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How it feels to be raised by a nanny in the UAE: Not all that bad

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We spoke to the UAE families who share a longstanding bond with their nannies



Photo by: Stefan Lindeque

When 24-year-old Alicia Goveas was declared Galeries Lafayette make-up blogger of the year in January, the crowd burst into a wave of applause and cheers for the talented young woman's win. Her younger sister Stephanie, mum Olinda, and father Charles' joyful whoops were accompanied by unabashed sobbing from 60-year-old Pushpa Kelji. Pushpa's tears were

of joy and pride – Alicia is the ward Pushpa has raised for 20 years. From holding Alicia’s hand on walks to the park to holding her camera and recording make-up tutorials she made in her bedroom, Pushpa has witnessed Alicia’s every milestone moment.

In Alicia and Stephanie’s words Pushpa, is ‘the world’s perfect nanny,’ an epithet sometimes used to describe that other nanny – Mary Poppins. *Friday* decided to track down the UAE’s own supercalifragilisticexpialidocious nannies, who transformed the lives of their adoptive families with their own spoonful of sugar.

Alicia and Stephanie are part of a generation of UAE kids raised by nannies. According to a 2011 report by the Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), the children of 94 per cent of the 23,851 Emirati families surveyed, and five percent of the 144,630 expatriate families surveyed were being raised by nannies. As the country’s population has expanded since the last survey, it’s likely those numbers have increased.

While this study and the general conversation around childcare in the UAE cautions against the dangers of entrusting children to nannies, painting a scary picture of misbehaved children suffering identity crises, and emotionally disconnected families where hired help replaces parental figures, like every narrative, there is an uplifting flipside to this story. Pushpa’s contribution to Alicia’s success is just one of them; the country is full of well-rounded young adults raised by nannies.

Milind Singh, co-founder of Rise, a Dubai-based tech start-up that aims to help domestic workers in the UAE achieve financial independence and skills says there are around 750,000 domestic workers in the UAE whose monetary (around a whopping \$3.4 billion) and qualitative contribution to society are often overlooked.

This is what pushed Rise to launch the Best Nanny Award last year. It saw over 400 families nominate their nannies (we spoke to two of them – the Culcus and the Homanns) and over 180,000 people vote in a Facebook competition.

WE ARE FAMILY

Over a week of interviews the setting changes, yet the familial vibe remained: whether we were in the sleek Jumeriah home of the Culcus, a Turkish family, or the vibrant living room of the Johnsons, an Indian family in Ghusais, or the airy Abu Dhabi home of the Homanns, a South-African-Swedish family, the affectionate ambience was universal. Amidst all the inside jokes and infectious laughter, it was hard to say who was employer and employee; parents, children and nannies all fit together seamlessly like pieces of a puzzle.

While the working families hired nannies as a cost-effective measure to overcome astronomical prices of day-care, the stay-at-home mums we spoke to wanted to have an extra pair of eyes and hands on deck.

‘Lara and Deniz get very upset if I ever slip up and say we’re a family of four instead of five,’ says Feyza Culcu, 40, of her 13-year-old daughter and 11-year-old son’s attachment to their Indonesian nanny, Nurah Rosidin, who has been with the family for 10 years. Her husband Tansel, 47, adds, ‘We are always five of us. Nurah isn’t “like” family, she is family. Everyone knows this, even our extended relatives Skype and text her.’

The rule of five applies in the Johnson household too, where Lijee Johnson and husband Johnson Joseph take their nanny of nine years, Thangamani Odiyion, 50, to movies, family outings, social visits, everywhere. ‘Our friends know every invitation extended to us includes Thangamani,’ says Johnson. ‘It’s difficult for some people to understand why we love someone who isn’t a relative,’ says his daughter Angelina. ‘Sometimes kids at school think she’s our mum,’ laughs their youngest daughter, Rachel.

