

Roman childhood

By Michael Coleman

NARRATOR: No, we don't need a school bell for the Romans in Britain! That's because there were no schools in those days. In fact most children didn't have lessons at all! Unless they were the children of rich Romans – then they did - at least they did if they were boys. Girls were expected to learn how to help their mothers around the house.

GIRL: I'd have preferred to have lessons!

NARRATOR: Boys were taught to read and write. Because parchment was too expensive, they wrote on wooden tablets...

TEACHER: That was my favourite tree, you horrible boy!

BOY: It's your fault, sir. You shouldn't have given me so much writing to do!

NARRATOR: The third subject boys learned was public speaking. This was very important, especially if you wanted a job in the government. As most people couldn't read, the only way to tell them your ideas was by speaking well in the Forum...

JUDGE: Welcome to the *All Rome Public Speaking Contest*. And your name is?

TONSILUS: Tonsilus, Madam Judge.

JUDGE: Well this is your chance to wow me with your rhetoric, Tonsilus. And if you hear this sound - it means I've heard enough. Good luck!

TONSILUS: Fellow pupils! My headteacher insists that I wear a toga edged in the school colours of green and brown. Gruesome green! Boring brown! I ask you, fellow pupils - has a more curious combination ever been composed? Is my headteacher colour blind? Wha - wha - why?



- JUDGE:** The answer to your rhetorical question is 'no', Tonsilus! Your head-teacher is not colour blind! I know, because I'm married to her. Next!
- NARRATOR:** At home children kept pets: dogs and birds were the most popular. Children also had toys like dolls and animals carved from wood. But don't forget that – unless they had rich parents – children didn't have a lot of time to play. They were expected to help out in the house and fields.
- Rich children, though, didn't have too much to do at all. Why? Because they'd probably got their very own slave to do things for them! A child's slave would be expected to look after him - or her - and help them grow to be an adult. If they'd been well educated before being captured, the slave might have been made to work as the child's teacher...which must have been tricky...
- SLAVE:** Young master, as your teacher I want you to learn your lessons.
- MASTER:** Well, slave, as your young master I'm ordering you not to want me to learn my lessons – so there!
- NARRATOR:** Once they became teenagers, Roman children would often take part in junior versions of adult games, like chariot racing...
- TANNOY:** And leading in the junior chariot race is Cassius in his two-wheeled super-mini pulled, as usual, by Flash!
- CASSIUS:** Come on, Flash! Faster! Faster! We're nearly at the finishing line! Yeah!
- TANNOY:** The winners: Cassius and Flash!
- CASSIUS:** Well done, Flash! I'm proud of you, my faithful slave!
- FLASH:** Thank you, master. But I do wish you'd get an 'orse.



NARRATOR:

Entertainment was important for adult Romans, too. One method they used was very clever because it combined having an enjoyable time with the essential business of keeping clean...

Only the richest Romans had their own bath, so when they wanted to get nice and clean the place ordinary Romans went to was a public bath-house. This was a bit like a leisure centre of today. In the bath-house you could meet your friends, play board-games, talk business – and be cleaned by a slave at the same time! Strangely, though, for all their inventions, Romans didn't know about soap...

TRIXIE:

Hello! It's Trixie, your personal grooming advisor! And today I'm going to tell you how to get clean the Roman way – without soap! First, take all your clothes off, of course! Now, hop into the calderium – that's a hot, steamy room – and stay there till you're all sweaty. Dripping, are we? That means the pores of your skin are wide open! Now take a strigil – that's a curved metal scraper, no home should be without one – and get a slave to drag it firmly all over your skin. You can do this yourself of course, but slaves are soooo useful for getting into those hard-to-reach corners! All done? Now it's off to the frigidarium to jump into a freezing cold bath! Get out, dry yourself off – and you're done!

