

Eleven contestants.
Nine months to win
the perfect child . . .

FROM THE
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF
THE ONE, NOW
A NETFLIX
SERIES

THE FAMILY EXPERIMENT



'Frighteningly plausible, gripping, dark and so clever. Superb!'
CLAIRE DOUGLAS

JOHN MARRS

THE FAMILY EXPERIMENT

JOHN MARRS

MACMILLAN

In simplest terms, the Metaverse is the internet, but in 3D.

Ed Greig, Chief Disruptor at Deloitte

Your children are not your children. They are sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you, they belong not to you.

Kahlil Gibran, writer and poet

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As seen on hit TV show The Family Experiment.

Why leave it to chance or genetics when you can have the perfect baby you've always dreamed of?

Here at Re:Born, we are now taking pre-launch orders for MetaBabies – children that exist entirely in the Metaverse. Here you can pick and choose the age and sex of your child, and design their appearance from eye and hair colour to skin tone and body shape, their accent, interests and the speed of their growth. Trust our designers to create a perfect blend of the two of you, just like Mother Nature intended.

Our children have a digital memory, photo-realistic faces and bodies which can respond to you using facial tracking and voice analysis.

But Re:Born isn't only for new parents. If you're not ready for your Real World child to grow up, we can build an exact replica of them so they can live forever in the Metaverse at an age of your choice. Or if you have suffered a loss, allow us to reanimate the one you loved with a near-exact replica.

Wherever you are in life, we can tailor a package that suits you.

Re:Born launches later this year. Pre-order now to avoid disappointment.

Deposit required followed by a £19.99 monthly subscription fee.

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1

Teleprompter script – *The Family Experiment* launch night

AUTUMN TAYLOR, PRESENTER

(CAM 1):

Welcome to the launch of what's going to be the *only* show you'll be talking about for the next nine months, *The Family Experiment*.

(PAUSE FOR OPENING TITLES AND APPLAUSE FROM A WALL OF VIEWERS ON SCREENS BEHIND HOST)

Well, if you haven't already heard or read about it, then where have you been? Because since it was announced, *The Family Experiment* has become the highest-trending reality TV show this decade – and that's before we've even gone on air!

(PAUSE FOR APPLAUSE)

So here's how it works.

(CAM 4):

Over the next nine months, eleven carefully selected childless British contestants will compete to raise the world's first fully interactive children

in the Metaverse. Our intended parents will wear virtual reality headsets, along with masks, gloves and full-body suits that feel like a second skin. This will allow them to feel everything a biological parent does with their children. And for twenty-four hours a day, you the viewer can watch every trial, treat, tribulation and tantrum. And if you're like me and hate to miss out, sign up for our push notifications every time something big happens so you can tune in and watch moments later. How amazing is that?

(PAUSE FOR APPLAUSE)

(CAM 1):

Our intended parents won't get to know the sex of their baby in advance. Every one of our children will grow at an accelerated rate, meaning they'll remain at each age for much less time than Real World children. For example, in month one, our parents will be tasked with looking after a newborn. In month two, their baby will be considerably older and more developed. And by month nine, their children will be fully grown adults. Each MetaChild is operated by artificial intelligence developed by market leaders Awakening Entertainment. And they'll grow and learn in the same way a Real World child does. What they experience and how they develop will depend on the nurturing they receive from each parent.

(CAM 2):

And as this show is fully interactive, we want you at home to feel a part of it. So every month, you'll be able to vote for a couple you want to face a Monthly Challenge that we'll be setting. And believe us, with your help, we are going to push our new mums and dads to the limit! More details on our first challenge coming up later in the show. You will also get to tell the contestants exactly what you think of their parenting skills as we go along. How? By awarding them red hearts for everything you like seeing and black hearts for the things you don't. Not enough cuddles? Black-

heart them. Giving them quality time? Throw them a red. And our parents will see them appearing on screen so they know how you think they're performing.