MUM’S THE (CONTROVERSIAL) WORD

Rachel’s innocent observation hints at the fear every parent who hires a nanny harbours: will the children ever confuse the caregiver for a parent? Will nanny replace mum?

Swede Susanne Homann, 43, will never forget the moment her ten-year-old twins Angelica and Daniella addressed their Filipina nanny Juliet Cunahap as “mummy” eight years ago. ‘That hurt a little bit but at the time I also knew that “mummy” was just a word for them; they were two and didn’t know the meaning of it. But I remember that [sinking] feeling and wondering if my decision to have somebody in the house, although I was a stay-at-home mum then, was a right one.’

That was just a one-off incident, says Susanne, who says and she’s never felt jealous of Juliet and her kids’ bond. The family hired Juliet, 50, when the family moved from London to the UAE in 2008.

Dr Sarah Rasmi, psychologist and parenting expert at the UAE University explains how the myth of children confusing their nannies for their mother is often a manifestation of a working parent’s guilt: ‘We have this tendency to believe that when a working parent leaves the child in someone else’s care they’re not contributing to their offspring’s upbringing. The child’s primary bond with a mother exists since birth and lasts a lifetime; even an intense secondary bond with a caregiver or a nanny can’t alter that. The important thing is that when the parents are at home they spend quality time with the child.’

Dr Anna Grazia Lecca, clinical psychologist at Life Works Foundation, suggests that parents should set up a routine that kids associate with parents.

When Olinda Goveas left infant Stephanie and three-year-old Alicia in Pushpa’s care to resume her job, she ensured that her time at home was dedicated to her children. ‘When I got home I ensured I’d bathe them, teach them, feed them and on weekends they were my priority.’

Now a 20-year-old mass communications student, Stephanie has never had trouble differentiating between Pushpa and Olinda. 'Pushpa is a mother figure and I've been her baby since I was three months old. Whenever I get a good grade and mum's not at home I run up to Pushpa and tell her my marks and we do a little dance in the kitchen. That's not because I love my mother any less. It's because I love Pushpa like I would my grandmother or an aunt. Mum will always be mum.'

When Lijee can't attend school activities and events, Thangamani is in loco-parentis. Lijee lets me in on the depth of Rachel and Thangamani's emotional attachment: 'When Thangamani goes on holiday, Rachel runs a fever, instantly. That's a special love, nothing about it intimidates me.'

When Nurah goes on her annual leave, Deniz's computer's background changes into a picture of her. 'Nurah means pretty much my life,' he shrugs, scrambling across the couch to give her a hug.

You'd think Feyza would wince with insecurity at this revelation, but she's beaming at the amazing bond her son has forged with this stranger.

'That [the insecurity] is the most common question everybody asks me,' Feyza sighs, 'and my answer is not at all not a slight bit. She thinks of their well-being before I do – we were redecorating the kids room and I was adamant that the cabinet be placed in a particular place for aesthetics but she foresaw the dangers of the kids climbing it and falling down and advised me against it. How can you not love and trust someone like that?'

TEAMWORK AND TRUST

Interestingly, in each of the families, parenting is a team effort, a responsibility that's shared between the nannies and the parents.

In the Culcu family the kids know to approach Feyza for issues related to school or a playdate and seek out Nurah if they're hungry or want to talk.

Lijee's daughters confide in Thangamani of issues at school or open up to her about their stormy teenage angst and mood swings. '[Thangamani] aunty gets me, she understands everything I go through,' says Rachel. But Thangamani keeps their mother informed of every incident in their life. 'Even if they get me to promise to not tell mamma I always tell Lijee,' says Thangamani.

Dr Lecca explains how a good nanny should not be a parental competitor but someone who reinforces the parents' importance and rules in their absence – why Susanne and husband Chris have given Juliet full authority to discipline their three daughters. 'Juliet can send them to their room if they refuse to do chores and clean up after themselves and they know they ought to obey her. Juliet doesn't take any rubbish from them.'

