tearful huddle in the hall, pathetically chanting: “Let Mr Jackson be okay.”

The widely circulated photographs of the chamber of horrors where Jackson suffered his fatal overdose form a ghastly tableau, yet it was striking how little the star’s drug-taking seems to have impinged on life elsewhere in the house.

To the end, Jackson was a master at compartmentalising and keeping secrets. Downstairs in the faux-chateau-style mansion in Bel Air was a suite of airy rooms where Jackson practised his dance moves for the O2 concerts with his choreographer Travis Payne, or worked out while the children played, ate or took lessons with their home tutor. On the terrace was a large swimming pool.

On the few occasions when Jackson and the children ventured out in public, he played up to his “wacko” image. In April he was spotted at a clothing store in Los Angeles wearing a bright green jacket, a white surgical face mask, shades and a black felt hat; at his side the children wore Mardi Gras feathered eye-masks. As disguises go, these were hopeless and probably a joke, in line with Jackson’s longstanding belief that stars need to cultivate their mystique off stage. “You’ve got to razzle-dazzle them,” he would say — a line he had borrowed from the musical *Chicago*.

Fearful of the media attention they might attract, Jackson never let the children out much on their own, although they would occasionally fly to Florida for play dates with the children of an old friend. Their cousins visited occasionally, as did Michael’s sister Janet, who had become close to Paris. Otherwise, as they had in every other home they had known, Jackson’s children mostly played with each other, and with him.

Lou Ferrigno, an old acquaintance and the former star of the TV show *The Incredible Hulk*, acted as Jackson’s personal trainer in his final months. He recalls being greeted every morning by the kids racing excitedly around the house. After a workout with Ferrigno in the back room on a treadmill and exercise ball, dressed all in black, Jackson would join the children in a game of hide-and-seek.

“He was a hoot,” Ferrigno reported. “Many years ago he told me he was extremely lonely. But when I was with him he looked very fulfilled and happy. He was like Mr Mom.” Jackson was also a devoted prankster. “He would call my phone, sometimes disguising his voice for 10 minutes,” Ferrigno said. “I was thinking I had a stalker. He would say his name was Omar and that he was looking for me.” It was the same name he often used to score prescription drugs.

In the evenings when Jackson was out rehearsing, he had to be forced to eat. The show director, Kenny Ortega, tells how he would fork-feed him chicken and broccoli, like a child, as they worked. “He was so focused he couldn’t think about food.” But on his days at home, he would make a point of sitting down to eat wholesome meals with his children, just as he had done in Bahrain.

A private breakfast of specially prepared fruit-juice drinks and granola was taken up to his bedroom every morning by Conrad Murray, the only person allowed in. For lunch, Jackson would eat with the children from a menu that often included spinach salad and chicken. Murray would sometimes join them for a dinner of seared tuna.

Chase, the family chef, said the doctor often conferred with her about Jackson's diet. Jackson told her: "You have to take care of me. I'm a dancer." She recalls: "He wanted food that would not make him cramp up while he was dancing."

When Chase suggested the family might enjoy "comfort-food Saturdays" with barbecued chicken, frankfurters and Mexican tacos for a change, Jackson initially welcomed but later rejected the idea. As the concerts approached, and the family, Chase included, prepared to fly to London, "healthy eating became his obsession".

When their father died, Prince, Paris and Blanket — perhaps for the first time in their complicated lives — discovered what it meant to be junior members of the fractious, extended Jackson clan. Soon after Michael's death, his sister La Toya Jackson descended upon their home, frantically trawling his possessions for clues to his death. Days later, their grandmother Katherine, wrongly believing her son to have died intestate, went to court to fight for control of his estate and custody of his three children.

At the memorial service, a long-lost 25-year-old brother, Omer — the reputed product of a one-night stand Jackson had with Pia Bhatti, a Norwegian fan, in 1984 — appeared to have been belatedly welcomed into the family: Omer was seated in the front row with the uncles and aunts.

The children currently live with Katherine, the Jackson matriarch, at the family compound on Hayvenhurst Avenue in Encino, a predominantly white, middle-class town popular with Hollywood stars, two hours north of Los Angeles. Former residents include John Wayne and David Hasselhoff. It was here that Michael Jackson spent most of his young life, and where, in turn, his own children are set to spend much of theirs.

The eight-bedroom, 11,000 sq ft mock-Tudor mansion is surrounded by outhouses, water features and 12ft-high walls to ensure maximum privacy. The main entrance to the house is set at 90 degrees to the road to fend off prying eyes. There is still \$4m (£2.4m) owing on the mortgage after Jackson bought the house from his father, Joe, in 1981, and \$16,000 in property tax arrears.

Many of the features Jackson later incorporated into his fabled ranch at Neverland made their debut here, notably a collection of exotic animals, including Bubbles, the chimpanzee. The children will be reminded of their father every time they step out of the front door and onto a replica of his star in the Hollywood Walk of Fame, which is set into a garden path. Uncle Tito Jackson, who has visited them, says: "The kids are very, very normal. They have lots of fun, they squirt the dogs with water guns and they play with toys and play ball with their cousins."