(CAM 1):

Tonight, each family automatically receives £250,000, the estimated cost of raising a Real World child from newborn to eighteen. They can spend as much or as little of that money as they like on anything they choose, such as education, healthcare, entertainment, travel and immersive experiences in other App platforms. After nine months, viewers will then vote for one family to win. Sadly, the losers will watch their MetaChildren permanently switched off and lose the remainder of their cash. But that's not where *The Family Experiment* ends.

(CAM 4):

Because our winners will then face the toughest decision of their lives. They can either keep what's left of that original £250,000 along with their MetaChild, or they can pull the plug on their child and get a quarter of a million pounds to start a Real World family of their own, paid on the live birth of their child through traditional means, IVF, surrogacy or adoption.

(PAUSE FOR APPLAUSE)

And for those of you who want to get up close and personal with a family, in-App purchases will allow you to spend time in the same room as them without them knowing and watch the action as it unfolds. A monthly lottery will also allow a lucky winner to interact and enjoy one-to-one time with the children themselves! Terms and conditions apply. And don't forget to log in to our *The Family Experiment* App to register your

interest in becoming a MetaParent when the programme is rolled out to the public on the night of the finale.

(CAM 4):

Now, without further ado, shall we meet our five couples and one singleton?

(CUT TO REAL WORLD INTRODUCTION VIDEOS)

2

Twelve years earlier

The first memory of his second life came when he awoke to find himself being pulled from the rear of a van and carried over the shoulder of someone who stank of rubber and petrol.

He'd opened his eyes but had struggled to focus on where he was or who was moving him. All he could be sure of was that it was night-time, and there was a near-full moon above them and a sky awash with stars.

Something didn't feel right in his head. It wasn't an injury; more like a deep-seated, burning pain emerging from behind his right eye.

'Where am I?' he croaked. The man carrying him didn't reply. Instead, he was brusquely lowered to his feet, where he tried and failed to steady himself. He toppled to one side, his face colliding with stones. He paused for a moment to gather his thoughts and listened carefully. They weren't alone. There were other voices like his, young and frightened, whispering in hushed tones. And, a little further away, there came the rush of water.

'Get up!' barked a gruff, accented voice he couldn't identify.

He glanced upwards and squinted at the bright light shining from a jacket. If he was not mistaken, the man was also wearing a balaclava, which added to his concern.

'Get up!' the man repeated, less patiently. The boy attempted to push himself up into a sitting position, but he was too weak. He barely protested when the man grabbed his arm, but yelped when it was almost yanked from its socket. Now he was back on his feet and being pulled across the beach, the heels of his trainers making trenches.

Soon after, freezing-cold water lapped at his ankles, then his knees, before his body was lifted and hurled into the air like a shotput. He landed face first on something wet and rubbery. Water splashed against his face and eyes, its saltiness stinging, but its chill eventually helping him to regain his vision. 'Put this on,' the man ordered, and thrust a set of dog tags attached to a chain into his hand. He did what he was told and put them around his neck.

Someone else, most likely another child judging by the lightness of their touch, placed their arm around his shoulder and helped him up into a sitting position. He turned to look at him, then all the others surrounding them. There must have been around thirty other young people here, around the same age as him, all looking as frightened as he felt. Some shared family resemblances and gripped each other tightly. Ahead, even more were coming, escorted through the water by two more balaclava-clad figures. The boat was only a few metres long and was soon cramped.

'What's happening?' he asked the lad who'd helped to lift him up from the floor.

'They're moving us,' he replied.

'Do you have a phone? I need to call . . . my . . . my . . .'

His voice trailed off. He didn't know who to call. His memory was a blank.

'If you are in this boat then there is no one to call,' the lad replied.

'Where are we going?'

'From here on the Kent coast over to Rotterdam or Calais, that's what I overheard.'

'But I don't want to go there. I want to go home.'

'You don't have a home any more. That life's over for you now. You're being taken abroad to start a new one.'