Feyza even credits her children's success in school to Nurah's strict mothering: 'Lara was the Middle East champion of the IBT exams, and Nurah's daughter, Najla, is the best in her school district. I don't think that's a coincidence!'

All these kids say they've never felt lonely or abandoned as the nannies were always around to supplement the absence of their parents.

A PILLAR OF STRENGTH FOR THE ENTIRE FAMILY

Much like Mary Poppins changed the lives of the Banks', the nannies here have been an integral support system to each of their families.

Nurah, whose name means light, was a literal beacon of hope to Feyza during a dark period. 'Soon after Deniz's birth, I was paralysed and needed help to even feed the kids. Nurah changed my life.'

In the Johnson household, Thangamani is not just a surrogate mum to kids Angelina and Rachel but to Johnson and Lijee too.

'Expatriate life in the UAE can be lonely. Having Thangamani around feels like having my mum here, like we have family. She is the reason I can have it all as a woman – the successful career in a demanding legal profession and the demands of motherhood. I can multitask, and come home at erratic hours, because I know Thangamani has things under control.'

Pushpa is Olinda's best friend. 'I had a miscarriage after Stephanie and went into a period of depression. Pushpa's friendship and presence is what pulled me through all of it.'

Dr Sarah Rasmi explains how often having a nanny frees up working parents from household responsibilities giving them enough freedom to spend quality time with their children: 'Parenting is exhausting, it's the hardest job in the world and add to that the demands of modern life and parents are depleted. The nannies here almost always clean and cook, which means when you come from work you can just spend time with your kids.'

For Susanne, who travels frequently to South-Africa to help her cancer-stricken niece and elderly parents, Juliet's presence is priceless; 'to just know I can pack my bags and go and Juliet will hold the fort is so comforting. And I can just take the kids to playdates when I'm here without worrying about the washing.'

INSPIRING WOMEN

Pushpa, 63, is originally from Mumbai, and never wanted to marry or start a family of her own. 'I've always loved working and living in different countries. I've lived in Kenya when I

worked for a family and even ran a small catering business there, but now I love staying in Dubai. I don't miss a family life – these two [Alicia and Stephanie] are my children.' Her independence has always inspired the girls. 'She's the original modern working woman,' Stephanie teases.

That Nurah, 38, is a widowed single mum who supports her 17-year-old daughter and extended family of 21 members through the salary of Dh1,000 she earns at the Culcu's wows Lara every day. 'In school I was clever but because my family was poor I couldn't study. So, I worked in shops, sold ice-creams...' She breaks into tears explaining her decision to come to Dubai and how she coped with her daughter's sense of abandonment by buying her material possessions as replacements for hugs and warmth: 'Najla used to be jealous of Lara and Deniz, saying I love them more than her. Now she understands – she's training to be a midwife.'

Thangamani and her siblings were abandoned by their mother as children. Raised by a neighbour, she was married off at 16 and worked in a rubber plantation with her husband until she came to the UAE in 2008 to help save money for her daughter's wedding. 'No one can beat Thangamani's grasp of regional politics and general knowledge,' gushes Johnson. 'We subscribe to a Malayalam newspaper just because she's a voracious reader.'

There's a hint of pain in the laughter that follows Thangamani's description of how her grandchildren don't associate her as family, but true to form, Thangamani looks at the glass half full: 'that's okay, the Johnsons are my family.'

For 24-year-old Emirati Shaikha Al Ahli, the Filipina nanny who has cared for her for 20 years, 62-year-old Esperanza Alvarado Amsio, is like a grandmother. 'She taught me to not care about people's opinion of what I say and do; not through a lecture but through example, at various stages in life.'

RESPECT IS KEY

How do these women find it in them to love someone else's children unconditionally? They all have the same answer – the implicit trust and the kindness of their employers is what fuels their selfless devotion to these children.

