Inside People: Fans adore the 'Supernanny'

by Jane Clifford

Jo Frost comes across as one tough cookie when she's laying down the law for children - and their parents - on ABC's hit series "Supernanny." Off camera, she literally lets her hair down from that British bun.

That's what she's doing right now, strolling barefoot in the sand of a Southern California beach with her hair let down.

SUPER NANNY - Jo Frost enjoys a walk in the surf at Carlsbad, Calif., during a break in her hectic schedule as the 'Supernanny' on the hit ABC series. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. "I want people to know the other side of me," she said, during a break from her busy schedule.

"At the moment, it's a relentless schedule," she says.

It's not just "Supernanny." It's also the two shows on British TV - the original "Supernanny" plus "Beyond the Naughty Step," which follows up on families she has worked with.

And it's running an in-depth Web site - www.jofrost.com - and finishing up her third book. "Jo Frost's Confident Baby Care" follows "Supernanny: How to Get the Best From Your Children" and "Ask Supernanny: What Every Parent Wants to Know." The new book comes out in August in the United Kingdom and in May in the United States.

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Born Joanne and nicknamed Jo-Jo, Frost laughs at the idea that she has become the Martha Stewart of child care. But no fewer than 30 or so moms, dads, kids and grandparents stop her between the beach and the hotel to get an autograph or ask a question.

Some yell hello from their balcony rooms, and she waves and yells back. Others just stand in awed silence.

"That's the Supernanny," Julie Rouse tells grandsons Adam Reed, 5, and brother Cole, 10.

When not relaxing, this no-nonsense woman is known for getting the job done. She has driven to the home of an anxious parent at 2 in the morning and taken phone calls from friends, celebrities and even determined strangers.

"You'd be surprised who gets your number when they want it," she says drily. But even that is OK. In some ways, her work is her life.

"One thing the show has done is get people talking, saying, 'I have a problem. I need help.' And I love that."

There's no husband, no boyfriend.

"I'm never in a place long enough. We only spend two weeks at a time."

She's content, for now, to help other people with their children.

"I meditate in the mornings before work. I need the stillness to be able to go in and do the work I do. It's very intense."

Anyone who has seen the show knows that. So, when is therea precious break?

"I spend time with family," she said, her voice trailing off as her mind drifts 5,400 miles away. "It's never enough time. We all want more time. I'm not grumbling. It is what it is at the moment."

She's supremely happy on the days she spends near the water, this time the Pacific Ocean.

Frost swears by it, by water in general.

"I spent a lot of time in Barbados as a kid," she says. "The sea for me is very much a place of tranquillity."

Those trips to sun-drenched islands were vacations from often-dreary London where she grew up with her mom, Joa, a self-taught interior designer, her dad, Michael, an electrician and brother Matthew, two years younger.

"I was raised with a lot of love in my life," she says, a smile moving across her face. "My parents say I was a child that was a social butterfly, and I wouldn't say I'm any different now. My dad says I would waddle along in my diaper and make friends with everybody."

Her mother died when Frost was 24.

"She was a major influence in my life, an absolutely wonderful woman," Frost says softly. "I definitely feel my mother's spirit around me all the time."

And now that she spends more time in the United States than in Britain, seeing the rest of her family isn't easy.

"I've just missed my cousin's wedding," she said. "I rang to congratulate them, and my father left the phone on while they did their speeches. I had some tears, but I know I'm meant to be here."

In June, she celebrated her 37th birthday by seeing - what else? - "Mary Poppins" on Broadway.

"I met Mary and Bert. It was magical," she said. Though her favorite food is Mexican, that night she dined on beef medallions with vegetables, and some champagne, at the famed Rainbow Room.

Open and demonstrative, Frost is friendly to a fault, ignoring no one who calls her name or wants an autograph, although she has had to draw the line.

"I was in an airport and a woman came up to me as I was coming out of the cubicle and I said, 'Could I just get out of the restroom?'"

But sign she did.

Frost appreciates those who recognize her, especially those who say they are employing methods with their children. That means more to Frost than being recognized. But there are others who make her shake her head.

"I'll run into someone who will say, 'You know, I tried your technique - and it worked!' I find that bizarre. I would never give you a technique that doesn't work. Of course it worked. These aren't like tips on how to grow your gladiolus in the garden.

"This isn't just a job. You're dealing with human beings, not paperwork stacked up on a table."

She pauses in bewilderment.

"It's very interesting to watch how Americans respond to the show," she says. "They're skeptical about me, but they see the results. Then they say, 'Let me give it a go' and it works. That's the whole point of doing what I do."

She's equally amused by those who "watch the telly and say, 'Thank God my kids aren't like that.' They're the ones who will come over to the house after I leave and ask what the chart is for and all sorts of other questions."

She notes it's not just the people who choose to be on "Supernanny" who need help, and she defends those who do open the doors to their chaotic households and out-of-control children.

"They have helped 8 to 10 million other parents with their courage."

As she starts the fourth season of her ABC show - and 20th year as a nanny - she's finally feeling comfortable in this country ("It's massive. It's just amazing how big America is") and with American families.

"I'm very direct, and people receive that as abrupt," she acknowledges. "Some realize it's passion, passion for what I do.

"I'm headstrong. And absolute. I look at every angle, then make my decisions and never change them," she says when asked to describe herself.

She adds "independent" and "strong-minded" but admits to being "a girly-girl" who likes scented candles, who just bought pink luggage.

"I'm a very sensitive woman, most definitely a woman who's a good and loving daughter and a good big sis. I'm a woman of integrity."

A woman on a mission.

"I will continue to do this - helping parents - whether the television show is on or not." Happy days ahead

Jo Frost's top 10 rules for creating a happy family life, from her 2005 best-seller, "Supernanny: How to Get the Best From Your Children":

- Praise and rewards: The best rewards are attention, praise and love. Sweets, treats and toys are not necessary as rewards. A star chart or a special outing can back up a pattern of good behavior.

- Consistency: Once you have made a rule, don't change it for the sake of a quiet life or because you're embarrassed. Make sure that everyone - which includes caregivers and your partner - keeps to the same rules as well.

- Routine: Keep your home in basic order and maintain a routine. Set times for waking, meals, bath and bed. Once a routine is in place, you can be a little flexible, if you're on vacation, for example.

- Boundaries: Children need to know there are limits to their behavior - which means what is acceptable and what is not.

- Discipline: You can only keep the boundaries in place by discipline. This means firm and fair control. It may just take an authoritative voice and a warning to get the message across. Otherwise, there are other techniques you can use, none of which involve punishment.

- Warnings: There are two kinds of warning. One tells a child what's coming next - you're the Speaking Clock telling her that bath time is coming up soon. The other is a warning for bad behavior. That gives her the chance to correct her behavior without any further discipline.

- Explanations: A small child can't understand how you want him to behave unless you tell him. Show and tell

to get the message across. Don't reason or make it too complicated - just state the obvious.

- Restraint: Keep cool. You're the parent and you're in charge. Don't answer a tantrum by a display of anger or respond to shouting by shouting back.

- Responsibility: Childhood is all about growing up. Let them. Allow them to do small, achievable things to boost their self-confidence and learn the necessary life and social skills. Get them involved in family life. But make sure your expectations are reasonable. Don't set them up for failure.

- Relaxation: Quality time is important for everyone, including yourself. Let your child unwind at bedtime with a story and cuddles. Make sure you, your partner and your other kids have quality time for individual attention.

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