

DRIVING PASSIONS

Social arbiter and people watcher Mary Killen analyses people's relationship with their cars. This month, she talks to authors **Karen Doherty** and **Georgia Coleridge** about the family-friendly Honda FR-V



As the co-authors of *Seven Secrets of Successful Parenting* (Bantam Press, £12.99), Karen Doherty (far left) and Georgia Coleridge (left) know all about transporting gangs of children from A to B.

Both are mothers of four, and both drive to the country at weekends and live in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. When the scare over Ken Livingstone's proposed £25-a-day congestion charge to be levied on drivers of high-emission cars first hit the headlines, California-born Karen was swift to act. She realised she must change her Mercedes M-Class four-by-four for a Greener, or at least less provocative, vehicle, which would not attract these charges but would still accommodate a family of six and their clutter.

As Georgia and I stand in the Notting Hill street next to Karen's new, six-seater Honda FR-V, Karen explains, 'You can't get a six-seater that runs on bio-fuel, or is hybrid or electric. They stop at five seats. So where do you go if you've got four children and you're trying to downsize and get better mileage from your petrol? I researched everything to see what was going to work. I looked in *Autocar* magazine, and this is the only one worth buying. None of the others had the six seats in the right configurations. This one has three seats in the front, and three in the back,' she exults.

Like the television news journalist she once was, Karen knows that actions speak louder than words. A gentle flip transforms the middle front seat so that it can support a rear-facing baby seat – the legal requirement since 2006. 'This is an important point,' she lectures. 'A baby can sit there now – well back from the airbag, should it inflate – and the driver can keep an

eye on it.' Georgia (who has a Mercedes seven-seater diesel) and I nod obediently.

We all climb into the Honda, Georgia in the back, Karen and I in the front. I am not a mother of four but this car seems total heaven to me. The middle seat, now restored to its normal position, is a perfect repository for my giant handbag. 'Even the gearstick is at a wrist-friendly height,' beams Karen. 'A manual car is more economic on fuel. It's a small amount, but every bit counts.'

The two mothers have spent the last two years at Karen's dining table, collating the sackloads of anecdotes, information and pearls of wisdom they have collected 'from the school gates and dinner parties' for their book, which has been heralded as the first childcare book to give parents useful tips, and not simply make them feel guilty or inadequate.

Georgia, who has spent many years reviewing children's books, says, 'We wanted to write it for ourselves, really; to teach ourselves how to be better mothers. We hope it is a positive book, which shows what other people have done successfully.'

The family-friendly Honda is extremely comfortable. One does not sit on the seats, but is cradled by them. There are useful pouches near the driver for mobile phones or other paraphernalia.

'Did you notice how tiny this car looked from the outside?' asks Karen. 'And you see how roomy it is. Wait till I show you the boot. There's plenty of space back there. We take this car to the country as it's so comfortable. It's absolutely wonderful. It's a multi-purpose vehicle, so the seats all fold down flat, and we can put our bicycles into it if we have to. It's great.'

Modest Georgia insists that Karen was the original super-mummy. 'She really does all the good things that we talk about in this book. Her children are always very wholesome, playing outside or cooking healthy food.'

But the book is a testament to collaborative research and attractively presented information. The authors have trawled the experiences of their friends and families to get their anecdotes of what has worked for a new generation of parents who realise they have to put as much work into their children as they do into their careers. Children will not just run themselves.

And what about fuel? 'Unleaded; not thirsty,' nods Karen. 'I have traded in my gas-guzzling four-by-four and I'm getting nearly double the miles per gallon (average 37.7mpg) that I was getting before' □

● For further details about Honda cars, visit www.honda.co.uk

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