Thangamani's voice cracks when she narrates her first day at the Johnsons, which marked the equal footing they've been on since. 'They welcomed me home and served me lunch, ensuring I'm seated at the table with them. The kids and I share a bed, they use my arms as a pillow. I was admitted in Zulekha hospital last year because of incessant vomiting. Lijee took time off from work, and nursed me back to health, cleaning me up whenever I vomited. They helped financially with my niece's wedding. They've done for me more than my kids would.'

Nurah doesn't hold the tears back and lets them flow freely when she describes the day she met baby Deniz 'and fell in love with him. They have been so kind to me. Last year my sir

[Tansel] surprised me with tickets home to go attend Najla's graduation after I came back from my annual leave. When I'm homesick, the kids cheer me up.'

The thread of kindness, equality and acceptance runs through the stories of the other nannies too: last year the Goveas threw Pushpa a surprise party to celebrate her 60th birthday. 'I didn't know it was happening!', Pushpa recounts fondly. 'I walked in and there were balloons and cake all our neighbours and my friends'. In Shaikha's family, Esperanza is always given the day off on Christmas and Easter and is free to follow her religion. Juliet's parents stayed at the Homann's house when they visited her in Abu Dhabi.

All of them go on annual leave to their home countries, have access to television, internet, a room to themselves, and most importantly, are respected by their employers.

The UAE cabinet approved a draft law last month that guarantees domestic workers a weekly day off, 30 days of annual paid leave, the right to retain passport, ID card and work permits and a daily rest of at least 12 hours. These families have already extended these basic rights to their nannies.

'We need to humanise our nannies and stop thinking of them as machines that run our households. They have a strong influence on our children and leave an impact on impressionable minds, so it's to our benefit we treat them well and ensure their physical and psychological well-being.'

Dr. Lecca reminisces about a patient who overcame the trauma of bullying due to the emotional bulwark his nanny was.

NOT WITHOUT OUR NANNIES

In the emotional 2011 Hollywood film, *The Help*, Emma Stone's character tries to locate her childhood nanny who was let go. Nurah often wonders if Deniz and Lara will remember her if they ever lose touch.

'Forget the kids – we have retirement plans with Nurah,' Tansel jokes. The gratitude these youngsters and their parents feel towards their nannies proves that sometimes, life lets you choose your family.

Rachel's earliest memory is of 'Thangamani aunty having my back and cheering me up when I was crying as a two-year-old. Nothing can break up the bond we share.'

'Alicia and I have our own lives now and the family can easily manage without Pushpa, but we don't want to. She's been our safety net for 20 years,' says Stephanie.

Shaikha expresses mock outrage at the thought of Esperanza leaving her family: ‘Would we let her go? She has been there for my graduation and, inshallah, she wants to be there for my wedding too. If she had to leave I would miss her a lot! I can’t imagine life without her nagging me.’

No gust of wind from the east can separate these families from their super-nannies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SAFETY

Susanne Homann remembers how her nanny Juliet saved her two-year-old daughter Angelica from choking. ‘I wasn’t home and Juliet was feeding the twins when one of them choked. Instead of losing her head she pumped the food out and saved my daughter’s life.’

Not every family is as lucky as the Homann’s to have a nanny with presence of mind. Child care is often about minimising risks and it’s essential to ensure nannies are skilled.

While maternal instincts can’t be developed through training, ‘ensuring your nanny is aware of first aid, CPR, nutrition and hygiene is the parents’ responsibility,’ explains Dr Rasmi.

Most domestic workers in the UAE are unskilled in child care explains Padmini Gupta, the founder of tech start-up Rise. The fault lies with recruiters and agencies who bring them under false promises of sales and technical jobs. Rise has 20 online courses via an app that train nannies in four focus areas: child safety and emergency, how to build a caring and nurturing environment, supporting child learning and development and healthy eating and nutrition. Each session lasts 30-45 minutes and they are priced between Dh50-Dh20. Visit growwithrise.com