

# 10 Facts on Motherhood and Children in the Middle Ages

Jeffrey L. Singman is a historian who writes about everyday in life in history. Over the weekend, I finally got to cracking his book *The Middle Ages: Everyday Life in Medieval Europe*.

The book offers a great glimpse into life in the Middle Ages from the perspective of people who weren't kings, popes, bishops, lords or knights.

Here's a snapshot of what family life was like for many birthing mothers and their offspring.

## 1. Giving Birth Was Hard (Surprise!)

No hospitals. No drugs. Probably no doctor or surgeon (unless a birth proved especially difficult). These were the conditions under which women gave birth. Women usually gave birth in their home and were assisted by family members (not the husband, unless absolutely necessary). If there was a medical professional present for the birth, it was most likely a midwife.

## 2. Maternal Deaths Were High

While statistics in the Middle Ages are hard to come by, a snap shot of Florence in the 15th century reveals 14.4 maternal deaths per 1,000 births. This shows that death during pregnancy was rare, but still extremely high by modern standards—about double what you find today in the world's poorest countries. (And bear in mind: Florence was a city noted for its wealth and culture.)

## 3. Baptism Was Important and Old School

All children born without complications were expected to undergo baptism. The practice was performed by a priest at the local parish. Up until the High Middle Ages, priests employed

the practice of immersion (the infant is completely dunked); a pinch of salt was usually placed in the baby's mouth and its back and chest were rubbed with oil.

#### **4. "Christian" Names Were Given at the Baptism**

The naming of the child was the highlight of the religious ceremony. Children were often named after Christian saints. This is why we often still refer to first names as "Christian names."

#### **5. A Party Followed the Baptism**

The baptism was social in nature as well as religious. Families often did not have enough to celebrate with a full-blown feast, but a gift-giving ceremony was customary.

#### **6. Children Received Surnames Later**

Babies did not receive surnames until later in life. Surnames could be given for a variety of reasons—occupation (Smith or Archer), physical attribute (Little or Redmane), origin (Fleming or Norman), or parentage (John-Son)—and were known to change during one's lifetime.

#### **7. Wealthier Families Often Used Wet Nurses (who made a killing!)**

Women cared for children almost exclusively for the first five or six years of a child's life. Families that could afford to often employed wet nurses to assist with feeding and child-rearing. A lactating, live-in wet nurse in France could make a relatively good living (about five pounds of silver), more than three times that of a chamber maid.

#### **8. Babies Were Bathed Frequently**

Contrary to popular belief, babies—who were swaddled in linen for the first several months of their lives—were usually bathed regularly. Middle Age doctors, in fact, encouraged mothers to bathe their children up to three times *per day*.

## **9. Children Under Age 7 Basically Just Played All the Time**

Medieval people recognized the need for play (and children's natural inclination for it). The first seven or so years of a child's life involved mostly leisure and play, though some memorization of Latin prayers was usually mixed in (often the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ave Maria).

## **10. Toys and Games Were Creative and Much Like Ours**

Many of the toys children played with in the Middle Ages would be familiar to children today: dolls, carts, tops, and whistles. But most of the play involved children adapting the nature surrounding them: wood, sand, water and limbs. Gerald of Wales, a 12th century religious man, wrote of a favorite practice of he and his brothers: building sand castles. Think of it as arts and crafts for children of the Middle Ages.