Of the three, Paris appears to have adjusted best so far to life without her father. Family sources report that she loves Hayvenhurst. She is especially fond of what she calls the "candy store", a room next to the movie theatre where parts of the *Thriller* video were shot. "Paris does a lot of reading and watercolour painting and hair-braiding with her cousins, who visit every day, and she speaks regularly to a handful of friends on her mobile phone," a family member told us. She has already expressed a desire to give up home tutoring to attend a private school, Campbell Hall, in North Hollywood, where her idol, the actress Dakota Fanning, is a student.

Blanket is having a harder time. “He cries himself to sleep and keeps asking where his daddy is,” according to a close family source. “His Aunt Rebbie spent the first few nights sleeping on a cot bed beside him because he was scared to sleep alone.” For now, Blanket has been given a full-time nanny to comfort him at night, and “acts pretty wild” during the day.

Meanwhile, the older boy, Prince, has withdrawn into a private world, playing video games on his hand-held PSP for hours on end. He is not allowed to loiter on the internet. The children’s grandmother, now guardian, Katherine, disapproves of online chat rooms. “She makes sure that internet access is monitored and time-limited around the house,” the source says.

The job of parenting them will inevitably be complicated. At 79, Katherine is too frail with arthritis and reportedly too forgetful to manage on her own, so she has engaged her eldest child, Rebbie, 59, to oversee most of the day-to-day care. Both Katherine and Rebbie are devout Jehovah’s Witnesses. They attend services four times a week and it is likely that religion will play an increasing part in the lives of the children.

Family sources say that Katherine has already made it clear that they will be raised within the faith, and that, when they are old enough, they will be expected to knock on doors on Sunday mornings with copies of *Watchtower* magazine.

Rebbie has the advantage of being the least recognisable of the Jackson clan. It is telling that when pictures were published of Paris in Las Vegas alongside her aunt, Rebbie’s name did not appear on any of the captions. Her other great asset is a steely stability: not a trait the Jacksons are known for.

Married for nearly 41 years to Nate, her childhood sweetheart, Rebbie is the only Jackson sibling to have survived a pop career unscathed. Briefly famous in the 1980s for her one hit, *Centipede*, Rebbie has devoted most of her life to bringing up her three children. “Rebbie got away from the Jacksons before Joe started beating them all into stars. She says she was lucky,” says a close family member.

Until recently, Rebbie was a comparative stranger to Michael Jackson’s children, though they did at least see more of her than they did of Debbie Rowe — the birth mother of Prince and Paris — who was shut out of the children’s life by Jackson, but who was finally granted access rights by a court in Los Angeles in July.

According to her former personal assistant, Rowe was discouraged from seeing the children after Blanket was born, on the grounds that such visits would be disruptive. “Debbie got very upset about being called a cold, neglectful mother, but she genuinely believed that Michael loved his kids, although not always wisely. It hurt, but she cut herself off. Now she is hoping that she will get to know her two kids.”

Whatever relationship — if any — they have with their mother, they will still have to contend with the rest of the Jackson clan. They are certain to find themselves embroiled in the money squabbles that have always been a hallmark of the Jacksons. Michael’s burial itself had to be postponed since so many siblings were attending a rival event for which they were receiving appearance fees.

Also brewing is a row over a proposed American tour involving the so-called “Jackson 8”. At issue is the unequal division of a moneypot of more than \$12m, which would pay Janet \$4m and Rebbie \$250,000. Katherine continues to object to the marketing and merchandising ideas put forward by her children’s lawyers to exploit their dead brother’s musical legacy. In return, the brothers and sisters are none too keen on her foisting her strict religious views on her grandchildren. And nobody likes the idea put forward by Grandpa Joe that he should visit the children at Hayvenhurst from time to time — least of all Rowe, who made his absence a non-negotiable part of her access settlement.

There may be other problems: Rowe has never met Rebbie, barely knows Katherine, and is baffled and annoyed by the claim of an English osteopath, Mark Lester, who starred in the 1968 film *Oliver!*, to be the biological father of her daughter, Paris. “Debbie finds that ridiculous.”

It did not take long for the next rumour to surface: that Macaulay Culkin, the child star of *Home Alone*, is the father of Blanket by an unknown mother. There are likely to be many more of these claims and stories of “long-lost” offspring and lovers — at least until Jackson’s shambolic finances are sorted out.

But children are famously adaptable, and in their short lives so far the Jackson Three have adapted more than most. Life for them now looks almost straightforward. It did anyway on the recent break in Las Vegas: Paris was photographed shopping for cosmetics in a local mall, looking plain and wearing glasses — something Jackson would never allow, according to a family friend. And the Jackson children were barely noticed splashing around in the hotel pool for two hours, with Blanket in his water wings, Prince sitting in the shadow of an umbrella playing with his PSP, and oh-so-grown-up Paris drinking a virgin strawberry-banana daiquiri.

The utter impossibility of that carefree scene with Michael Jackson in attendance suggests that the future for Prince, Paris and Blanket might contain the promise of a life more ordinary.