He shook his head vigorously. 'No. They wouldn't let that happen.'

'Who wouldn't? Your parents? They sent you here because they probably can't afford to keep you any more. That's normally how it works.'

'They wouldn't have done that.'

He racked his brain, but there was a blank page where the image of his parents should have been.

The lad looked at him and frowned. 'What's your name?' he asked.

'It's . . .' But his thoughts were empty once more. 'I . . . I don't know,' he said, embarrassed.

His new friend nodded.

'You're lucky – your parents probably loved you if they had your memories of them erased. It hurts less if you don't know who you or they are.'

His gaze fell to his wet shoes.

With no one left on the shore, two of the three men began to turn the dinghy in the direction of the mouth of the bay, while the third started the engine. Soon they were all on board as the boat pulled out into the choppy waters of the Channel. The further they travelled, the larger the waves lapped, and the colder and damper their passengers became. It wasn't long before at least half of the children were vomiting over the side or onto each other.

'Throw your stuff in here,' one of the men yelled above the chugging of the motor. He held out a large bag. 'Anything you have – phones, toys, books, throw it all away. You don't need them.'

Without argument, the terrified young passengers rifled through their pockets and surrendered their belongings. As the boy opened his hoodie to look at the pockets inside, his new acquaintance caught sight of his T-shirt in the moonlight. It featured an image of the Statue of Liberty and nearby Hudson River.

'Hudson,' his friend said suddenly. 'That's what I'll call you until you remember your name.'

Hudson wrapped his arms around himself to neutralize the bracing wind and didn't speak again until lights appeared on the horizon. To his relief, it appeared to be land.

Just then, the dinghy's engine began to splutter and seize. The man steering it attempted to restart it, which briefly worked before it sputtered to another halt. It was only then that Hudson noticed he was up to his knees in water. Below him, the air chambers in the dinghy were deflating, lowering

the boat, allowing too much water inside and making it too heavy for the engine to shift.

‘Out!’ yelled one of the men. ‘You swim to shore.’

‘I don’t know how to,’ screamed a girl.

The man ignored her. It was only after all three men jumped overboard that the terrified children followed, like lemmings falling from a cliff.

‘Come on,’ Hudson said to the other lad.

‘I can’t swim either,’ came his panicked response.

‘I’ll help you.’

First Hudson jumped, and then the other lad. His body disappeared under the surface, so Hudson reached for him, but in the lad’s panic he began dragging him down too. The two wrestled in the freezing depths, Hudson taking huge gulps of water deep into his lungs as he struggled to get them both to safety. Eventually, now on his back, Hudson grabbed the boy, placed his arm around his chest, turned them both and kicked against the waves to get them to shore.

‘I need you to kick too,’ Hudson yelled, and the lad eventually followed suit. Several times they were forced to stop for air as water filled their mouths.

Around them, the other children splashed and screamed. Some vanished beneath the waves, their arms stretching into the air as if reaching for God’s hand.

Eventually, Hudson’s feet felt the shingle of the shore beneath him, and the two boys dragged themselves out of the water, coughing and spluttering.

Parked on the beach were two vehicles, with tall bright lights jutting from their roofs and a handful of figures standing alongside them. Hudson squinted and made out the words *Police Nationale* emblazoned across the sides of both vehicles.

Some of the others who had made it out of the water before them were stumbling towards the authorities, begging for help. But instead of hurrying to their aid, an officer pointed at a waiting truck, its headlights cutting through the night sky.

‘Can you help us?’ asked Hudson.

A second officer refused to look him in the eye. Instead, she allowed her hand to rest on a baton attached to her belt. They were turning a blind eye to what was happening. Hudson and the other boy had no choice but to follow orders.

The closer the remaining children got to the truck, the louder the noises appeared from inside. He realized it was packed with sheep, and straw was scattered across the floor. Hudson coughed several times, turned to look at his fellow dinghy passengers and realized only half had made it ashore.

Even fewer would make it to their next destination.